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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Qualitative job insecurity, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment: the mediating role of control perceptions

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## Abstract

This study analyses job insecurity within the framework of stress theories and psychological contract breach, and focuses on how qualitative job insecurity relates to employee attitudes, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Specifically, it aims to test the mediating role of work-related control perceptions (i.e. organizational control and employability) in the relation between qualitative job insecurity and employee attitudes. The study was conducted in Lithuanian organizations and draws a focus to the Baltic countries, which have rarely been represented in job insecurity research. In total, 1180 employees took part in this study. Mediation analyses were performed to test the hypotheses. The results offer support for the hypothesis that qualitative job insecurity is related to lower positive employee attitudes towards the job and the organization, namely job satisfaction and organizational commitment. It was also found that oorganizational control and employability partially mediated the link between job insecurity and these attitudes.

## Keywords

Job insecurity, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, organizational control, employability

## Rezumat

Acest studiu analizează insecuritatea percepută a locului de muncă în cadrul teoriilor stresului și a încălcării contractului psihologic, concentrându-se pe modul în care insecuritatea calitativă relaționează cu atitudinile angajaților, în mod specific cu satisfacția profesională și cu angajamentul organizațional. Mai precis, urmărește să testeze rolul mediator al percepțiilor controlului (de exemplu, controlul organizațional și angajabilitatea) în relația dintre insecuritatea calitativă și atitudinile angajaților. Studiul a fost realizat în cadrul unor organizații lituaniene, atrăgând asfel atenția asupra țărilor baltice, care foarte rar au fost reprezentate în cercetările din acest domeniu. În total, 1180 de angajați au luat parte la acest studiu. Analize de mediere au fost efectuate pentru a testa ipotezele. Rezultatele oferă dovezi pentru ipoteza

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conform căreia insecuritatea calitativă este relaționată cu un nivel scăzut al atitudinilor pozitive față de muncă, anume cu satisfacția profesională și angajamentul organizațional. S-a constatat, de asemenea, că percepția controlului organizațional și angajabilitatea mediază partial relația dintre insecuritatea locului de muncă și atitudinile investigate.

## Cuvinte cheie

insecuritatea locului de muncă, satisfacția profesională, angajamentul organizațional, controlul organizațional, angajabilitate

## Résumé

S'appuyant sur les théories du stress et du contrat psychologique, cette étude analyse la relation entre l'insécurité qualitative de l'emploi et les attitudes au travail, telles que la satisfaction au travail et l'engagement organisationnel. Plus précisément, elle vise à mettre en évidence le rôle médiateur des perceptions de contrôle (i.e. contrôle organisationnel et employabilité) pour expliquer le lien entre l'insécurité et les attitudes au travail. De plus, en discutant des effets de l'insécurité de l'emploi, cet article attire attention sur les pays Baltes (spécifiquement, la Lituanie), qui ont été sous-représentés dans la recherche sur ce sujet. Les données ont été recueillies auprès des 1180 salariés dans les entreprises lituaniennes représentant le secteur public ainsi que le secteur privé. Les analyses statistiques (un test de médiation parallèle) ont été effectuées pour vérifier les hypothèses. Les résultats ont confirmé l'hypothèse sur la relation entre l'insécurité de l'emploi et les attitudes au travail : l'insécurité a été liée de manière négative à l'engagement organisationnel et la satisfaction au travail. Enfin, ils suggèrent le rôle médiateur joué par les perceptions de contrôle dans le lien entre l'insécurité de l'emploi et les attitudes des salariés.

## Mots-clés

l'insécurité qualitative de l'emploi, la satisfaction au travail, l'engagement organisationnel, les perceptions de contrôle, employabilité

## Introduction

Nowadays, many organizations experience major changes leading to the need for restructuring. In turn, these changes, either ongoing or just foreseen, affect employment contracts and working conditions. Most often, they are accompanied by job insecurity, which has received considerable attention from social scientists and social policy makers in recent years. Recent surveys on working conditions (e.g., Eurofound & EU-OSHA, 2014) have documented a general increase in job insecurity in many European countries revealing certain regions (such as Central Eastern Europe and the Baltic region) as particularly vulnerable. Even though the percentage of employees who report job insecurity may vary across occupations and may not seem extreme when taken the EU average (ca. 16 %; Eurofound & EU-OSHA, 2014), it cannot be ignored, because previous findings have clearly shown job insecurity to be detrimental for employee well-being (e.g., De Witte, De Cuyper, Handaja, Sverke, Näswall, & Hellgren, 2010; De Witte, Vander Elst, & De Cuyper, 2015; Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002).

Psychological studies usually focus on the subjective side of job insecurity, which is defined as the perceived threat to the current employment situation. In addition, according to Hellgren, Sverke, and Isaakson (1999), there is a distinction between quantitative and qualitative job insecurity. Quantitative job insecurity is related to the prospective termination of the employment contract in the near future. To date, many studies have focused on this type of job insecurity, exploring its immediate and distal outcomes in an attempt to identify psychological or organizational resources that might prevent its negative effects (Chirumbolo & Areni, 2005; Hellgren & Sverke, 2003; Vander Elst, De Cuyper, Baillien, Niesen, & De Witte, 2014).

With a few recent exceptions (e.g., Stynen, Forrier, Sels, & De Witte, 2015; Van den Broeck, Sulea, Vander Elst, Fischmann, Iliescu, & De Witte, 2014; Vander Elst, Richter, Sverke, Näswall, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2014), qualitative job insecurity is, however, still a relatively unexplored form of job insecurity. It denotes the perceived threat of losing certain valued features of the job, such as one's salary, working hours or various social rewards (De Witte, 2005; Hellgren et al., 1999). Compared to quantitative job insecurity, it is much more intertwined with the job, that is, the source of threat concerns possibly changing working conditions rather

than loss of the job itself. Given the current situation in the global labour market, where changes in working conditions have become almost an inevitable component of work, qualitative job insecurity is an extremely important issue: It is likely to be easily induced and may affect many employees' working lives. Hence, the current study will focus on this type of job insecurity.

An exploration of the psychological nature of job insecurity in the literature further leads to several notions. First, it is bound to employee expectancies related to their working conditions and the employment situation in general. Second, when confronted to job insecurity, employees' expectancies are negative. Work psychology has ascribed an important role to various expectancies in predicting job behaviour and attitudes (e.g., Hackman & Porter, 1964; Lawler, 1968; Lawler & Suttle, 1973). However, contrary to positive ones, which are thought to be empowering, negative expectancies, such as perceived qualitative job insecurity, imply a detrimental effect. This argument thus primarily draws attention to the possible negative implications of the envisaged negative change in working conditions (i.e. qualitative job insecurity) for job attitudes.

## Organization- and work-related attitudes in the context of job insecurity

While there are many attitudes employees may hold at work, they can be classified into broader categories according to their focus. For instance, in their meta-analytic study, Sverke and colleagues (2002) defined the attitudinal outcomes of job insecurity as being focused towards either the individual or the organization. According to them, individual-focused outcomes manifest in the attitudes towards the job, such as job satisfaction and job involvement, whereas organization-focused outcomes reflect the relation between the individual and the organization in the form of, for instance, commitment and trust.

Similarly to this conceptualization, we will distinguish two categories of employee attitudes in the current study. The first category will be labelled as *work-related* attitudes. Job satisfaction is the most salient attitude in this category, reflecting a positive affective response to one's job (Locke, 1969). Attitudes of this type reflect the relation between an employee and his or her work and are immediately bound to the working conditions. Hence, it seems plausible that work-related attitudes are extremely sensitive to the anticipated negative changes in working conditions as reflected in the concept of qualitative job insecurity.

The second category of *organization-related attitudes* reflects the relation between an employee and his or her organization as a whole. However, they may not immediately depend upon working conditions. The most salient attitude in this category is affective organizational commitment, which reflects how employees approach their organization in general, in terms of affection or loyalty (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993).

Arguments for explaining the job insecurity–employee attitudes relationship can be primarily found in psychological contract theories (Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Rousseau, 1989). The psychological contract is defined as employee beliefs about the reciprocity of obligations between themselves and the employer (Rousseau, 1989). Job insecurity is thought to relate to psychological contract breach, as the expectation of having job security is not met, resulting in a number of negative employee reactions (De Cuyper & De Witte, 2007; De Witte, De Cuyper, Vander Elst, Vanbelle, & Niesen, 2012). Findings from meta-analytic studies have indeed demonstrated that the violation of the psychological contract has a significant effect at the attitudinal level (e.g., Bal, De Lange, Jansen, & Van Der Velde, 2008; Zhao, Wayne, Glibkowski, & Bravo, 2007). The underlying rationale is that, in case of psychological contract breach, employees tend to re-balance their relation with the organization in a corresponding manner by modifying their attitudes and behaviour (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). Hence, a negative relationship between job insecurity and employee attitudes, and particularly organizational commitment, can be expected.

Another argument for the hypothetical link between job insecurity and work- and organization-related attitudes stems from stress research. Previous studies have pointed out that under high levels of uncertainty, employees will be more likely to react in a negative way (Ashford, Lee, & Bobko, 1989; Davy, Kinicki, & Scheck, 1997; Grunberg, Moore, & Greenberg, 2006). This may be due to withdrawal reactions, which, following stress theories, can be seen as an adopted coping strategy (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Specifically, when a person cannot control the uncertain situation (as in the case of job insecurity), distancing from the source of stress is likely to occur, which manifests in the form of deteriorated attitudes or disruptive work behaviours. Based on this rationale, qualitative job insecurity may be hypothesized to relate to both lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

The above stated propositions were supported by multiple previous empirical findings. For instance, many studies have shown the link between job insecurity and reduced job satisfaction (De Cuyper, Notelaers, & De Witte, 2009; De Witte & Näswall, 2003; Reisel, Probst, Chia, Maloles, & König, 2010). The most convincing evidence comes from two meta-analytic studies (Cheng & Chan, 2008; Sverke et al, 2002) revealing that the relationship between job insecurity and the particular outcome of job satisfaction is one of the strongest, among other outcome variables. Furthermore, over the past decennia, a number of studies have also linked job insecurity and organization-related attitudes, including organizational commitment (e.g., De Cuyper & De Witte, 2006, 2007; Hartley, 1998; Staufenbiel & König, 2010). However, while research generally shows a significant job insecurity–employee attitudes link, most of the previous studies have focused on quantitative job insecurity (for an exception, see De Witte et al., 2010; Hellgren et al., 1999; Vander Elst et al., 2014b). Therefore, additional evidence concerning qualitative job insecurity and its association to job satisfaction and organizational commitment is needed.

*Hypothesis 1: Qualitative job insecurity is negatively related to job satisfaction.*

*Hypothesis 2: Qualitative job insecurity is negatively related to affective organizational commitment.*

## Coping and prevention of the negative job insecurity effects

The concept of job insecurity as an important workplace stressor (De Witte, 1999) subsequently raises the issue of identifying the mechanism underlying its relationship with organization- and work-related attitudes. Some findings suggest that the outcomes of job insecurity may be bound to personal interpretations of the situation, such as, for instance, perceived control (Schreurs et al., 2010; Vander Elst et al., 2014b, 2014c). The appraisal theory by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) provides a theoretical framework to further elaborate on this. It explains the way individuals react to uncertain situations and may offer a number of implications on how the negative outcomes of job insecurity occur and how they might be prevented. The primary proposition of the theory is that in an encounter that is perceived as stressful and potentially threatening, people tend to appraise their possibilities to cope with it. Control appraisals are different from coping reactions: Whereas coping reactions are generally defined to include cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage psychological stress (Lazarus, 1993), control appraisals reflect the (perceived) possibility or means to deal with the demands of a stressful situation. Such control appraisals may determine how employees will react to the threatening situation and are particularly relevant in the context of job insecurity. This issue has already been raised in the early seminal work on job insecurity (e.g., Ashford et al., 1989; Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984), which proposed that the strength of insecurity relates to a sense of powerlessness (i.e. loss of perceived control), which, in turn, can be seen as a determining factor of the negative outcomes of job insecurity.

Over the past decades, numerous studies have attempted to explore the relationship between job insecurity and various control

perceptions (such as employability, work control, locus of control, self-efficacy, etc.) in a variety of contexts (e.g., Berntson, Näswall, & Sverke, 2010; Schreurs, van Emmerik, Notelaers, & De Witte, 2010; Vander Elst, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011). In general, the findings suggest perceptions of control to be a significant intervening factor in the relation between job insecurity and its outcomes. However, up to date, there are quite a few under-researched parts in the job insecurity–control–outcomes framework, which need to be addressed. First, the focus on the role of different types of control perceptions (e.g., employability, control appraisals, job control) raises the question of the replicability of the findings across different contexts. Second, only a few recent studies (e.g., Vander Elst et al., 2014b) have addressed the outcomes of qualitative job insecurity, which is rather different from quantitative job insecurity (as outlined above). Finally, many studies tend to focus on either organizational control or personal control perceptions exclusively, which might somewhat narrow the interpretation of findings.

Referring to the above, this study simultaneously focuses on two variables of perceived work-related control – organizational control and employability – which reflect very different, yet essential control perceptions held by employees. Building upon Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theoretical framework, both are assumed to serve as significant control appraisals, which potentially explain the way qualitative job insecurity relates to employee attitudes. Perceived *organizational control* (henceforth, organizational control) reflects the perceived ability to control organizational situations, such as controlling the threat to valued job characteristics (Vander Elst et al., 2014b). The key aspect of these beliefs is that they are directed towards the possibility to keep things in control within the current organizational situation. Further, *employability*, is defined as the perceived capability to find a similar employment to the current one, and thus, to control one's own employment situation (e.g., Berntson & Marklund, 2007; De Cuyper et al., 2012). It has a different focus compared to the organizational control: It is more person-centred and reflects control perceptions that go beyond the current organizational situation.

## The role of work-related control perceptions in explaining the job insecurity–attitude relationship

Qualitative job insecurity is often a stressful outcome of organizational change or restructuring. Building upon Lazarus and Folkman (1984), two types of appraisals are important when exploring the way stressful events are perceived and responded to. Primary appraisals refer to the evaluation of how personally significant the situation is. In the case of job insecurity, the primary appraisal would refer to how the objective outwards conditions are translated into the subjective sense of insecurity. That is, it may determine to which extent the source of job insecurity (i.e. organizational change) is seen as threatening. Secondary appraisals refer to judgments about a person's ability to manage with the situation after it has been evaluated as threatening or challenging (Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). They consist of persons' evaluation of the possibilities to cope with the threatening event (or possibility to control the situation).

An important implication raised from the appraisal framework is that the negative outcomes of a job-insecure situation might be related to employees' low perceptions of control. Referring to the above, the appraisal theory provides two different ways of exploring job insecurity and explaining its hypothesized outcomes. First, the control perceptions might be regarded as a relatively stable characteristic of the individual or the environment. This suggests testing for moderation effects, implying that employees with more coping resources or work-related control are less likely to evaluate the source of job insecurity as threatening and react less sensitively to the perceived insecure situation (i.e. that the relationship between job insecurity and its outcomes is buffered by control). In line with this, work-related control has extensively been analyzed as a buffer in the relation between job insecurity and its outcomes (based on different theoretical

models, not just the appraisal theory), accumulating into quite diverse findings. A number of studies have yielded support for the moderation effects although, notably, not all moderation effects turn out to be significant (e.g., Barling & Kelloway, 1996; Bussing, 1999; Silla, De Cuyper, Gracia, Peiró, & De Witte, 2009). With this in mind, it is worthwhile to look for alternative explanatory models, which would add more clarity to the existing findings.

The second approach is therefore to test for indirect effects, which would reveal yet another side of the job-insecure situation referring to work-related control as an appraisal in a certain organizational situation rather than a stable characteristic of the person or the organization. Such analysis is based on the rationale that control appraisals depend on the situation one is in. Notably, job insecure employees often cannot change their insecure job situation and may not know how and if one should deal with the experienced job insecurity (Dekker & Schaufeli, 1995). Job insecurity may thus result in the experienced difficulty to select the most appropriate response, also in terms of career planning (De Cuyper, Mäkikangas, Kinnunen, Mauno, & De Witte, 2012). When encountered to such a situation, employees are thus likely to evaluate their possibilities to cope with the uncertain organizational situation as insufficient, reflected, for instance, in lower organizational control (Vander Elst et al., 2014) and lower employability (De Cuyper et al., 2012).

Organizational control and employability are, in turn, hypothesized to result in impaired attitudes: Employees experiencing low control may want to withdraw from the stressful but uncontrollable situation (e.g., Vander Elst et al., 2014a). Based on the appraisal theory, suggesting the dynamic nature of the stressful experience (Lazarus, 1990; 1993), it is thus equally credible that control appraisals (e.g., organizational control and employability) act as mediators in the job insecurity-employee outcomes link. This means that job insecurity is indirectly related to employee attitudes through employability or organizational control.

*Hypothesis 3a: Control perceptions – employability and organizational control – mediate the link between qualitative job insecurity and job satisfaction.*

*Hypothesis 3b: Control perceptions – employability and organizational control – mediate the link between qualitative job insecurity and organizational commitment.*

Differently from the moderation hypothesis, which states that job insecurity and work-related control perceptions interact with each other, the mediation hypothesis assumes that job insecurity might reduce the sense of control and employees would then be more likely to experience negative outcomes due to lower control perceptions. To date, there is some evidence that control perceptions at least partially mediate the link between quantitative or qualitative job insecurity and their outcomes (e.g., Fugate, Kinicki, & Prussia, 2008; Vander Elst, Van den Broeck, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2014; Vander Elst et al., 2014a, 2014b). However, this idea has received somewhat less attention compared to moderation models. Moreover, several studies (for instance, De Cuyper, Bernhard-Oettel, Berntson, De Witte, & Alarco, 2008; De Cuyper et al., 2012) have proposed namely job insecurity to act as a mediator between the control perceptions (specifically, employability) and various outcomes, thus raising the issue of the direction of effects in mediation models. Focusing on qualitative job insecurity, the current study therefore aims to test an alternative mediation model (i.e. job insecurity–control perceptions–attitudinal outcomes), which could provide an additional contribution to this recent line of research.

## Method

### Sample

Employees ($N$ = 1180) from various Lithuanian organizations were surveyed. After having made research agreement with the management of the participating organizations, respondents were asked to fill out an online questionnaire. Respondents were assured that their responses would be treated anonymously and confidentially, and that the study results would be presented in aggregated form only, without any possibility of personal identification.

The total sample consisted of 793 (67.2%) women and 387 (32.8%) men, and the mean age of the sample was 36.35 years (*SD* = 12.51). Regarding the tenure, the majority of the respondents (54.2%) had less than five years working experience, 17.4% reported 6 to 10 years working experience, 15.5% had 10 to 20 years working experience, and 12.9% of the respondents had more than 20 years working experience. Respondents in managerial positions constituted 28.1% (*n* = 331) of the sample, whereas 71.9% (*n* = 849) of the sample was represented by employees in non-managerial positions. The sectorial distribution was as follows: 677 (57.4%) respondents worked in public sector organizations and 503 (42.6%) respondents represented the private sector. Furthermore, 517 (43.8%) employees reported having encountered changes in their organizations during the last year, 491 (41.6%) employees reported there were no changes, and 172 (14.6%) respondents did not provide this information (missing). Due to missing cases, the final sample included in the analysis consisted of 1004 respondents.

## Measures

The respondents were asked to provide demographic data and to indicate their agreement with items measuring the study variables. Demographic questions were used to acquire information about respondents' age, gender, status, tenure in the organization, changes in the organization, and sector. The main questionnaire included items to assess qualitative job insecurity, perceived organizational control, employability, job satisfaction, and affective organizational commitment. Unless otherwise noted, respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements on a five-point Likert-type scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Means, standard deviations, correlations between study variables and reliability estimates (Cronbach's alpha) are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between study variables

| Variables | α | Mean | *SD* | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Qualitative job insecurity | .849 | 2.604 | .811 | – | | | |
| 2. Employability | .888 | 3.132 | .864 | –.248** | – | | |
| 3. Organizational control | .844 | 2.959 | .830 | –.316** | .242** | – | |
| 4. Job Satisfaction | – | 7.490 | 1.762 | –.274** | .044 | .238** | – |
| 5. Affective organizational commitment | .862 | 3.323 | .819 | –.175** | –.154** | .284** | .484** |

*Note:* Correlation is significant at ** .01 (two-tailed). N = 1180

*Qualitative job insecurity*, indicating the perceived threat of losing certain features of the job, was measured using a four-item scale (developed by De Witte and De Cuyper), tapping into similar aspects as the items of De Witte et al. (2010). This scale was previously used by Van den Broeck et al. (2014). A sample item is: "I feel insecure about the characteristics and conditions of my job in the future".

*Perceived organizational control*, implying the perceived ability to control things in the organization that might affect one's job, was measured with a three-item scale by Ashford et al. (1989). A sample item is: "I have enough power in this organization to control events that might affect my job".

*Employability* was measured with a four-item scale created by De Witte (1992) and further developed by De Cuyper and De Witte (2010). The scale indicates a belief about one's ability to find a job equitable to the present one. An example item is: "I am confident that I could quickly get a similar job".

*Job satisfaction* was measured with one item developed by Steijn (2004). Respondents were asked to indicate on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (*very unsatisfied*) to 10 (*very satisfied*) how much in general they were satisfied with their current job.

*Affective organizational commitment* – referring to emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization – was measured using a six-item scale by Meyer et al. (1993). An example item is "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization".

*Covariates.* When testing the study hypotheses, the following demographic, organizational, and job-related characteristics were controlled for: age (years), gender (0 = female; 1 = male), job status (0 = manager; 1 = non-manager), organizational change during last year (0 = no change, 1 = encountered to change), sector (0 = private sector; 1 = public sector). The covariates were chosen based on their possible relationships with study variables as shown in previous studies (e.g., De Witte, 2005; Näswall & De Witte, 2003).

## Results

To test for Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, two hierarchical regression analyses were performed using SPSS. First, regression paths indicating the relationships between job insecurity and both outcome variables (i.e. job satisfaction and organizational commitment) were estimated, while controlling for background characteristics (i.e. age, gender, job status, sector, and organizational change). The background characteristics were introduced in the first step of the regression analysis, whereas job insecurity was introduced in the second step.

According to the results, qualitative job insecurity significantly negatively predicted job satisfaction, ß = -.27, $t(997) = -8.61$, $p < .001$, and organizational commitment, ß = -.20, $t(997) = -6.70$, $p < .001$. The regression models explained a significant proportion of variance in job satisfaction scores, $R^2 = .09$, $F(6; 997) = 15.63$, $p < .001$ as well as organizational commitment scores, $R^2 = .16$, $F(6; 997) = 31.60$, $p < .001$. Notably, introducing job insecurity in the second step resulted in a significant increase of the variance explained in job satisfaction and organizational commitment (respectively, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $p < .001$ and $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $p < .001$). Based on the above presented results, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 were supported.

Second, to test Hypothesis 3a and Hypothesis 3b, mediation analyses were performed, using the SPSS PROCESS macro developed by Hayes (2013). The PROCESS macro uses regression path analysis to estimate the magnitude and significance of the following associations: *a* (path from independent variable to mediator), *b* (path from mediator to dependent variable), *c* (path from independent variable to dependent variable), and *c'* (path from independent variable to dependent variable, while controlling for mediators). The indirect effects (*a*b*) and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals were estimated using 5000 bootstrap samples, as recommended by Hayes (2009). Bootstrapping is a resampling method that simulates repetition of the original sample, making no assumptions about the shape of the sampling distribution. Moreover, the PROCESS macro allows for testing multiple or parallel mediators. The criterion for mediation was the identification of a significant indirect effect (*a*b*), as indicated by the 95% confidence interval not including the zero value.

Table 2. The mediating role of organizational control and employability

| | Regression analysis | | | | PROCESS macro | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Organizational control** | | **Employability** | | **Job satisfaction** | | | | | | **Affective organizational commitment** | | | | | |
| | Direct *a* | | | | Direct (*b*, *c*‘) | | Indirect effect (*ab*) | | CI indirect effect | | Direct (*b*, *c*‘) | | Indirect effect (*ab*) | | CI indirect effect | |
| | Estimate | SE | Estimate | SE | Estimate | SE | Estimate | SE | LLCI | ULCI | Estimate | SE | Estimate | SE | LLCI | ULCI |
| Constant | 3.87 | .12 | 4.67 | .12 | 6.64 | .46 | | | | | 2.57 | .20 | | | | |
| Age | .01 | .00 | –.03** | .00 | .02** | .01 | | | | | .02** | .00 | | | | |
| Gender | –.05 | .06 | .08 | .05 | –.01 | .12 | | | | | .03 | .05 | | | | |
| Job status | –.14* | .06 | .01 | .06 | –.13 | .12 | | | | | –.11* | .05 | | | | |
| Changes | –.13** | .05 | .02 | .05 | .16 | .11 | | | | | .16** | .05 | | | | |
| Sector | –.18** | .06 | –.24** | .05 | .21 | .12 | | | | | .01 | .05 | | | | |
| Qualitative job insecurity | –.27** | .03 | –.16** | .03 | –.47** | .07 | | | | | –.14** | .03 | | | | |
| Organizational control (path *b*) | | | | | .32** | .07 | –.09[a] | .02 | –.13 | -.05 | .26** | .03 | –.07[a] | .01 | –.08 | –.03 |
| Employability (path *b*) | | | | | .09 | .07 | –.02 | .01 | –.04 | .01 | –.11** | .03 | .02[a] | .01 | .01 | .03 |
| $R^2$ | .11 | | .26 | | .11 | | | | | | .22 | | | | | |
| *F*(6;997) | 19.73** | | 59.16** | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| *F*(8;995) | | | | | 15.39** | | | | | | 36.13** | | | | | |

*Note.* The estimates are based on unstandardized values.
Covariates were coded as follows: 0 = female, 1=male; 0 = manager; 1 = non-manager; 0 = no changes, 1 = changes; 0 = private sector, 1 = public sector.
a Empirical 95% confidence interval does not overlap with zero
**p < .01, *p < .05. N = 1004

The mediation results for Hypothesis 3a and Hypothesis 3b are presented in Table 2 and indicate that organizational control mediated the relationship between qualitative job insecurity on the one hand, and job satisfaction (*a*b* = –.09; 95% CI = [–.13; –.05]) and organizational commitment (*a*b* = –.07; 95% CI = [–.08; –.053]) on the other hand. Employability only mediated the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and organizational commitment (*a*b* = .02; 95% CI = [.01; .03]). The direct paths between qualitative job insecurity and job satisfaction (*c’* = –.47, *p* < .01) and between qualitative job insecurity and organizational commitment (*c’* = –.14, *p* < .01) remained significant, suggesting partial mediation. Therefore, Hypotheses 3a and 3b were partially supported.

## Discussion

This study aimed to analyze qualitative job insecurity in relation to employee attitudes. Its particular feature is that it was carried out in one of the Baltic countries, namely Lithuania, which are rarely represented in job insecurity research. Over the past decades, various social and political developments have brought remarkable changes to the economies of the region. This makes job insecurity a relevant topic to explore in the context of the Lithuanian labour market. Notably, the experience of job insecurity is not only dependent upon employee’s characteristics – it is also more or less rooted in the national socio-economic system. Thus, in addition to testing specific study hypotheses, it was also important to demonstrate that this study generally yielded similar results to what had been found in the international context.

Additionally, this study contributes to the job insecurity literature by simultaneously investigating two explanatory mechanisms – organizational control and employability – in the relationship between qualitative job insecurity and both organization- and work-related attitudes. Although previous studies have provided evidence for the mediating effects of organizational control and

employability in the job insecurity–job attitudes relationship, they have not considered the specific type of qualitative job insecurity and/or tested these explanations simultaneously (e.g.,, De Cuyper et al., 2012; Vander Elst et al., 2011).

In line with the hypotheses, the findings showed qualitative job insecurity to be negatively related to job satisfaction. They are comparable to those obtained in other studies, where negative associations between job insecurity and employee attitudes were demonstrated (De Cuyper et al., 2009; De Witte & Näswall, 2003). The meta-analyses carried out by Cheng and Chan (2008) and Sverke and colleagues (Sverke et al., 2002) are particularly relevant as a reference point for discussing our present results, as the association between job insecurity and job satisfaction was found to be particularly evident in these studies. However, as noted in the introduction part, despite the large body of research on the detrimental job insecurity effects, findings on qualitative job insecurity are quite scarce up to date. By definition (Hellgren et al., 1999), quantitative and qualitative job insecurity are rather distinct: Although bound to the anticipated changes in the workplace, they contain a different source of threat and might emerge in their own specific ways. Focusing on qualitative job insecurity, this study complements the previous research by distinctly demonstrating the link from qualitative job insecurity to job satisfaction.

In addition, a negative relationship between job insecurity and affective organizational commitment was found. Affective organizational commitment refers to the sense of loyalty, belonging, and identification with the organization (Meyer et al., 1993). Job insecurity is thought to be detrimental for various forms of employee loyalty and many studies have demonstrated this using various measures (e.g., Berntson et al., 2010; Sora et al., 2010; Vander Elst et al., 2014b). The current findings are thus quite expected and, in general, compatible with what had been previously found.

To further interpret these results, the deterioration of employee attitudes in response to job insecurity can be attributed to withdrawal reactions, which is a well-known phenomenon in stress research. High levels of uncertainty are thought to evoke strain, which may result in distancing (i.e. withdrawing) oneself from the source of stress (Lazarus, 1993). Though many job insecurity studies have analyzed withdrawal reactions at the behavioural level, such as intention to quit (Sverke & Hellgren, 2001), cynicism towards co-workers (Grunberg et al., 2006) or organizational withdrawal (Probst, 2002), negative attitudes towards one's work or organization may as well be interpreted as a withdrawal reaction at the psychological level (Vander Elst et al., 2014a). In fact, it is argued that the attitudinal response to job insecurity might be even stronger (Chirumbolo & Hellgren, 2003) and more immediate than the behavioural one (Sverke et al., 2002). Referring to the above, the anticipated threat to favourable working conditions can be interpreted to trigger psychological withdrawal reactions (which manifest in impaired job satisfaction and lower affective organizational commitment), because changing one's attitudes might be the only way to deal with the uncertain situation (Dekker & Schaufeli, 1995). Notably, as job satisfaction and organizational commitment are both affective in nature, this is a rather credible result, possibly indicating the occurrence of emotion-focused form of coping (see Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus, 1993), which, in this case, was related to qualitative job insecurity.

The subsequent question concerned the explanatory role of employee control perceptions in the relationship between job insecurity and its outcomes. In the present study, we specifically raised the hypothesis that two control perceptions – employability and organizational control – would act as mediators between qualitative job insecurity and both job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment. The results partly confirmed this. However, the mediation effects were different depending upon both the specific attitude and the mediator under consideration. Employability was found to partially mediate the relation between qualitative job insecurity and affective commitment (but not job satisfaction). The

indirect effect of job insecurity upon organizational commitment through employability was found to be positive, which contradicts our expectations. Generally, our findings imply that qualitative job insecurity may impose upon the reconsideration of one's working situation, which presumably results in critical evaluations of employability. Employability then relates negatively to organizational commitment, a finding that was also found by De Cuyper and De Witte (2011). In our study, employability reflects the perceived possibility of an employment at the external labour market, which would be similar to the one that is presently held (e.g., Berntson & Marklund, 2007). De Cuyper and De Witte (2011) argued that employability increases the permeability of organizational boundaries, reducing employees' affective commitment to the current organization. This may explain why despite the direct negative association between job insecurity and affective organizational commitment, the indirect relationship through employability was positive. However, given the very small indirect effect these findings should be interpreted with care.

The role of employability in the context of job insecurity has been provoking many debates. High levels of employability are thought to result in more favourable subjective interpretations of insecure situations, but job insecurity was also found to have a significant effect upon employability (De Cuyper et al., 2012). Hence, the precise psychological mechanism of how employability translates into less strain is not yet known. Some studies refer to it as a buffer, which mitigates the negative job insecurity effects by interacting with the latter (Berntson et al., 2010; Green, 2011; Silla et al., 2009). Others yet attempt to test various mediation models (see De Cuyper et al., 2008; 2012). Our findings contribute to the latter line of research. Although somewhat unexpected in terms of the sign of the relationship, the partial mediation effect is an important result, because it possibly reveals the vulnerability of control perceptions when confronted with insecure situations (i.e. job insecurity was found to predict reduced levels of employability and organizational control). Such results are interpretable within the theoretical framework offered by the appraisal theory (Lazarus, 1993; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). It emphasizes the dynamic nature of a stressful encounter, in which reactions to and coping with stressful events are seen as a dynamic and highly contextual process. Specifically, this implies that variables, which are hypothesized to explain employee reactions to job insecurity may be affected by the stressful experience per se. This seemed to be the case in the present study, where qualitative job insecurity was found to negatively associate with both mediator variables referring to control perceptions. However, when exploring the role of employability, it would nonetheless be relevant to ask the reversed question: What is the indirect effect of employability upon employee outcomes through job insecurity. In this particular case, job insecurity would be seen as a mediator as, for instance, supported in the study by De Cuyper et al. (2008).

In addition to employability, organizational control proved to be the second partial mediator in the link between job insecurity and the outcome variables. More precisely, it was found to mediate the link between qualitative job insecurity and both job satisfaction and affective organizational commitment. Specifically, qualitative job insecurity was indirectly related to lower job satisfaction and affective commitment through a reduced sense of organizational control. These findings are compatible with previous research (e.g., Vander Elst et al., 2014b, 2014c; Vander Elst et al., 2011) and could be interpreted as a demonstration of how the loss of control results in emotional withdrawal reactions. This could be also used as a managerial implication: In organizational change situations, where the sense of insecurity is inevitable, increasing control (e.g., through participative activities) could be beneficial in preventing negative employee reactions. Similar practical implications have been made in a number of previous studies. For instance, as argued by Barling and Kelloway (1996), job design and/or layoff management decisions would benefit from focusing on employees' perceptions of control. Both *informing* and *involving* employees in corporate decision making are

seen as managerial practices that help to avoid negative outcomes at the individual and organizational levels. Similar suggestions have also been made in a recent publication by De Witte and colleagues (2015), in which a number of possibilities of organizational interventions are discussed. Specifically, De Witte et al. (2015) discuss interventions that relate to the concepts of communication, participation, and employability, such as organizational communication and participation. According to De Witte et al. (2015), these interventions are particularly relevant in alleviating the stressful experience caused by job insecurity, because all of them help to maintain employees' perceptions of control.

These above-mentioned suggestions are well applicable to the current study, which focuses on the stress perspective in explaining job insecurity. Our findings especially emphasize the importance of sustaining employees' perceived organizational control for the reason that it was found to mediate the job insecurity–attitudes relationship, which means that control perceptions may yield an explanation for why people respond negatively to job insecurity and how these responses occur.

## Limitations and strengths

The findings of this study contribute to the empirical examination of the outcomes of job insecurity within the framework of stress theories and of the theory on psychological contract breach. The study highlights qualitative job insecurity and identifies possible mediators in its relationship to employee attitudes. However, it contains several limitations, which should be addressed when interpreting the results.

The first limitation concerns the design of the study. We aimed to test the effects implying a certain sequence. However, as the data for this study were collected at a one time-point, the results should be interpreted with care. A more complex study design (for instance, a cross-lagged analysis based on longitudinal data) would be advantageous to further validate the findings and to investigate the direction of relationships.

Second, the analysis of qualitative job insecurity would benefit from a more detailed focus on job satisfaction. Qualitative job insecurity refers to the existing or anticipated change in working conditions. Thus, focusing on different facets of job satisfaction could possibly reveal more specific job insecurity effects, which are overlooked when analyzing overall job satisfaction.

Finally, the findings of this study concern qualitative job insecurity specifically. While we consider it to be an advantage (due to the small number of studies on this job insecurity dimension), it would be nonetheless important to include both qualitative and quantitative job insecurity in a single study, in order to compare their effects on the same outcomes.

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