Junior designers’ awareness of personal values and their employment choices

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Abstract: For junior designers, friction between personal and organizational values can lead to frustration. This paper addresses job selection choices of junior designers, and how they are affected by an awareness of personal values. An experiment (n=106) shows how an explicit awareness of personal values (based on the Schwartz Value Survey) affects the choices and motivations of junior designers. Results show that, overall, junior designers select vacancies that express values that are congruent with their own values. In addition, a greater awareness of personal values is found to lead to more confidence in one’s choice, and to a greater tendency to look for a match between personal and organizational values based on complementarity (rather than congruence). These findings are to help junior designers to make professional choices based on personal values and ambitions, promoting the best fit for their first job.

Keywords: personal values, value assessment, employment choice, junior designers

1. Introduction

After graduation, design students look for appealing vacancies to apply to. Besides criteria of a matching CV and a good salary, an implicit criterion is value orientation: do values of the junior designer match with those of the organization expressed in the vacancy?

Values serve as guiding principles in people’s lives, and they direct people’s behavior (Schwartz, 2006; 2011). However, junior designers might often be unaware of their personal values, and would not immediately relate them to the values expressed by an organization.

Indeed, as was noted in interviews with designers and design managers, young designers struggle to identify values of the organization, and to recognize how those might differ from their own personal values (Van Onselen, 2015). The result can be frustration and even severe value conflicts between junior designers and the organization they work for. This
could be avoided if junior designers were more aware of their personal values when selecting and entering new organizations.

The present paper looks at how job selection choices of junior industrial designers can be affected by a greater awareness of their personal values. In particular, we will explore how an explicit awareness of personal values affects the choices of junior designers, leading to more confidence when entering a new job.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, the literature on personal and organizational values is reviewed from the perspective of junior designers choosing interesting job ads. Next, we formulate hypotheses on the effects of personal value awareness. These hypotheses are then tested in an experimental study among industrial design students close to graduation. Finally, the paper ends with a conclusion with suggestions for further research.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Basic human values

In this paper we follow Schwartz (2006), who defined values as “desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance, which serve as guiding principles in people’s lives” (p.1). Values are embedded in personalities, influencing aspects of social life; of family, work, and friendships. Expressing one’s values can be challenging as different terms are used to describe values.

Schwartz created the Theory of Basic Human Values, in which he formulated ten basic human value types: Universalism, Benevolence, Conformity, Tradition, Security, Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, and Self-Direction. The theoretical model of relations among Schwartz’s ten motivational types of values is visualized in a circular structure in figure 1 (Schwartz, 2006; Ros, Schwartz & Surkiss, 1999). The ten value types are organized by their motivational similarities and dissimilarities. They are arranged in two opposing dimensions: Self-Transcendence versus Self-Enhancement and Conservation versus Openness to Change. Different individuals can have different value orientations. For example, people who emphasize the value ‘Security’ (on the dimension ‘Conservation’) might not rate ‘Self-Direction’ (on the dimension ‘Openness to Change’) as high.

To assess values people find important in their daily life, Schwartz established a tool in the form of a questionnaire called the Schwartz’ Value Survey (SVS). The SVS survey has been tested with 200 samples from over 60 countries, providing us a verified tool to measure basic human values. Other value surveys are less complete and not as rigorously verified. The Rokeach value system does not cover all human values (e.g. tradition and power) and not all values can be addressed by innovative products or services (den Ouden, 2012). The Hofstede’s value dimensions do not discriminate among individuals (Schwartz, 2001). Although being from sociological origin, SVS is a complete and validated survey applicable in other fields of research. In design research fields such as architecture (Le Dantec & Do, 2009)
and human computer interaction (Friedman & Hendry, 2012) values have been studied, however, they do not propose a way to raise the awareness of one’s own basic human values as a designer. They aim to raise awareness of values of others such as clients, stakeholders and moral values. Therefore, the value survey of Schwartz (SVS) is adopted to measure and raise awareness of one’s own basic human values among junior designers.

Figure 1  Schwartz’ Value Circle: 10 Basic Human Values.

2.2 Values and value conflicts of designers at work
Sortheix, Dietrich, Chow and Salmela-Aro (2013) focused on ‘value congruence’ at work, which happens when personal values of employees are compatible with those of the organization. Congruence between individual and organizational values was significantly associated with work engagement. Work engagement results in a higher level of energy and involvement, resulting in better job performance (Sortheix et al., 2013). In addition, congruent work values are positively related to social integration and therefore to organizational commitment (Elizur, 1996; Nägele and Neuenschwander, 2014). Such commitment is based on stronger attachment or loyalty towards the company, and a focus on the potential benefits that befall the employees belonging to a particular organization (Elizur, 1996).

Rothkegel (2012) found that personal values and beliefs have a negative influence on the multidisciplinary actions needed to create meaningful innovation in larger organizations. When common values are not properly defined during innovation projects, stakeholders might experience friction and tension while collaborating (Bergema, Kleinsmann &
Conflict of values between different parties can arise when two or more parties hold opposing values or accredit varying levels of importance to values (McCuen & Gilroy, 2011). Such value conflicts can have a strong impact on project performance: “experiencing incongruence between individual values and dominating values in the job or organization may result in more stress symptoms” (p.12, Bouckenooghe, Buelens, Fontaine, & Vanderheyden, 2004).

Contrastingly, Woehr, Arciniega and Poling (2013), who have evaluated effects of deeper psychological characteristics such as values on team performance, found that congruent values do not affect task performance. Nevertheless, the result of their studies showed that “diversity resulted in lower team cohesion, lower team efficacy, and more conflict” (p. 117).

In the design literature, values are seen to play an integral role in negotiating the basis for a common understanding in collaborative design settings (Le Dantec & Do, 2009). However, Trimingham (2008) found that an understanding of common values might not be helpful for designers and the decisions they make, unless it is weighed against their own, personal values. Indeed, the situation for creative professions such as design might be somewhat special, because team conflicts are sometimes found to stimulate the creative process. Moderate levels of conflict in teams may result in a higher degree of innovativeness of the work of the teams (De Dreu, 2006; Farh, Lee & Farh, 2010). In addition, team diversity in collaborative teams may only become problematic when one of the parties involved is unwilling to make a compromise, and no decisions are being made (McCuen & Gilroy, 2011). However, these studies are not explicitly related to conflicts of values, and diversity is a multi-faceted term describing many things other than values (Mannix and Neale, 2005).

Still, the above findings might extend to value conflicts. Wandahl (2005), for instance, stated that it is not desirable to enforce similar values in project teams. Although there is no direct evidence for this, a moderate level of value conflict might stimulate the creative process. Thus, for junior designers, as creative workers, it might not always be advisable to aim for the highest level of value congruence when applying for new jobs. Instead, they might better seek out a degree of value complementarity, where their personal values differ from the values of the organization, creating an interesting and productive mix.

Lyons, Duxbury and Higgins (2005) mention that the identification of value priorities can “reconcile conflicts that may emerge between competing values within a specific situation” (p.764). This implies that an awareness of personal values may help people in an organization to prevent disruptive conflicts from happening. Within the context of junior designers applying for work, it might also incite them to select organizations where disruptive conflicts are less likely to happen. In an earlier study about value conflicts, van Onselen (2015) interviewed a senior designer and a recruiter for designers. Addressing the potential danger of value conflicts, the senior designer commented: “In case someone is a
junior designer and does not know himself and is not capable to estimate others, you will get many conflicts and things that go wrong. “Addressing the match in value orientation between applying junior designers and hiring organizations, the recruiter added: “when recruiting product engineers for a company who highly values social responsibility and local production, this story can very useful in the recruitment process.” These quotes suggest that value congruence is likely to be a motivation for vacancy selection that is stimulated by a greater awareness of personal values.

Finally, Duffy and Dik (2013) found that students who make clear career plans are confident in their career decisions, and they have a stronger job commitment than others. Applied to junior designers looking for work, it is likely that a greater awareness of personal values will also instill greater confidence in vacancy selection. This is important, since more confident job applicants are found to be hired for positions better suited to them (McCarthy & Goffin, 2004; Schmit & Ryan, 1992).

2.3 Hypotheses
Different researchers studied personal values of designers and their influence in organizational teams. Nevertheless, there is only little literature that focuses on value awareness before working at a company, when choosing a new position. The present paper aims to fill this gap.

The literature on personal vs. work values suggests that value congruence is desirable in organizations. Although the case could be made for creative professions that value complementarity is more relevant than value congruence (allowing for moderate levels of value discrepancies between designers and the organization), there is no direct evidence to support this. For that reason, we follow the literature on value congruence, while keeping an open mind to the possibility that, for a creative profession such as design, value complementarity might be an alternative motivation for junior designers selecting a new job. This leads to the following hypotheses, based on value congruence:

H1: Junior designers apply at organizations whose expressed work values match with their own personal values.

H2a: Junior designers look more for congruence than complementarity between personal and company values when making a vacancy selection.

In addition, we assume higher awareness of personal values will stimulate junior designers even further to search for value congruence:

H2b: Junior designers are stimulated to look even more for congruence between personal and company values if they are more aware of their personal values before making a vacancy selection.

Above, we also proposed that a raised awareness level of one’s personal values will help junior designers to make choices with a higher degree of confidence:
H3: Junior designers who are more aware of their personal values before making a vacancy selection are more confident with their choice.

3. Method

An experiment (n=106) with two (between subjects) conditions was carried out to test if the awareness of junior designers of their personal values has an influence on job decision making. Participants were randomly assigned to the two groups. The awareness group (n=58) performed a value assessment test based on Schwartz Value Survey (SVS), whereas the control group (n=48) carried out a filler task: a calculations test of equal duration.

After having received feedback on the SVS or the calculation test, both groups evaluated and chose between two job vacancies. Next, they filled in a questionnaire, where they rated their tendency to seek for value congruence vs. value complementarity in the job vacancies, and their confidence about their choices.

3.1 Subjects

Participants were students of Industrial Design Engineering at Delft University of Technology. We surveyed 7 bachelor and 99 master students in their final year close to entering the job market. 53 had preliminary work experience in design. Participation was voluntary.

3.2 Pretest

In order to ensure that the SVS test enhances value awareness, a pretest with six students was conducted and turned out to be successful: the pretest showed that filling in the value assessment test led to a higher level of awareness, compared to students filling in a calculations test (1.5 mean values difference on scale).

3.3 Independent variable

Value awareness was manipulated by having the experimental group fill in the Schwartz Value Survey (SVS group), while the control group performed a filler task in form of calculations (control group).

Participants in the SVS group assessed their personal values by rating twenty 6-point scale statements on five values belonging to the dimensions of Self-Enhancement (Hedonism, Achievement and Power) and Self-Transcendence (Universalism and Benevolence). In our survey the items measuring Openness to Change and Conservation were left out. We chose to leave out this dimension as we expected an unequal distribution on this dimension, assuming designers as a group tend to prefer Openness to Change over Conservation. In addition, only one dimension is needed to test our hypothesis.

The control group performed a task of doing calculations, which was designed to ensure that participants would perform a task of about equal length and difficulty. The level of mathematical difficulty was first year secondary school.
3.4 Materials
The two fictional job vacancies were created, expressing organizational values based on Schwartz’ value dimensions ‘Self-Enhancement’ (Company profile A) and ‘Self-Transcendence’ (Company profile B). The researchers created the vacancies based on those dimensions in order to ensure that the values described in the vacancies could be linked to Schwartz’ basic human values. During this process actual job vacancies from several design agencies were reviewed to make them as plausible as possible.

The company profiles were formulated using value explanations of Schwartz (see Schwartz, 2006; Schwartz, 2012). One part of the vacancy described the way the company was structured, including for instance long-term goals or the importance of teamwork. The other part explained what the company had to offer which involved, among other things, the possibility of achievement (in profile A) or the focus of projects on protecting the environment (in profile B) (for the company profiles see Appendix).

The two profiles were of equal length, and they presented information at the same level of detail. While creating these company profiles the focus was on making the profiles equally attractive for design students.

3.5 Questionnaire
The questionnaire was printed on paper in order to lower the barrier to participate. The two dependent variables ‘value congruence/complementarity and confidence’ were measured first. In order to ensure the participants familiarity with the terms, they were presented in the following statements: “When rating the job descriptions, I looked for similarities between the company’s values and my personal values (congruence).” and “When rating the job descriptions, I looked for aspects where my personal values differ from the company’s values and can therefore add something (complementarity).”

First, value congruence was measured on a scale ranging from 1 (‘I focused a lot on congruence’) to 6 (‘I focused little on congruence’). Second, complementarity was measured in the same way, on a scale from 1 (‘I focused a lot on complementarity’) to 6 (‘I focused little on complementarity’). Third, participants were asked to make a forced choice whether their choice had been motivated by value congruence or value complementarity.

Confidence about the choice of job vacancy was measured next in the questionnaire, on a scale ranging from 1 (very confident) to 6 (not confident).

Next, the manipulation on the level of awareness of one’s personal values was checked, by a scale from 1 (very much aware) to 6 (not aware). Finally, a number of control factors were measured: age, level of education, expected date of graduation, work experience, studying abroad and working in a student association.
3.6 Procedure
Participants in the experimental (SVS) and control group both performed their respective tasks. For the SVS group feedback on task performance was given. The individual scores for each value dimension were calculated, and each participant was then instructed to read the descriptions of those values on which they had the highest scores – depending on their survey outcome. No feedback was given to the control group. However, later checks revealed that performance on the calculation task had not affected confidence and value congruence measures.

Next, participants read the two company profiles A and B, they were asked to make a choice for their preferred profile description, and they continued by filling in the questionnaire. After the experiment had ended, all participants were offered information about the purpose of the experiment. The time to complete the whole questionnaire varied from 10 to 15 minutes for the SVS group as well as the control group.

4. Results
H1 states that junior designers apply at organizations whose expressed work values match with their own personal values. This hypothesis could only be tested for the 58 participants in the SVS group, who had received the SVS test on five values, belonging to two value dimensions (Self-Enhancement: Hedonism, Achievement, Power; Self-Transcendence: Universalism, Benevolence).

39 of the participants could be positioned as having their mean value scores at least a half scale point in the direction of Self-Enhancement or Self-Transcendence. For those participants, a value orientation towards Self-Enhancement or Self-Transcendence is positively correlated for the application choice for company profiles A (Self-Enhancement), and B (Self-Transcendence) \( r = .46, p < .00 \). This finding is corroborated when looking at the five separate values that were tested over all 58 participants in the SVS group, with positive correlations between choice and Universalism \( r = .29, p < .03 \), and negative correlations between choice and Achievement \( r = -.38, p < .00 \), and Power \( r = -.40, p < .00 \).

In order to test H2 and H3 we looked at the differences between the SVS group and the control group. The SVS group seemed to have a higher level of value awareness than the control group we noticed in a first check, however, this manipulation check was unsuccessful \( M_{SVS} = 2.17, M_{control} = 1.98, t_{(104)} = .97, ns \).

Despite the manipulation was not recognized by participants, the hypotheses tests delivered interesting results. H2a states that junior designers look more for congruence than complementarity between personal and company values when making a vacancy selection. Based on the forced choice question about the underlying motivation for choosing a vacancy (congruence vs complementarity), we tested H2a over participants of both SVS and control groups. Data shows 83% chose for congruence as opposed to complementarity \( p = 0.000 \).
H2b states that junior designers are stimulated to look for congruence between personal and company values, if they are more aware of their personal values before making a vacancy selection. Thus, compared to the control group, participants in the SVS group should look more for congruence between personal and company values. However, when tested on the forced choice between value congruence vs. value complementarity, participants in the SVS group more often opted for complementarity ($X^2_{(1)} = 4.65, p < 0.03$).

This negative result for H2b had partly been anticipated upon in the theoretical framework. H2b is informed by literature suggesting that value congruence is desirable in organizations. However, we stated that an alternative case could be made for creative professions, because team creativity is positively influenced by team members that complement each other. Tests on the separate 6-point scales for congruence and complementarity as a motivation for job choice support this alternative explanation. The SVS group rated congruence as less important than the control group ($M_{SVS} = 3.03$, $M_{control} = 2.21$, $t_{(98)} = 3.48, p < .000$). In addition, the SVS group graded complementarity as more important than the control group, with the difference being marginally significant ($M_{SVS} = 4.07$, $M_{control} = 4.54$, $t_{(104)} = -1.86, p < .066$).

H3 states that participants in the SVS group were more confident with their job choice than those in the control group, which turned out to be the case ($M_{SVS} = 2.60$, $M_{control} = 3.19$, $t_{(104)} = -2.49, p < 0.01$).

Finally, interdependence between H2a/b and H3 may exist, because an interest in value congruence/complementarity could depend on a higher degree of confidence with one’s choice for company profile A or B. Thus, a final check was made to ascertain that the results under H2a/b - that value awareness leads to more value congruence/complementarity - were not mediated by (and thus independent of) a higher degree of confidence in choice in the SVS group. This check was a mediation analysis according to the procedures proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), and it turned out negative. This means that the effect of value awareness on value congruence/complementarity is not explained by the fact that participants in the SVS group were more confident about their choice.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

5.1 Reflection on research outcomes

The present study looked at how job selection choices by junior designers are informed by their personal values, and how a greater awareness of personal values might lead them to job selection choices made with more confidence and different motives. The results showed that junior designers apply at organizations whose expressed work values match with their own personal values (H1). It also shows that value congruence is a general motive for designers applying at an organization (H2a), although a greater awareness of personal values stimulates designers to consider how their values can complement those of the organization.
Finally, results show that value awareness increases confidence regarding job decision making (H3).

These results show that values are an important consideration for junior designers who are searching for a new job. In addition, the literature stresses the importance of value congruence in organizations. We find that, overall, this motive is also strong in junior designers looking to blend in with the organizations they want work for. However, in contrast to the literature, we see that a raised awareness of one’s personal values also brings forth an alternative motive for vacancy selection: a desire to work at an organization that has values that are not the same, but still complementary to one’s own. What causes this can be a matter of debate. It might be that junior designers, as creatives, seek organizations that are more open to change. However, it might also be that junior designers, as ambitious young professionals, want to change themselves after being hired into a new job.

In the pre-test the manipulation of value awareness by performing the SVS test was sufficient. Participants who did the SVS test showed a higher level of awareness of their personal values than those doing the calculations test. However, the actual study showed no difference between the SVS group and the control group, meaning that we were unable to confirm that the manipulation of filling in and receiving feedback from the SVS test had in fact increased awareness levels of personal values (according to participants themselves).

Looking at the data, we can see that both groups had scored very high on the value awareness scale, even the control group, who had little reason to do so. In a post-hoc test we asked nine participants directly whether they had become more or less aware of their personal values after filling in the SVS test [on a 6-point scale from 1 (more aware) to 6 (less aware)]. With a mean score of 3, this test indicated that most participants indicated that their value awareness had in fact become bigger due to the SVS test.

Other research constraints might also have had an influence on the outcome. For one, we did not check whether participants believed that the espoused values expressed by the vacancies (values the organisation says and may believe it has) were predictive of the values of the organisation at work (the values in use). The effect of the value communication in the vacancies might be quite different for participants believing or not believing the vacancies, or even for participants who would not believe the vacancies but still feel that the espoused values of an organisation would help advance their own espoused values. A more practical constraint were the non-ideal conditions for participating in this research. Ideally, the participants should be scheduled in advance, in order to have their full attention. However, many students who participated were interrupted while working on other projects, and could consequently have had the feeling of being rushed. This sometimes hastily reflection could also have led to confusion and doubts about one’s personal values.
5.2 Suggestions for further research

In order to gain comprehensive insights in personal value assessment, the researchers would suggest an expansion of the study. This could be done by choosing a larger sample of participants from different universities, which would provide the study with diverse design backgrounds. Additionally, educational influences could be measured and its effect on value perception and the choices junior designers make when entering the job market. Alternatively, the study could be extended using more than two company profiles, and to test junior designers on all ten values (and four value dimensions) of the SVS test. Additional qualitative interviews could help to gain insights in the reasoning for specific choices and ratings. Such extensions would make it possible to test more elaborate hypotheses about the relation between SVS test scores, raised value awareness, and vacancy selection, surpassing the somewhat dichotomous nature of the current study.

At the same time, we want to emphasize that the subject of personal values is difficult to grasp with a quantitative approach, since individuals can never be fully captured on a set of prespecified value dimensions. Thus, another approach for future research on value awareness and choosing the right job could be by cooperating with companies. Qualitative research could investigate the influence of clear value communications in vacancies. Moreover, it could be evaluated how companies could benefit from including value assessment tests in their application procedure to communicate the company’s as well as the participant’s values.

Finally, the results of the present study connect to previous research as discussed in the theoretical framework. However, most of that research was not about vacancy selection but team performance. Further research could investigate whether a higher level of confidence about personal values at the start of teamwork would lead to more unified teams (Thamhain, 2013), less friction (Bergema et al., 2011; van Onselen, 2015), and perhaps more coherent or creative design work.

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7. References


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Appendix – Company Profiles

Company Profile A

- We are a company that consists of different departments, e.g. a design department with multiple design teams.
- Our company is well-respected and well-known in our professional domain.
- We are result and growth oriented.
- We are very ambitious and strive to be the best in what we do.
- Our motto could be ‘Work hard, play hard’ - after a successful period of hard working, we like to enjoy life.
What we offer

- Possibility for achievement: Growing beyond your horizon, exceeding your own goals – we offer the resources to get somewhere!
- Stimulating and enhancing your self-development to achieve an outstanding performance.
- Drive, entrepreneurship, a focus on results and efficiency.
- Opportunity for controlling resources and leading big project teams.
- We acknowledge and appreciate meaningful results and celebrate achievements together.
- Excitement to stimulate and motivate the team and spread your ideas.

Company Profile B

- We are a design company that cares for the world and its people.
- We are a close, informal group of colleagues that value harmony.
- Working together as a team in a flat hierarchical structure in which everyone’s opinion counts.
- A positive working atmosphere is very important to us.
- Part of our objectives is to have several projects that contribute to the welfare of human life and do not focus on financial benefits in the first place.
- A group of colleagues that share the same vision on nature and human equity.

What we offer

- Environment with a sense of belonging: Working together in a loyal and honest surrounding that shows interest in every individual employee – ‘feel at home at work’.
- Projects that focus on social context and protect our environment.
- We care about the welfare of our employees and accept every individual equally.
- We offer a job in which you can really make a difference – for yourself, for other people and nature.
- Loyal employees that care about each other and have a broadminded attitude.
- People that feel responsible for their projects and their environmental influences.