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Overcoming work-related stress and promoting employee creativity in hotel industry: The role of task feedback from supervisor

Alice H.Y. Hon^{a,*}, Wilco W.H. Chan^{a,1}, Lin Lu^b

^a The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, The School of Hotel and Tourism Management, 17 Science Museum Road, TST East Kowloon, Hong Kong

^b Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Antai College of Economic & Management, 535 Fa Hua Zhen Rd., Shanghai 200052, China

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ABSTRACT

This study adopts the literature on voice and examines the importance of task feedback (positive and negative) from supervisors in facilitating the emergence of creativity, as an expression of voice behavior, from two types of work stress (challenge- and hindrance-oriented). We theorized that both forms of feedback would interact with challenge- and hindrance-related stress to result in employee creativity. Using multi-source data from a total of 265 full-time Chinese employees in Beijing, China, we show that employees under challenge-related stress generated most creativity when levels of positive task feedback from their supervisors were high. Similarly, those suffering from hindrance stressors were more creative at work when supervisors provided less negative and more positive feedback. Future research and directions are also discussed.

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Work stress has become one of the most widely studied topics in research, mainly because of its importance to employees' psychological health, which in turn affects service quality and organizational effectiveness (Bliese and Halverson, 1996; Hon and Kim, 2007; Jex et al., 2001; Kahn and Byosiere, 1992; O'Neil and Davis, 2010; Xie and Johns, 1995). It is reasonable to expect work stress to be negatively associated with job attitudes and performance. Researchers have found that work-related stress is associated with negative outcomes such as disloyalty, low morale, burnout, absenteeism, job seeking, or voluntary turnover (Glazer and Beehr, 2005; Hamilton et al., 1993), which are detrimental to organizations and their members. However, existing literature mostly generate mix results and inconsistent findings on the relationship between work stress and job outcomes. A number of other studies show only a modest or no relationship between work stress and outcomes (Bretz et al., 1994; Jex et al., 2001; Podasakoff et al., 2007). In their study of job seeking, Bretz et al. (1994) find no significant relationship between stress and job hunting or intention to leave. Consistent with this, several other studies suggest that stress may not necessarily be related to negative outcomes, but instead may have a positive impact on organizational effectiveness (Jex and Bliese, 1999; Stamper and Johlke, 2003). For example, Jex et al. (2001) find no significant relationship between work overload and active coping behavior. Active coping behavior denotes actions

initiated by individuals to solve work-related problems. Moreover, Demerouti et al. (2001) argue that demands and resources serve as buffers between job stressors and performance under strain. Other researchers show that work overload and time pressure enhances employees' positive feelings toward the job and organization (see for example Hon and Kim, 2007; LePine et al., 2005). These findings indicate that stress does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes at work.

One explanation for these inconsistent findings may be that the relationships between work stress and outcomes differ according to the stressors that are being evaluated. That is, the stress associated with some stressors may result in negative outcomes, whereas others may produce positive outcomes. Support for this explanation can be found in a recent meta-analysis confirming that not all work-related stress is bad (LePine et al., 2005; Podasakoff et al., 2007). Stress can produce a competitive edge and force employees to change and create novel ideas and procedures to solve problems.

In an era of constant emphasis on change, employee creativity, and innovation in organizations, particularly for employees in the hospitality industry who are repeatedly encouraged to improve service quality and delivery, the idea of a creative workforce has captured managers' attention. Creative ideas generate psychological and business benefits for both employees and the hotel industry as a whole (Hon, 2012; Hon and Leung, 2011). One way of meeting current business challenges is to rely heavily on employees' creativity when serving customers seeking quality accommodation and food and beverage (F&B) services. This can substantially contribute to innovation, productivity, and long-term success in the hospitality business (Amabile et al., 1996; Hon, 2011). Creativity here refers to the development of novel and useful ideas about products,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +852 3400 2363; fax: +852 2362 9362.

E-mail addresses: hmahon@polyu.edu.hk (A.H.Y. Hon), hmwilco@polyu.edu.hk (W.W.H. Chan).

¹ Tel.: +852 3400 2160; fax: +852 2362 9362.

services, ideas, procedures, or work processes, generated by individuals working together within a complex social system (Amabile and Khaire, 2008; George and Zhou, 2001; Woodman et al., 1993).

In spite of the growing attention to creativity in the hotel industry, however, there is still very little research on the topic (Hon, 2011). An interesting question of whether work stress and creativity is always negatively related, or may in some circumstances have a positive relationship, has drawn the attention of creativity scholars seeking to probe whether work-related stress is always detrimental to employee creativity, and thus harms the effectiveness of service organizations (Hon, 2011; Hon and Leung, 2011). However, little is yet known about the circumstances under which this stress-creativity relationship may form, particularly in the hospitality industry (Hon and Kim, 2007). This paper seeks to overcome these limitations by integrating the voice theory, creativity, and stress literature to explore whether some contextual factors may serve as a boundary condition to explain the relationship between work stress and employee creativity in the service industry.

Service employees who feel under pressure at work are, in essence, dissatisfied with the status quo. Stress can be a trigger for change when those who are unhappy with their current situation find new ways and creative approaches to improve their working conditions. Consistent with this reasoning, a number of scholars suggest that stress may actually have a positive influence on employee creativity and organizational effectiveness (Hon and Kim, 2007; Jex et al., 2001; Talbot et al., 1992). The essence of creativity is finding new methods and better ways of approaching problems. Thus, it is important to examine the conditions under which employees' experience of stress may actually lead to more creative performance, which ultimately benefits their organization. For instance, employees may experience various levels and types of work stress, such as the pressure to perform a lot of tasks within a short period of time or a failure to understand what is expected of them on the job. This might affect well-being and performance (O'Neil and Davis, 2010). Hence, this study seeks to identify the supervisor's role as the boundary condition under which work stress may actually lead to creativity. Identifying such a contextual factor is important for two reasons. Firstly, stress is very common in the hospitality industry, so employees who experience it may provide a powerful impetus for change in organizations by coming up with creative ideas for improvement. However, this is likely to occur only in certain situations; for example, where the employee decides not to leave his or her job in response to stress. Secondly, in the competitive modern business world, a degree of stress at work is inevitable, so managers should not view it as necessarily detrimental but instead as an opportunity to improve their human resource management (HRM) practices and training and development approaches. More specifically, this study examines the role of both positive and negative task feedback from a supervisor as a crucial condition for the relationship between work stress and employee creativity in the hospitality industry.

1. Theory and hypothesis development

1.1. Categorizations of work stress: challenge- and hindrance-oriented stress

Psychologists and management researchers alike are interested in studying stress at work and its effects on psychological health and organizational outcomes (Glazer and Beehr, 2005; Jex et al., 2001; Van Dyne et al., 2001). Cavanaugh et al. (2000) were among the first to theorize that work stress consists of two categories. *Challenge-oriented stress* refers to stress that creates challenges and feelings of fulfillment or achievement, such as tasks associated with a heavy workload, time pressure, and high levels of

responsibility. *Hindrance-oriented stress* is that which creates feelings of constrained personal development and work-related accomplishment caused by role ambiguity, job insecurity, organizational politics, and "red tape." The former can be regarded as good and likely to be positively related to job satisfaction, loyalty, and intention to remain; whereas the latter is considered as bad and hence related negatively to job satisfaction and performance, and positively related to turnover and job search (Cavanaugh et al., 2000).

1.2. When will work stress result in employee creativity?

Both theoretical and empirical work suggests employees will respond to work-related stress in one of the four ways: exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect (Farrell, 1983; Withey and Cooper, 1989). They may leave an organization in response to work stress (exit); choose to remain while actively trying to improve stressful conditions and create ideas for improvement (voice); remain but respond passively by accepting the status quo without making any improvements (loyalty); or remain in the organization and minimize their efforts while exhibiting passive withdrawal behaviors (neglect). As Farrell (1983) suggests, exit and voice are active responses and therefore constructive to an organization, whereas neglect and loyalty are passive and destructive responses (Van Dyne and LePine, 1998).

Despite the support for the above framework, there has been no attempt to integrate it with a theory that could be used as a basis for explaining employee creativity in response to the two types of stress (Ng and Feldman, 2012; Talbot et al., 1992). For either aspect of stress to result in creativity, employees must make an active and constructive response. Leaving a job is a genuine option for stressed employees, and when employees choose to exit, their potential to be creative and improve the focal organization is removed. However, exit will not be a viable option for employees when there are high costs associated with leaving and they are aware of these. In addition, finding another job cannot guarantee work stress would totally disappear in a new firm. In this situation, stressed employees often feel that staying is the better choice. Voice behaviors such as creativity not only enable organizations to channel their employees' stress into a positive desire for change, but also help them to correct problems and improve performance. A recent meta-analysis conducted by Ng and Feldman (2012) supported our argument that work stress is associated with voice behavior, which in turn positively related to performance outcomes. Thus, consistent with the voice theory, individuals who experience challenge stress and hindrance stress will be associated with creativity as an expression of voice behaviors.

Hypothesis 1a and b. Challenge-related stress will be positively related to employee creativity and hindrance-related stress will be negatively related to employee creativity.

The literature on voice suggests that employees are most likely to engage in this type of behavior when they perceive the unfavorable situation (such as work stress) as potentially effective, in the sense that they can perform their tasks, leaders or supervisors in the organization will support them, and they can bring about the desired change (Brockner et al., 1998; Withey and Cooper, 1989). This social support may be especially important when creativity is used as an expression of voice. Therefore, employees may choose to express voice through creativity only when they perceive that this has the potential to be effective and resolve their stressful situation. A review of the voice and creativity literature suggests that supervisory task feedback – both positive and negative – may channel stress into creativity in the form of voice behaviors (Amabile and Khaire, 2008; Talbot et al., 1992). Thus, this study aims to examine two forms of task feedback from the supervisor as a boundary

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