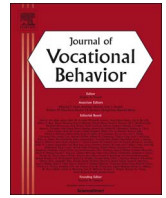


Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Vocational Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jvbThe power of routinized task behavior for energy at work[☆]Sandra Ohly^{a,*}, Anja S. Göritz^b, Antje Schmitt^a^a Institute of Economics, University of Kassel, Germany^b Institute of Psychology, University of Freiburg, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Energy
Routines
Work tasks
Diary study

ABSTRACT

According to conservation of resources model and control theory, routinized task behavior that develops through repeated execution under stable circumstances helps employees to deal with demanding aspects of their jobs. In two studies, we investigated whether routinized task behavior predicts momentary levels of energy. In the first study, 328 employees rated their level of routinization of five work tasks and subsequently provided information on their daily working on these tasks and energy twice a day on five consecutive workdays. Multilevel analyses reveal that employees experience higher levels of energy after they were working on a highly routinized task. In the second study, 32 employees provided ratings of their current routinized task behavior and energy three times a day for three consecutive workdays (in total 285 data points). Routinized task behavior at one point in time predicted energy at the next point in time when controlling for initial levels of energy. These results indicate that routinized task behavior is an effective way of managing energy at work, and that a microanalysis of task behaviors offers valuable insights.

1. Introduction

Today's employees are largely confronted with increasing job demands such as a high workload, interdependencies at work, problem solving, information processing as well as emotional demands (Grant & Parker, 2009; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). Suggestions on how to manage these demands include taking breaks during work time, applying energy management, or cognitive-behavioral strategies (Fritz, Lam, & Spreitzer, 2011; Schmitt, Zacher, & Frese, 2012; Zacher, Brailsford, & Parker, 2014) or recovering in off-job time (Sonnentag, Niessen, & Neff, 2012). Work-related energy management strategies include switching to another task, making a to-do list or checking emails (Fritz et al., 2011).

Research on work tasks demonstrates the powerful influence of task characteristics such as task difficulty or task urgency on work-related outcomes (Fisher & Noble, 2004; Minbashian, Wood, & Beckmann, 2010) and employee affect (Muraven, Gagné, & Rosman, 2008). Another characteristic of tasks that has previously been neglected in terms of its consequences on work-related outcomes is the level of routinization.

In this study, we aim to demonstrate the advantages that working on routinized tasks may have. We build on existing literature suggesting that the degree of routinized task behavior is likely to affect well-being (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006; Hacker & Richter,

[☆] Author note: Previous versions of this manuscript have been presented at the Cognition in Rough workshop at the Academy of Management conference 2012 in Boston, MA, and at the Academy of Management conference 2013 in Orlando, FL. The helpful suggestions of workshop participants, especially of Dov Eden and Neil Ashkanasy, are gratefully acknowledged. Furthermore, we would like to thank Johannes Kunze and Denise Hinn for their assistance in the data collection, and Clara Heißler, Lenka Duranova and Shaul Oreg for their comments on a previous version of this manuscript. Preparation of this manuscript was supported by the University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

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2013). Specifically, the aim of the present study is to examine the role of routinized task behavior in shaping workers' daily levels of energy. We argue that when employees work on routinized tasks, this might leave them with more energy than working on non-routinized tasks.

Our approach challenges previous research that has examined routinization as a stable job characteristic that is opposed to enriched or complex jobs (Baba & Jamal, 1991; Iverson & Peter, 1997), and that equated routinization with a lack of stimulation resulting in boredom (Loukidou, Loan-Clarke, & Daniels, 2009). In jobs that are characterized by high levels of routinization, work is repetitive and requires lower levels of skill. Furthermore, working methods are often prescribed. Loukidou and colleagues conclude after reviewing the literature that results are inconsistent in linking job-level routinization and boredom.

Although this previous research has provided important insights, it has neglected the fact that using routines and working on routinized tasks may vary within individuals over time. Rather than examining job-level routinization (i.e., the degree to which a job is repetitive overall) we study task-level routinization. Relationships at the intra- and the interindividual level reflect different psychological processes (Dalal, Bhave, & Fiset, 2014; Tennen, Affleck, & Armeli, 2005). On the *intraindividual* level, working on routinized tasks as opposed to novel or complex tasks, might save and/or provide resources, which results in higher levels of energy. On the *interindividual* level, holding a job that is generally characterized as highly routinized might be associated with boredom and lack of stimulation. Our study departs from this previous interindividual perspective in that we apply an intraindividual approach to routinized task behavior in daily work. Furthermore, our study adds to previous knowledge on energy management (Fritz et al., 2011; Zacher et al., 2014) and suggests that actively switching to a routinized task might be an important strategy to manage energy at work on a daily basis.

1.1. Routinized task behavior

Grant, Fried, and Juillerat (2011) argued that knowledge about employees' work experiences and behavior can be gained by studying “more molecular, personalized units of work such as tasks” (p. 423) instead of solely focusing on broader job characteristics. Consistent with this recommendation, recent studies examined how individuals experience work tasks in terms of their emotional and behavioral consequences (Fisher, Minbashian, Beckmann, & Wood, 2013); (Minbashian et al., 2010) suggesting that task is a useful level of analysis.

Work tasks differ on several dimensions such as their difficulty, urgency, and importance (Fisher et al., 2013; Minbashian et al., 2010; Taber & Alliger, 1995). Work tasks also differ in the degree to which their execution is routinized. Routinized task behavior refers to automaticity in task behavior (Frese & Zapf, 1994; Ohly, Sonnentag, & Pluntke, 2006) that develops through repeated execution in stable contexts (Betsch, Haberich, Glöckner, Haar, & Fiedler, 2001; Ouellette & Wood, 1998; Weiss & Ilgen, 1985) and practice (Anderson, 2000; VanLehn, 1996). Through repetition, an association is formed between external cues and behavior (Frese & Zapf, 1994) such that an external cue can elicit behavior without any conscious decision being necessary. In addition, single behavior steps form a pattern that is stored in memory (Bargh & Barndollar, 1996). Once an external cue is presented, the entire behavior pattern is executed. The repeated performance of a work task, such as a secretary using spreadsheet software, would lead to the automatization of the task and hence to behavior that is guided by external cues. This automaticity only becomes evident when something in the task changes so that external cues can no longer guide behavior. Over time when tasks become automatized through practice, fewer demands on working memory capacity and attention are posed on the individual, which makes routinized task behavior an effective and efficient way of working (Kesting & Smolinski, 2007; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). Through repeated execution of the behavior, performance becomes faster (Wickens & Hollands, 2000), mental resources are freed, the attentional load is reduced (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1989), and performance requires less conscious processing (Norman & Bobrow, 1975). The routinization of specific tasks can occur in all kinds of jobs, also in more complex ones (Grant & Parker, 2009; Waldenström, Josephson, Persson, & Theorell, 1998). Even in jobs that are generally more complex, employees need to accomplish certain tasks repeatedly in the same context (Ohly et al., 2006), and employees may decide to intersperse routinized episodes into episodes of working on highly complex or novel tasks.

1.2. Related concepts of routinized task behavior

Routinized task behavior bears some resemblance to established concepts: mindless work, habits, task self-efficacy, and job experience. Below, we will describe how routinized task behavior differs from these concepts.

Elsbach and Hargadon (2006) introduced the concept of mindless work, defined as performing “tasks that are low in cognitive difficulty and performance pressures” (p. 470). Examples of mindless work include simple manufacturing line tasks, making photocopies, and ordinary cleaning chores (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006). Mindless work bears some similarities to routinized task behavior in that both refer to working on tasks that do not require deliberative processes such as conscious decision-making. Routinized task behavior differs from mindless work as the former develops over time with practice, which means that even a difficult task can be routinized after a while. This has important implications. For example, providing practice opportunities to routinize initially difficult tasks might help if including simple tasks is not feasible in the workplace. Furthermore, although most individuals will find certain tasks such as making photocopies easy, this does not mean that they can be performed without problems when lacking practice and the accompanying automaticity in behavior. For instance, a professor who does a task that is apparently simple, such as using the photocopy machine, might have a hard time without practice.

Routinized task behavior is also similar to the concept of habits (Ouellette & Wood, 1998) in that both refer to behavior that is executed automatically in response to external cues. Habits have been studied in relation to everyday behavior such as traffic mode

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