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## Yes, we can! A fuzzy-set analysis of challenges, skills, and enjoyment of work

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## ABSTRACT

Happy employees are a major source of competitive advantage. This research examines antecedents of employees' well-being with an emphasis on balance of challenges and skills. Using data from a survey of 185 employees in academia, this research tests whether a balance of challenges and skills at high levels of underlying components is necessary and/or sufficient for work enjoyment. The results of a fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis indicate an asymmetrical causal relationship between balance of challenges and skills at high levels and work enjoyment. In addition, post hoc analyses reveal complex configurations of job demands and resources that lead to work enjoyment. From a methodological perspective, this research contributes to qualitative comparative analysis literature by outlining an approach to visualize contrarian cases in large-N samples, using a binned scatterplot.

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## 1. Introduction

Companies need talented and engaged people to achieve performance goals and generate competitive advantage (Crook, Todd, Combs, Woehr, & Ketchen, 2011). According to a Gallup (2013) study, however, only 13% of employees worldwide are engaged at work, 63% are not, and 24% even feel actively disengaged, indicating that they are unhappy at work and liable to spread negativity to co-workers.

The purpose of this research is to contribute to the understanding of employee well-being by embracing a new perspective that considers necessary and sufficient antecedent conditions of work enjoyment. Work enjoyment refers to employees' assessments of the quality of their work lives (Peters, Poutsma, Van der Heijden, Bakker, & de Bruijn, 2014) and describes the extent to which employees experience their work as intrinsically interesting or pleasurable (Graves, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Weber, 2012). Prior studies in different academic disciplines indicate several beneficial effects of positive emotions, such as a broadening of thought–action repertoires (e.g., Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002), more creative thinking and problem solving (e.g., Estrada, Isen, & Young, 1994), enhanced likability and cooperation (e.g., Barsade, Ward, Turner, & Sonnenfeld, 2000), increased pro-social behavior (e.g., George, 1991), high work performance (e.g., Hsiao, Jaw, Huan, & Woodside, 2015), and better physical well-being and coping strategies (e.g., Diener, 2000). These effects have important implications for companies because they relate to employee-, group-, and firm-level outcomes and encompass a

spectrum of managerial actions, including human resource management (e.g., teamwork), sales management (e.g., personal selling), and innovation management (e.g., ideas for new product development).

Regarding antecedents of work enjoyment, studies indicate that characteristics of employees, employment tasks, and work environment can affect employees' level of work enjoyment (Bakker, 2008; Ng, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2007). The current research illuminates the effects of a subset of these antecedents of work enjoyment—namely, *challenges* that employees experience at work and *skills* that employees possess to cope with work-related challenges.

Studies in the fields of positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), self-determination (Gagné & Deci, 2005), and job characteristics (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) underscore the role of challenges and skills as antecedents of enjoyment. Drawing on both theory and empirical work in these streams of literature, the current research examines how the *balance of challenges and skills* relates to enjoyment of work. In addition, this research investigates how employees' perceptions of work-related pressure and impact shape the relationship among challenges, skills, and work enjoyment. A survey of 185 employees in academia provides the data for this study. To analyze the data, this research uses fuzzy-set Qualitative Comparative Analysis (fsQCA; Ragin, 2008)—that is, a set-theoretic method based on Boolean algebra.

The results of this research contribute to the literature in three ways. First, this research adds to the existing body of literature on job demands and resources by providing novel insights into the effects of states of balance between challenges and skills on experiences of work enjoyment. Using fsQCA, this research outlines a new way to model balance of challenges and skills and to examine its effects on outcomes of interest. Second, this research contributes to extant work on positive emotions by elucidating the necessity and sufficiency of

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balance of challenges and skills and by showing that a state of balance at high levels is sufficient for achieving high work enjoyment. Third, this research outlines how binned scatterplots can help identify and quantify contrarian cases in large-N studies.

## 2. Theoretical foundation and research propositions

Three primary theoretical perspectives provide insights into the effects of challenges and skills on work enjoyment: self-determination theory (Gagné & Deci, 2005), flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Self-determination theory contends that three needs are essential for optimal psychological growth and well-being (Gagné & Deci, 2005). One of these needs involves competence, which refers to the capability of achieving internal and external outcomes (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991). Individuals experience competence when they have the appropriate skills to master the challenges they face. Thus, a balance of challenges and skills should positively influence work enjoyment.

Flow theory contends that in situations of activity, people can experience a state of flow in which they become totally immersed in the activity and experience intense enjoyment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Studies on flow show that people more often experience flow at work than during leisure time (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). Flow in work settings involves optimal experiences and encompasses, inter alia, emotional components such as work enjoyment (Salanova, Rodríguez-Sánchez, Schaufeli, & Cifre, 2014). Flow at work occurs in situations in which employees face high challenges, or opportunities for action, and have high skills, or abilities that help them deal with challenging situations (Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Situations with low challenges, in contrast, do not lead to flow, regardless of whether employees perceive a balance between challenges and skills (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

According to the JD-R model, two categories of working conditions—namely, job demands and job resources—affect employees' psychological, physiological, and behavioral reactions (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Job demands encompass physical or mental efforts; job resources facilitate the realization of work-related goals, reduce job demands, and stimulate growth (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). With regard to this theoretical perspective, work-related challenges represent job demands, and employee skills represent individual resources. The JD-R model assumes two processes: job demands consume energy reserves and lead to strain, and a lack of job resources hinders the effective handling of job demands and leads to disengagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In addition to these two processes, the JD-R model addresses the interaction between them and proposes a buffer effect of job resources. High resources mitigate the negative effects of high job demands. As such, the combination of high job demands and high job resources leads to average strain and high motivation, which in turn leads to positive outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Consequently, the JD-R model also points to positive effects of a balance of challenges and skills at high levels on work enjoyment.

The findings of empirical work provide additional insights into the relationship among challenges, skills, and work enjoyment (e.g., Inkinen et al., 2014). A meta-analysis of 28 empirical studies reviews research on the relationship between optimal challenge–skill balance and flow and reveals a weighted average correlation of .52 across all settings and a correlation of .32 in work/educational settings (Fong, Zaleski, & Leach, 2015).

In summary, the findings of prior work suggest that a balance of challenges and skills at high levels leads to work enjoyment, whereas its absence does not. Prior research, however, does not provide conclusive evidence of explicit connections (Ragin, 2008), that is, the necessity and sufficiency of a balance of challenges and skills at high levels for work enjoyment. Empirical research predominantly uses correlations to assess the relationships between challenges, skills, and work

enjoyment. The range of the correlation coefficients reported in previous studies suggests medium to strong relationships between balance of challenges and skills and work enjoyment. While these results provide important insights into cross-case tendencies, they offer little insights into explicit connections, because correlation pools and “conflates different kinds of causal assessment” (Ragin, 2008, p. 22). This research aims to address this gap by examining the necessity and sufficiency of balance of challenges and skills for enjoyment of work. These theoretical arguments lead to the following:

**Proposition 1.** The balance of challenges and skills at a high level is a necessary and sufficient condition for work enjoyment.

**Proposition 2.** The absence of balance of challenges and skills at a high level is not a necessary or sufficient condition for work enjoyment.

## 3. Research method

### 3.1. Data collection and sample characteristics

An online survey of 1029 academic employees of a major German university provides the empirical basis to test the propositions. An invitation e-mail including a link to the questionnaire invited the respondents to participate in the study and assured an anonymous data collection. In total, 185 respondents completed the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 18%. Of the respondents, approximately 44% are women. The mean age of the respondents is 32.4 years (SD = 7.80), and the mean time with the organization is 6.7 years (SD = 5.21).

### 3.2. Data collection instrument and validation of the measurement model

A standardized questionnaire serves as the data collection instrument. The questionnaire includes multiple-item measures to capture the focal constructs and presents them on five-point Likert-type rating scales, anchored by 1 (“strongly disagree”) and 5 (“strongly agree”). Three items based on Leischnig and Kasper-Brauer (2015) capture work enjoyment. In addition, three items based on Spreitzer (1995) measure employees' skills. For work challenges, this study uses three items inspired by Churchill, Ford, and Walker (1974) (see Table 1).

The measurement validation procedure, in line with recommendations in the literature (Bagozzi, Yi, & Phillips, 1991; Gerbing & Anderson, 1988), indicates an acceptable overall model fit ( $\chi^2 = 48.87$ ,  $df = 24$ ,  $\chi^2 / df = 2.03$ ; CFI = .97; TLI = .94; RMSEA = .07). Cronbach's alpha ranges from .83 to .84 and exceeds the recommend threshold of .7 (Nunnally, 1978). Composite reliability values range from .84 to .85, and average variances extracted range from .64 to .65, exceeding the standards of .6 and .5, respectively (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Analysis of discriminant validity based on Fornell and Larcker (1981) procedure indicates satisfactory discriminant validity, as the square root of the average variance extracted of each factor is higher than the correlation of that factor with all other factors in the model. In summary, these results suggest that the measurement model fits the data well.

Additional tests for common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) and non-response bias (Armstrong & Overton, 1977) indicate that both issues do not appear problematic for this study. For subsequent analyses, this research combines the multiple-item measures of the focal constructs into average scores.

### 3.3. Data analysis

FsQCA (Ragin, 2008) helps probe the formulated propositions. FsQCA is a data analytic method that examines relationships between constructs in terms of set relations. A major strength of fsQCA is its

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