



# Work environment and well-being of different occupational groups in hospitality: Job Demand–Control–Support model



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## ABSTRACT

The Job Demand–Control and Job Demand–Control–Support (JDCS) models are theoretical approaches that are commonly used to understand the relationship among work characteristics, health, and well-being. In the European context, minimal studies on the main effects and multiplicative model in relation to individual well-being have been conducted. To fill this significant research gap, the present study analyzed the relationship among job demands, job control, social support, and the well-being of certain occupational groups in the European hospitality sector. The JDCS model is critical for the future of the hospitality industry due to its significant role in employees' well-being, strain, and conflict. Different logistic regression models were employed to test the proposed hypotheses. Findings of the data collected from approximately 2000 hospitality employees (a heterogeneous sample in a homogeneous occupational field given the need to use additional homogeneous samples for improved analysis) in Europe confirm the strain (only among managers) and iso-strain hypotheses of the JDCS model across three occupational groups.

## 1. Introduction—theoretical approach to work environment and well-being

Work is a primary element of personal well-being because it provides income and indicates social status. Work and well-being are intricately related given that work conditions impact the quality of workers' personal lives (Eurofound, 2012). The Job Demand–Control (JDC) (Karasek, 1979) and Job Demand–Control–Support (JDCS) models (Johnson and Hall, 1988; Karasek and Theorell, 1990) are theoretical approaches that are commonly used to understand the relationship among work characteristics, health, and well-being (Ibrahim and Ohtsuka, 2012). Both models identify the key dimensions of work environment: organizational or psychological demands (job demands) and the level of control that employees have over their activities (job control).

Job demands are psychological stressors related to work overload, such as the performance of unforeseen tasks or certain personal conflicts. Job control, also known as decision latitude, is defined as the level of individual control over work, including the tasks that work involves and how they develop each day. The decision latitude concept integrates the following two constructs: (1) decision authority, which

refers to employees' authority to adopt decisions that affect their work and (2) skill discretion, which expresses the workers' degree of control in terms of individual initiatives and the utilization of their own abilities. Two traditional lines of research, demand at work and lack of autonomy, are combined in Karasek's original model (1979), which raises the first strain hypothesis. This hypothesis claims that a combination of high job demands and low job control results in job strain, which, in turn, increases the risk of physical and mental health problems. Therefore, as Muhonen and Torkelson (2003) asserted, the combination of high demands and low control, instead of job demands per se, generates poor well-being.

The dichotomy between work demands and control results in four types of jobs with well-differentiated effects on the psychological well-being of employees. (1) Active jobs submit workers to strong demands, but they enjoy a wide margin of autonomy to start initiatives, become creative, or participate in decision making about their activities, thereby stimulating work involvement and favor well-being. Active jobs are typical in certain professions, such as lawyers, judges, journalists, or managers, among others (Neffa, 2015). (2) Low-strain jobs are characterized by low job demands and high control over activity, which implies enhanced psychological well-being, although these can reduce

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productivity. (3) High-strain jobs have intense physical and psychological demands and reduce margins for maneuvering with regard to autonomy and control. These jobs generate severe strains that negatively affect the health and psychological well-being of workers. Neffa (2015) corroborated that workers who experience these conditions are subject to operating machinery, office employees who perform automated and standardized tasks, phone operators, and cooks and waiters in the hospitality industry. (4) Passive jobs have low job demands and reduce control over activity, thereby leading to routine, demotivation, overtime, and the loss of professional skills and capabilities. These results create an unattractive work atmosphere that increases absenteeism and turnover. Passive jobs are typical for service staff with low qualifications, for example, custodians, porters, cleaners, and helpers.

From an organizational point of view, high-strain jobs have the highest health risk. Therefore, Karasek's (1979) JDC model (job-strain hypothesis) mainly hypothesizes that workers with high-strain jobs have diminished psychological well-being. In addition to the independent and additive effect of job demands and control in predicting well-being, the JDC model also indicates a buffer hypothesis, that is, the joint interactive effect of both variables according to which job control can moderate the negative consequences of high job demands. From this perspective, the degree of control constitutes a resource available to help employees' moderate job demands. Chiang et al. (2013) considered that psychological consequences on individuals do not depend on numerous demands as they do on the absence of autonomy and control capacity to manage them.

Johnson (1986) elucidated that the JDC model only considers control over work as a potential psychosocial resource, thereby avoiding social support. Furthermore, social support is deemed as another moderator more important than work control. Thus, Johnson and Hall (1988) and Karasek and Theorell (1990) expanded and reformulated Karasek's original model by adding social support as a third dimension that leads to the JDCS model. In this expanded model, social support is perceived as the exchange of positive emotional resources between a worker and his/her co-workers and/or supervisors (Wadsworth and Owens, 2007). Social support is an essential, emotionally sustaining, and instrumentally supported resource that enables workers to manage job stress (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). From this perspective, social support increases the ability of employees to cope with stressful situations; thus, strain would be buffered if an employee is supported by peers (social or emotional support) and/or their supervisors (technical support). The extended JDC model includes social support as advocated by several researchers (i.e., Cooper et al., 2001). The JDCS model warns that the greatest risks to physical and mental health are experienced by employees exposed to a high isolation strain (iso-strain) job, i.e., those forced to address high demands or psychological overload in a context of low job control or decision latitude and low social support (iso-strain hypothesis).

The three elements—job demands, job control, and social support—can individually affect well-being; collectively, these elements have a synergistic impact greater than the sum of the effects of each. However, empirical evidence on the effect of the three-way interaction remains rare (Janssen et al., 2001) because of the substantial heterogeneity in the working conditions between different positions and occupations. Thus, Kristensen (1995) verified that research on the JDCS model would substantially improve with increased homogeneous samples from the addressed working conditions. Janssen et al. (2001) validated that the samples used to test the JDCS model should be homogeneous in terms of varied “disturbing” background variables even if they are heterogeneous with respect to the degree of employee exposure to the environment's labor factors.

Given that job strain research requires a homogeneous sample for improved analysis (Rodríguez et al., 2001), this research aims to test the JDCS model in a heterogeneous sample of employees in a homogeneous occupational field—the hospitality sector and in three different

occupations: managers, personal service workers, cleaners, and food preparation assistants. These are three jobs that present different levels of responsibility, require various skill levels, may be subject to different job demands and strain levels, and may differ in the employees' degree of control and social support. This methodological design is supported by the necessity to develop empirical studies that consider occupational status when investigating the JDCS model (Muhonen and Torkelson, 2003).

Unlike other sectors, such as manufacturing, hospitality offers an intangible service related to a professional who provides it. Thus, the JDCS model is important for the future of the hospitality sector due to high demands faced by its workers and the strategic value of their well-being to preserve company competitiveness. In the European context, minimal studies have been conducted on the main effects and the multiplicative model in relation to individual well-being. Thus, the impacts of job demands, job control, and social support have not received the attention they deserve in a sector that is strategic for the economy of many European Union countries. To fill this significant research gap, the present study analyzes the relationship among job demands, job control, social support, and the well-being of certain occupational groups in the hospitality sector in the European context.

## 2. Job demands, job control, and social support in the hospitality sector

Tourism represents a prominent proportion of GDP and employment in many European Union countries. According to a World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2017) report, international tourist arrivals reached 1235 million in 2016, and the tourism industry accounted for 10% of the world GDP, 7% of the global trade, and 1 in 10 jobs. Europe is the most visited region in the world, with more than 600 million visits or 51% of the world total and with over 400 billion euros injected into the European economy or 36% of the world income. In certain countries, such as Spain, tourism is an essential engine for the national economy to function. Spain met the needs of 75.3 million foreign visitors in 2016 (12% of the total received by Europe and 6% of global visitors), which represents 7.2 million more than the 2015 visitors, and the country established its own tourism record for the seventh year in a row. Currently, Spain is a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) with the highest direct contribution from the tourism sector to the economy in terms of gross value added (10.2%) and employment (11.5%).

A critical factor for this sector's competitiveness is the human component given that most tourism activities require an intensive use of labor that is difficult to substitute with technology. The tourism and hospitality sector's labor market also shows special features that make it unattractive, thereby shaping its ability to attract and integrate excellent professionals. Among these features, on the one hand, is the emphasis on the high seasonality that generates uncertainty and lays the foundation for the degradation and precarization of working conditions and, on the other hand, is the use of subcontracting, which subordinates and limits the sense of belonging to the company. Human resource management in the hospitality sector is significant because of employees' contribution to the quality levels perceived by customers. However, the labor conditions offered by the industry mean that hospitality employment is considered as a job transition to other sectors of activity. High turnover makes the simultaneous application of proactive policies in human resource management to guarantee good professional careers for the best employees difficult.

The current reality depicts a convoluted panorama in which many employees are subject to high job demands. Kusluvan et al. (2010) asserted that the tourism and hospitality industry is characterized by a high level of labor turnover; largely unskilled jobs; labor and skill shortages; dual labor markets with core and peripheral workforce; high proportion of seasonal, part-time, and on-call workforce; high proportion of non-nationals (ethnic minorities and immigrants), students, and

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