



Can job crafting reduce job boredom and increase work engagement? A three-year cross-lagged panel study[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Building upon the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this longitudinal study examined whether job crafting behaviors (i.e. increasing structural and social job resources and increasing challenges) predict less job boredom and more work engagement. We also tested the reverse causation effects of job boredom and work engagement on job crafting and the dynamics between the three job crafting behaviors over time. We employed a two-wave, three-year panel design and included 1630 highly educated Finnish employees from a broad spectrum of occupations in various organizations. Our results indicated that seeking challenges in particular negatively predicted job boredom and positively predicted work engagement. Seeking challenges fueled other job crafting behaviors, which, in their turn, predicted seeking more challenges over time, thus supporting the accumulation of resources. Job boredom negatively predicted increasing structural resources, whereas work engagement positively predicted increasing both structural and social resources. These findings suggest that seeking challenges at work enhances employee work engagement, prevents job boredom, and generates other job crafting behaviors. Conversely, job boredom seems to impede job crafting.

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A high level of employee well-being in the workplace is in the best interest of both workers and organizations (Danna & Griffin, 1999). Work engagement and job boredom capture aspects of both employee well-being and motivation. The purpose of this study is to examine how employees can prevent job boredom, increase work engagement, and thus sustain well-being.

Work engagement is defined as an active state of well-being that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption at work (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006). Engaged employees are described as immersing themselves in their work roles, and thereby as delivering high quality work performances (Kahn, 1992, 1990). Engaged employees tend to be proactive and open to new information, and motivated to perform well in their work (Bakker, 2011).

Whereas work engagement refers to a positive and fulfilling psychological state, job boredom is regarded as the opposite (Salanova, Del Líbano, Llorens, & Schaufeli, 2014). More specifically, job boredom refers to an unpleasant state of passiveness that is characterized by attentional difficulties and a distorted sense of time (Reijseger et al., 2013; Fisher, 1993).

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Bored employees may disengage from a work role that lacks satisfying activities (Eastwood, Frischen, Fenske, & Smilek, 2012), or does not enable full use of individual capabilities (Harju & Hakanen, 2016). Previous studies have associated boredom at work with harmful outcomes for individuals and organizations, such as substance abuse, low job satisfaction and deteriorated work performance (see Loukidou, Loan-Clarke, and Daniels, 2009 for a review) as well as stress symptoms, turnover intentions, poor self-perceived health and reduced workability (Harju, Hakanen, & Schaufeli, 2014). In sum, organizations and employees alike may benefit from fostering work engagement and preventing job boredom.

Employees may also promote their own well-being at work by pro-actively shaping their jobs to better fit their individual needs, skills and motivations. This type of proactive behavior has been dubbed job crafting, which refers to activities that employees initiate to shape their tasks, their work environment or their mindset to create jobs that are more meaningful for themselves (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

According to Tims, Bakker, and Derks (2012), job crafting is essentially about employees increasing resources and seeking challenges in their jobs in order to motivate themselves at work. As such, job crafting builds on the fundamental proposition of the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, which posits that individuals strive to retain, protect and accumulate resources to cope with threats to their well-being (Hobfoll, 1989). As stated by COR theory, resources are those objects, personal characteristics, conditions or energies that are valuable either in their own right or because they may help in achieving or protecting other valued resources (see also Hobfoll, 2001). Individuals may invest their current resources (e.g. time and/or energy) into building new resources (e.g. skills, relationships or better work environment) and consequently into sustaining and protecting their well-being. Lack of resource gain, or resource loss, may in turn cause stress and threaten individual well-being.

Furthermore, COR theory suggests that “resources aggregate in resource caravans in both an immediate and a life-span sense” (Hobfoll, 2001, p. 349). These positive *gain cycles* are mirrored by negative loss cycles, in which initial resource loss predicts future loss. When individuals’ resources are depleted, they are more likely to withdraw their efforts than to invest in acquiring more resources (Hobfoll, 1989). It thus follows that, in addition to short-term impact, both gain and loss cycles may yield long-term effects on individual well-being.

In the present study, we focus on job crafting as a way for employees to gain resources that protect them from job boredom, increase their work engagement, and help them to accumulate further job resources to maintain their well-being over time. Moreover, we seek to explore the reversed relations between well-being (work engagement and job boredom) and job crafting to examine whether engaged employees craft their jobs in the future, and whether bored employees withdraw themselves from such behaviors, or indeed craft their jobs and become more engaged.

Some qualitative and cross-sectional studies have suggested that employees may seek challenges and increase resources in their work to constructively prevent and cope with job boredom (van Hooff & van Hooff, 2014; Carroll, Parker, & Inkson, 2010; Game, 2007). However, to date, no longitudinal studies on the relations between job boredom and job crafting have, to our knowledge, been carried out. Thus, we lack knowledge on whether job crafting can effectively reduce future job boredom and how, in turn, job boredom may affect job crafting.

The present study had two aims: (1) to increase our knowledge regarding the long-term effects of job crafting on preventing job boredom and increasing work engagement and vice versa; and (2) to examine the dynamics (i.e. temporal order) between different types of job crafting behaviors. In so doing, our study sheds light on the mechanisms of job crafting as an ongoing process.

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Job crafting and employee well-being

Employee well-being can be perceived as a function of various job resources and job demands, in which job resources spark a positive, motivational process while buffering the negative effects of job demands (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Work engagement involves high levels of job resources that are balanced with reasonably high job demands (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007). Hence, the more demanding a job, the more resources are needed to sustain work engagement. In contrast, job boredom has been associated with a lack of both job resources and job demands (Reijseger et al., 2013).

Two types of job demands have been distinguished: Whereas hindrance demands (e.g. role conflict, role ambiguity, red tape and hassles) may hamper well-being, challenge demands (e.g. high workload, time pressure, job responsibility) may foster work engagement (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010) and protect employees from job boredom (van Tilburg & Igou, 2012). According to COR theory, employees may proactively cope with potential threats to their well-being, before problems actually arise (Hobfoll, 2001). We argue that job crafting can thus be considered proactive coping behavior, as employees anticipate potential threats to their well-being and actively prevent future experiences of job boredom from emerging.

So far, research has associated job crafting with, for example, higher work engagement (Vogt, Hakanen, Brauchli, Jenny, & Bauer, 2016; Tims et al., 2012; Petrou, Demerouti, Peeters, Schaufeli, & Hetland, 2012; Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011), as well as colleague-rated in-role performance (Bakker, Tims, & Derks, 2012). In addition to increasing employees’ own work engagement, a recent study showed that job crafting may also increase colleagues’ job crafting and consequently, colleagues’ work engagement (Bakker, Rodríguez-Muñoz, & Vergel, 2016). However, research on the well-being effects of job crafting other than work engagement has been scarce. In addition, studies have typically examined the effects of job crafting as a unitary concept, although there are many ways to make tasks, job context or social encounters at work more meaningful (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Tims et al. (2012) distinguish between three types of job crafting behaviors; (1) increasing structural resources

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