

Interest and Autonomy: A New Model for Improving Employee Engagement
Danielle Boris
12/15/2020

Introduction

What are the drivers of employee satisfaction as it relates to the current pandemic work environment and post-pandemic future of work? The current pandemic environment caused a complete disruption in organizations. While employees have been working across countries office and even countries for some time, the entire workforce was suddenly remote. Employees needed to navigate a new way of working while organizations needed to provide support for an unprecedented situation. As the pandemic continued beyond the expected time, it became increasingly clear that work will never look the same again. This literature review aims to understand employee engagement and satisfaction in order to address how organizations and employees can stay engaged through the new normal.

Background

Current literature on job satisfaction is disjointed leaving holes in the models used to improve employee engagement, motivation, and happiness. Through the lenses of Karasek's (1979) Job Demand-Control Model and Deci & Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory, I propose a new model through which to evaluate organizational behavior.

Through a literature review, I argue that this model coupled with literature on entrepreneurship, interest, autonomy, and space demonstrate the need for organizations to evaluate employee autonomy as it relates to workspace and interests in the immediate situation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the short-term return to work post-pandemic, and extending beyond pandemic times.

I also argue that the JDC model is interdependent on workspace setup. Having job demand-control in only one aspect of a job will not in itself lead to empowered employees. Further empirical research will need to be conducted on the exact relationship between the two.

The study of interest as it relates to education has been extensive. This is likely because education is seen as being for students and for the greater good of society. On the other hand, businesses are designed to drive revenue and employees are viewed as necessary to achieve revenue goals. However, research (Karasek, 1979; Schmidta, Hupke, & Diestel, 2012; Schmitt, 2010) has found that alignment between work and interests benefits not only the employee but the organization as well.

Continually, extensive research on interests and autonomy at work ignore the linear impact of interests to autonomy. Rather, they conclude with effects of interest on self-regulation. Self regulation in-turn leads to improved engagement. Interest and autonomy, are in fact linked. One paper stands out as a notable exception and provides extended support for the link between interest and autonomy.

The proposed model details how interests, self-regulation, autonomy of work, and autonomy of space relate to each other, engagement, psychological ownership, and employee satisfaction.

Job Demand-Control

Karasek's (1979) Job Demand-Control model provides a baseline for understanding employee satisfaction. He argues that employees must have a certain level of decision latitude and job demand in order avoid what he refers to as job strain (or stress in today's words). Empirical evidence in later studies (review Häusser, Mojzisch, Niesel, & Schulz-Hardt, 2010) support that job strain is correlated to high stress with low decision latitude. Similarly, low job demand coupled with low decision latitude leads to feelings of passiveness at work, while high job demand with high decision latitude leads to an active job (Karasek, 1979).

Physical Working Environment

In order to have an engaged workforce, organizations must strive to have working conditions that lead to high job demand and high job control. The Job Demand-Control model leaves out the important role physical environment or workspace plays in job strain and subsequently employee satisfaction. As Cohen (2007) articulates, “the physical work environment represents a sizable portion of the balance sheet and typically represents the second-highest operating cost, after human resources” (p. 290). However, in her literature review comparing articles in management journals to articles in design journals, she finds that no management article “...considers characteristics of control, in contrast to 29% of the design articles” (Cohen, 2007, p. 288). With this, there is a clear gap in how organizations perceive control, which must be included in an organizational behavior model.

Knight and Haslam (2010) studied the effect of office spaces on employee well-being and productivity. The two tested whether lean, enriched, or empowered office spaces gave way to more productive employees with higher levels of well-being. Findings show that when employees decorated their own spaces, without management oversight or redesign, organizations saw up to a 32% productivity boost compared to the employees in a lean office setup (Knight and Haslam, 2010). This effect was greater than the effects of an enriched office space, defined by management decorating the office with plants and art (Knight and Haslam, 2010). In other words, Knight and Haslam (2010) proved job demand-control extends beyond ownership of tasks and into ownership over space as well.

Innovation also stems from privacy, a form of control over space. Bernstein (2012) discovers “that operators were hiding their most innovative techniques from management so as not to ‘bear the cost of explaining better ways of doing things to others’ or alternatively ‘get in trouble’ for doing things differently” (p. 57). Continually, after installing privacy curtains, output on lines increased 10-15% in the first week and remained high for the following five months (Bernstein, 2010). Bernstein’s (2010) finding demonstrates a level of control over a workspace in the form of privacy, and how this control leads to autonomy, directly increasing the bottom line of an organization.

Autonomy over space can take many forms, from decorating to privacy, but it is clear that space plays an important role in job demand-control and the bottom line of a company.

Self-Regulation and Self-Determination Theory

The increased gig economy and pre-pandemic struggle for organizations to retain young talent demonstrate a gap in both the literature around employee satisfaction and its application into the workforce. Models such as the attraction-selection-attrition Framework show that

employees select to work at organizations that align with their missions and values (Schmidt & Diestel, 2015). This macro view on organizations has been studied in depth and findings are consistent across disciplines. Schmitt (2010) found in studying nurses that “Improving the fit between personal and organizational goals and strengthening the individual control resource could make health care workers less vulnerable against the depleting effects of meeting self-control demands at work.” (p. 855). But what occurs after an employee has been hired into an organization. The employee will need to stay engaged with work.

Karasek (1979) acknowledges this eventual disengagement saying, “We reason that repetitious work, even if it once required skill, loses its capacity for intellectual challenge after constant rehearsal” (p. 290). Thus, workers must be consistently intrinsically motivated to continue learning, and organizations need a system that not only encourages but enables growth.

Self-regulation is the human ability to control impulses. As people spend more time controlling themselves, cognitive capacity depletes, decreasing the likelihood that people achieve their goals, in addition to other behaviors (Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Muraven, M., & Tice, D.M., 1998). For the purposes of this paper, we consider goals and productivity to be inherently linked. That is, one achieves productivity through completing goals. Continually, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) posits that humans have the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and these needs are key for optimal functioning and well-being.

Outside of the organizational behavior discipline, studies consistently agree that interest related work not only increases positive affect, but also productivity (O’Keefe & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014; Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002). Fewer studies have acknowledged the effect of employee interest in work beyond hire. Consistent with the self-regulatory and control work cited earlier, “high levels of affect- and value-related interest were associated with the optimization of both performance and self-regulatory resources” (O’Keefe & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). O’Keefe and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2014) continually demonstrate through their work on students that interests in work can relate beyond affect and value into stored knowledge. Stored knowledge involves “interests for particular content, events, or activities” (O’Keefe & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014, p.76) and relates heavily to operation and function of organizations. Among the largest costs of employee turnover is not simply replacing an employee but training a new employee to be as efficient as the previous. By aligning various interests, the studied students exhibited positive affect and persistence (Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff, 2002).

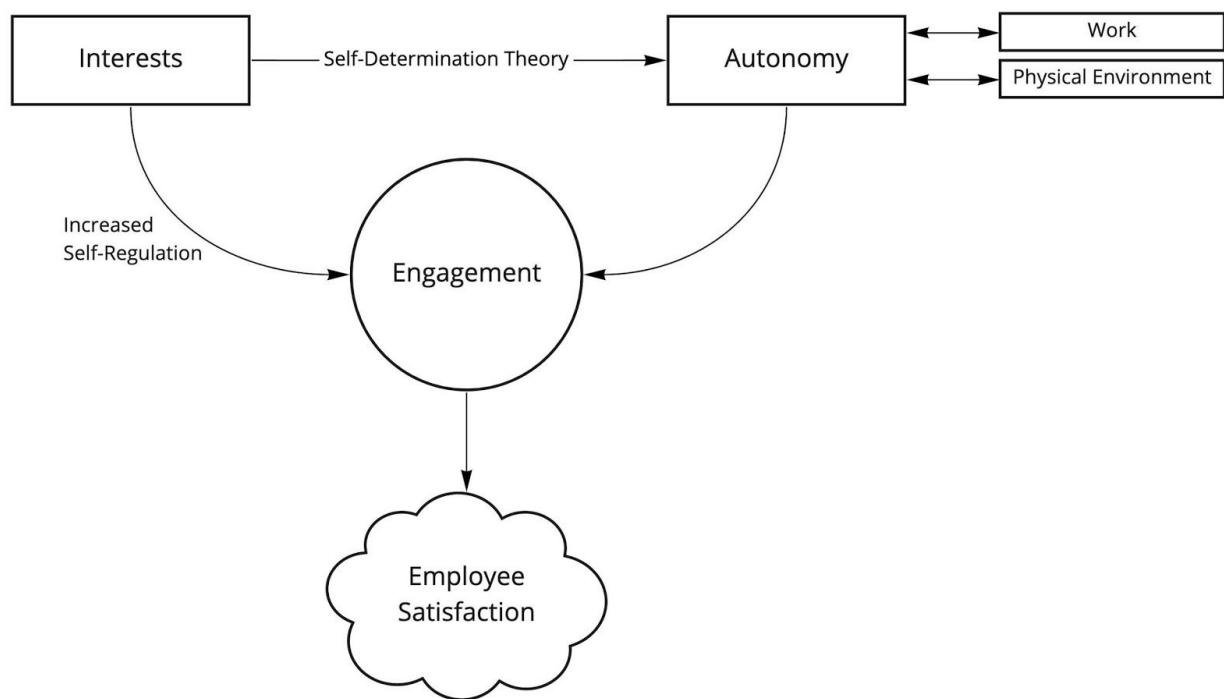
While some (Leuty & Handsen, 2012) have argued against the power of aligning interests and work, their cited material dates mainly around the 1990s, a time when work was still considered to be something one has to do rather than what employees want to do. The shift to fulfillment through work is relatively novel and recent. Organizations, especially larger ones, tend to still operate in a similar manner to factory labor: task-based, operating (working) hours, and strict procedure. These processes are thought to achieve greater efficiency (Shit, Nikolaev, & Wincent, 2019). However, Shit, Nikolaev, and Wincent (2019) cite, “Greater job control can lead to lower levels of work-related stress through an increased sense of mastery and competence...the extent to which people feel competent and in control of their lives is one of the strongest predictors of well-being” (p. 6). Furthermore, when control is assessed through engagement in entrepreneurial tasks, people’s developed increased sense of autonomy results in higher levels of well-being (Shit, Nikolaev, & Wincent, 2019). In other words, “Providing choice about aspects of task engagement tend to enhance feelings of autonomy, [prompting] a shift in

[Perceived Locus of causality] from external to internal, and increase intrinsic motivation” (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Gagné & Deci (2005) articulate that when employees are able to choose what they want to work on, they become intrinsically motivated.

Put plainly, “Intrinsically motivated behavior, which is propelled by people’s interest in the activity itself, is prototypically autonomous” (Gagné & Deci, 2005, p.26). There is in fact a direct link between interests and autonomy by way of self-determination theory.

New Model for Employee Happiness and Organizational Behavior

In order to increase employee engagement, organizations must enable employees to complete work which aligns to their individual interests. Tapping into interests increases ability for self-regulation, leading to engagement; and additionally, interests are inherently linked to autonomy through self-determination theory, which we have seen leads to engagement as well. Similarly, autonomy of work and space leads to engagement and then to employee satisfaction and retention. Interests relate to autonomy through self-determination theory.



When employees are interested in the work they are doing they have increased engagement and psychological ownership over that work, which in turn drives a desire for autonomy, all culminating in employee satisfaction (ideally happiness) and employee retention.

Discussion and Limitations

The current literature review and new model for employee satisfaction links together previously siloed research and expands upon the job demand-control model to include the physical environment as an important factor in employee engagement. The implications of this

work apply to current working conditions in pandemic times and beyond as we will see a shift in organizational structure and work life expectations post-pandemic.

Particularly, the productivity spike in early pandemic months have mainly been attributed to increased boredom at home with more time to dedicate to work. However, working in comfortable and private spaces which were autonomously set up may have contributed to this productivity spike. Moreover, the future of work appears to involve an increased mixture of work from home and work from office, organizations must create a system that enables a level playing field for employee engagement. Using the new model, organizations have an opportunity to pull new levers of interest and physical environment autonomy as a means of driving engagement.

The current model is not without limitations. Most notably, further quantitative research must be done to evaluate the extent of the relationship between interest and engagement. Additionally, the job demand-control model was developed in 1979. While research has consistently supported this model, it is important to note that today's employees are considered to have much more autonomy than workers of the late 1970s. Full autonomy is at odds with time, team dynamics, and traditional office spaces. Further research must be conducted to determine the extent of autonomy needed to observe engagement effects.

Conclusion

The present literature review provides the basis for a new model of employee engagement. Prior research failed to fully connect interests with autonomy and employee engagement. Continually, within organizational behavior, only autonomy over work was considered, rather than also accounting for the impact autonomy over the physical environment has on employee engagement. The new framework has implications for future research in the field on organizational behavior as well as practical implications for the future of work both in and after pandemic times.

References:

- AINLEY, M., HIDI, S., & BERNDORFF, D. (2002). Interest, learning, and the psychological processes that mediate their relationship. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94(3), 545–561.
- ALEXANDER HAUSSER, J., MOJZISCH, A., NIESEL, M., & SCHULZ-HARDT, S. (2010). Ten years on: A review of recent research on the Job Demand-Control (-Support) model and psychological well-being. *Work and Stress*, 24(1), 1–35.
- Baldry, C., & Hallier, J. (n.d.). Welcome to the house of fun: Work space and social identity. *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 31(1), 150–172. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1177/0143831X09351215>
- Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Muraven, M., & Tice, D.M. (1998). Ego depletion: Is the active self a limited resource? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74(5), 1252–1265.
- Becker, E. & Huselid, Mark. (1998). High performance work systems and firm performance: A synthesis of research and managerial implications. *Research in Personnel and Human Resource Management*. 16. 53-101.
- Bernhard-Oettel, C. (1,2), Stengård, J. (1,2), Leineweber, C. (2,3), Westerlund, H. (2,3), Peristera, P. (2,3), & Östergren, P.-O. (4). (n.d.). Stuck at a workplace: What's work control, demands and learning got to do with it? A longitudinal multilevel study on Swedish permanent employees in situations of 'workplace locked-in.' *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 31(14), 1771–1792.
<https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1080/09585192.2017.1423101>
- Bernstein Ethan S. (2012). The Transparency Paradox: A Role for Privacy in Organizational Learning and Operational Control. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 57(2), 181–216.
- Cohen, L. M. (n.d.). Bridging two streams of office design research: A comparison of design/behavior and management journal articles from 1980-2001. *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*, 24(4), 289–307.
- Craig, K., & S. Alexander, H. (2010). The Relative Merits of Lean, Enriched, and Empowered Offices: An Experimental Examination of the Impact of Workspace Management Strategies on Well-Being and Productivity. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied*, 16(2), 158–172.
- Gagné, M. and Deci, E.L. (2005), Self-determination theory and work motivation. *J. Organiz. Behav.*, 26: 331-362. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.322>
- Hsueh-Liang Fan, Sheng-Tsung Hou, & Yu-Hui Lin. (2019). Flow as a mediator between psychological ownership and employees' subjective happiness. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 34(7), 445–458.
<https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1108/JMP-11-2017-0405>
- Klaus-Helmut, S., & Stefan, D. (2015). Self-Control Demands: From Basic Research to Job-Related Applications. *Journal of Personnel Psychology*, 14(1), 49–60.
<https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1027/1866-5888/a000123>
- Leuty, M. E. (1), & Hansen, J.-I. C. (2). (n.d.). Building Evidence of Validity: The Relation Between Work Values, Interests, Personality, and Personal Values. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 21(2), 175–189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072712466714>
- O'Keefe, P. A., & Linnenbrink-Garcia, L. (2014). The role of interest in optimizing performance and self-regulation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 53, 70–78.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2014.02.004>

Robert A. Karasek, J. (1979). Job Demands, Job Decision Latitude, and Mental Strain: Implications for Job Redesign. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24(2), 285–308.
<https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.2307/2392498>

Schmidt, K.-H. (2010). The relation of goal incongruence and self-control demands to indicators of job strain among elderly care nursing staff: A cross-sectional survey study combined with longitudinally assessed absence measures. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 47(7), 855–863.
<https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2009.12.004>

SCHMIDT, K.-H., HUPKE, M., & DIESTEL, S. (2012). Does dispositional capacity for self-control attenuate the relation between self-control demands at work and indicators of job strain? *Work and Stress*, 26(1), 21–38.
Shir, N., Nikolaev, B. N., & Wincent, J. (2019). Entrepreneurship and well-being: The role of psychological autonomy, competence, and relatedness. *Journal of Business Venturing*, 34(5).
<https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2018.05.002>

Van den Broeck, Anja & Vansteenkiste, Maarten & De Witte, Hans & Soenens, Bart & Lens, Willy. (2010). Capturing autonomy, competence, and relatedness at work: Construction and initial validation of the Work-Related Basic Need Satisfaction Scale. 83. 1-22. 10.1348/096317909X481382.