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### Recommended Citation

Kettenbohrer, Janina; Eckhardt, Andreas; and Beimborn, Daniel, "A Theoretical Perspective on Meaningfulness of Work and the Success of Business Process Standardization Initiatives" (2015). *Wirtschaftsinformatik Proceedings 2015*. 37.  
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/wi2015/37>

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# A Theoretical Perspective on Meaningfulness of Work and the Success of Business Process Standardization Initiatives

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**Abstract.** Business Process Standardization (BPS) leads to organizational changes, which are often faced with employee resistance. To make BPS initiatives successful, the ‘human resource’ has to be taken into consideration and with it, the job process fulfilled by them, their needs, and their work environment. The objective of this research is to analyze the role of employees affected by BPS initiatives and their perceptions of their work they are doing as part of the processes to be standardized. Based on job characteristics theory and the work-role fit concept, we develop a research model theorizing the role of these concepts for the acceptance of BPS initiatives. As main theoretical contribution, this research explains how employees’ job-related attitudes toward their own work and the collaborations with others determine their (non-)openness towards BPS initiatives, while it will also guide managers in incorporating the ‘right’ people into a BPS project.

**Keywords:** Business Process Standardization, Business Process Management, Meaningfulness of Work, Job Characteristics, Work-Role Fit, Job Construals

## 1 Introduction

During the last decades, firms and other organizations have moved from a functional view towards a business process oriented organization structure [1] and business process management (BPM) has become an elemental instrument. One important element of BPM is business process standardization (BPS), which means to make “*process activities transparent and achieve uniformity of process activities across the value chain and across firm boundaries*” [2, p.213].

Often, BPM, in general, and BPS, in particular, focus merely on process modeling, implementation of workflow management systems [3], identifying critical organiza-

tional success factors, and implementing key performance indicators [4, 5], without taking the human factor into account – although major reasons for failure of process-related projects are job-related attitudes and behaviors of the involved employees [3, 6, 7].

Some studies mention people-oriented success factors (e.g., top management support, communication, and involvement of employees) [e.g., 8, 9], but the guidelines derived from such studies mostly remain on a rather strategic level [10]. By contrast, the employees who execute the different tasks in a business process and their needs have not been sufficiently considered, so far [5].

Employee participation, respectively appreciation of their work, is one of the key elements of vom Brocke et al.'s [5] sixth principle of good BPM (the “*Principle of Involvement*”): BPM and BPS, which lead often to substantial organizational change [e.g., 11], can cause employee resistance because their tasks and jobs would change. For successful BPM and to gather employees' commitment for the change, it is crucial [5] to create and cultivate employees' appreciation for their work.

Organizational psychology and management research have shown the impact of motivating factors of work on business outcomes very early [e.g., 12, 13]. These motivating factors are supposed to increase positive behavioral outcomes (e.g. work performance) and attitudinal outcomes (e.g. work satisfaction) and to reduce negative behavioral outcomes (e.g. turnover). The impact of these motivational factors on personal and work outcomes are mediated by critical psychological states (such as experienced meaningfulness of work, experienced responsibility for outcomes of the work, and knowledge of the actual results of the work activities) [14].

Hence, in order to make organizational change projects, in general, and BPS initiatives, in particular, more successful, the 'human resource' has to be considered more intense, and with it the tasks and jobs fulfilled, their needs and work environment. This more detailed view on the human aspect within BPS could help to get deeper and more precise insights into how to negotiate possible obstacles.

Accordingly, our research objective is to analyze employees' role in BPS initiatives in general and their attitudes toward their job and the impending BPS initiative in particular. Thus, the paper is guided by the following research question: *How does the employees' attitude towards their job affect the success of BPS initiatives?* Therefore, we draw on job characteristics theory as well as on the concepts of work-role fit, and co-worker relations to develop a theoretical model integrating the different lenses and to create a 'job construals' construct for explaining the acceptance of different BPS-caused changes of the employee's work (e.g., technology change or workflow change).

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: the next section summarizes the main literature regarding the relationship between individual job-related attitudes and acceptance of BPS initiatives. After that we derive the propositions of our theoretical model, which posits that for the acceptance of process standardization initiatives, the meaningfulness of work which an employee gives his/her work is crucial. We then give an outline on the empirical validation of the model. Finally, we discuss the implications for research and practice.

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 Business process management and business process standardization

Most organizations perform a wide variety of business processes whereby a business process is defined as “*a collection of inter-related events, activities and decision points that involve a number of actors and objects, and that collectively lead to an outcome that is of value at least one customer*” [15, p.5]. In light of this definition, business process management combines methods, techniques, and tools for process discovering, analyzing, redesigning, executing, and monitoring [15]. In the context of this paper, business process management is a broad holistic management approach consisting of “*the art and science of overseeing how work is performed in an organization to ensure consistent outcomes and to take advantage of improvement opportunities*” [15, p.1]. Thereby, we follow the definition of Ferstl and Sinz who state that business systems consist of tasks and resources that execute the tasks. A bundle of tasks constitute a job. A job can be assigned to a person or an application system [16].

One opportunity to increase a company’s business performance is standardizing its business processes [17]. BPS is supposed to increase operational performance, to realize cost synergies, and to ensure quality [18]. As a consequence, it leads to higher process performance [19-22] due to decreasing process errors, facilitating communication and reporting, achieving economies of scale, and using expert knowledge [2]. Business process standardization is understood as making “*process activities transparent and achieve uniformity of process activities across the value chain and across firm boundaries*” [2, p.213]. In addition, de Vries states that “*standardization is the activity of establishing and recording a limited set of solutions to actual or potential matching problems directed at benefits for the party or parties involved balancing their needs and intending and expecting that these solutions will be repeatedly or continuously used during a certain period by a substantial number of parties for whom they are meant*” [23, p.155]. This definition of standardization highlights that employees are one of the core elements, which have to be considered while standardizing business processes.

### 2.2 Changed job perception based on BPS initiatives

Vom Brocke et al. [5] state that employees who execute the different tasks along the processes have to be considered and involved strongly by BPM practice [5]. BPS initiatives induce changes which can affect staff tremendously in several ways (cf. Table 1). For example, new tasks have to be executed, the scope of the job changes, or work has to be performed in new or different ways by altered workflows. For example, BPS might lead to activities in this process becoming more regulated, requiring the employees to work in changed or more explicitly determined workflows including new policies and practices (*workflow change*). In addition, their tasks, the scope of their job (*task change*), or their responsibilities (*working condition change*) might change. Furthermore, the used technology (*technology change*) and the govern-

ance structure which affects the employee (*governance change*, e.g., working for a new manager) will be altered.

**Table 1.** Potential BPS induced changes (according to [24])

<i>BPS related change</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Technology change	Change of used technology, such as software applications or other tools
Task change	Change of tasks or of the scope of the job
Workflow change	Change involving performing work in new or different ways, altering workflow or implementing new policies or practices
Working condition change	Change of working conditions, which involves receiving new responsibilities and a new status
Governance change	Change of governance structure that affects the employee (e.g., working for a new manager)

As a consequence, these various changes are often perceived as threatening and unpleasant [5]. One explanation for employees' resistance is a perceived loss of meaningfulness of work [14, 25] after the BPS initiative has been conducted. Meaningfulness of work is understood as "the degree to which the individual experiences the job as one which is generally meaningful, valuable, and worthwhile" [14, p.256]. Oldham and Hackman identified five job characteristics which are relevant for increasing positive behavioral and attitudinal outcomes while decreasing the negative ones [14]. Meaningfulness of work has shown to be the strongest mediator between job characteristics and work outcomes in previous studies [26].

To experience meaningfulness in work, it is essential to be able to pursue cherished goals [27, 28]. This includes having autonomy (which influences self-determination and meaning) [29] as well as feedback from the job (e.g. receiving feedback on the progress of goal accomplishment) [30].

In addition, Barrick and Mount [25] expect purposeful goal striving to impact experienced meaningfulness. They assume that human beings strive to higher-order implicit goals which are goals which an individual strives to subconsciously (cf. Table 2).

**Table 2.** Higher-implicit goals [25]

<i>Higher-implicit goals</i>	<i>Description</i>
Communion Striving	Individuals are motivated to achieve meaningful contact, get along with others
Status Striving	Desire to exert power and influence over others
Autonomy Striving	Motivated to gain control and understanding of important aspects of the work environment and to pursue personal growth opportunities
Achievement Striving	Need to demonstrate personal competence and a sense of accomplishment

According to Barrick and Mount [25], striving for purposefulness and experienced meaningfulness are very closely related. However, there are some critical differences. Purposefulness is understood as “*dynamic motivational process by which personality traits are enacted through the pursuit of these implicit goals*” [25, p.137] while “*meaningfulness refers to individuals’ perception that their actions are valuable, useful and worthwhile*” [25, p.137 f.]. Goal fulfilment does not only refer to how well a goal is accomplished but also to the extent an individual could act according to his/her personality. As a consequence, the focus is on volitional behavior, which means that “*the employee has to have both perceived and actual control over his or her goals and behavior*” [25, p.139]. In other words, employees do not feel comfortable and free in situations where they get a lot of instructions [25].

In these so called “discordant work situations” [25, p.138] the individual’s higher-implicit goals and personality do not fit with the characteristics of the job that has to be performed. Due to a lack of perceived importance and significance of their work, individuals do perceive no or reduced meaningfulness of their work in such situations [25, 31, 32]. In discordant work situations, the employees are not able to fulfill their implicit goals anymore so that these situations are perceived as threatening and thus become obstacles for their personal success. In other words, employees have to perform tasks they do not like, are not interested in or they have to change their personal way of working by following a given workflow [33].

BPS can create such a discordant work situation because its objective is to serve “*as a template for all instances of the process throughout the organization*” [34, p.308]. Standardization could raise job instructions, more bureaucracy, and higher levels of control [35].

### **2.3 Work design**

There is a long history about research of work and its design. Originally, the focus was on division of labor and worker efficiency as well as productivity [e.g., 36, 37, 38]. After noticing that maximizing efficiency often leads to, e.g., decreasing employee satisfaction or turnover [13], researchers began to analyze motivating factors of work [e.g., 12, 13].

One of the most influential works in this strand is Hackman and Oldham’s model [14] in which they define five core job characteristics (Table 3).

According to Hackman and Oldham [14], these work characteristics are supposed to increase positive behavioral (e.g. work performance) and attitudinal outcomes (e.g. work satisfaction) and decrease negative behavioral outcomes (e.g. turnover). These personal and work outcomes are mediated by critical psychological states, such as experienced meaningfulness of work, experienced responsibility for outcomes of the work, and knowledge of the actual results of the work activities [14].

**Table 3.** Job Characteristics [14]

<i>Job characteristics</i>	<i>Description</i>
Skill variety	The degree to which a job requires a variety of different activities in carrying out the work, which involve the use of a number of different skills and talents of the person.
Task identity	The degree to which the job requires completion of a "whole" and identifiable piece of work; that is, doing a job from beginning to end with a visible outcome.
Task significance	The degree to which the job has a substantial impact on the lives or work of other people, whether in the immediate organization or in the external environment.
Autonomy	The degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out.
Feedback	The degree to which carrying out the work activities required by the job results in the individual obtaining direct and clear information about the effectiveness of his or her performance.

Humphrey et al. [26] have added five characteristics to Hackman and Oldham's original model. These are task variety, information processing, job complexity, specialization, and problem solving), which are non-redundant with the original characteristics of Hackman and Oldham [39, 40]. Further, they understand autonomy as a three-dimensional construct (work-scheduling autonomy, work methods autonomy, and decision-making autonomy). Moreover, they extend Hackman and Oldham's characteristics [14] by adding work context characteristics (physical demands, work conditions, and ergonomics) and social characteristics (interdependence, feedback from others, social support, and interaction outside the organization) [26].

Similar to Hackman and Oldham [14], Humphrey et al. [26] showed that the critical psychological states mediate the impact of work characteristics on work outcomes whereby experienced meaningfulness showed to be the strongest mediator. Here, meaningfulness is understood "*as the value of a work goal or purpose, judged in relation to an individual's own ideas or standards*" [41, p.14].

According to Hackman and Oldham [14], the three motivational characteristics of skill variety, task identity and task significance influence experienced meaningfulness and consequently work outcomes. Other research shows additionally that autonomy and feedback from job also have an impact on work outcomes mediating by experienced meaningfulness. Due to the fact that experienced meaning impacts wellbeing and happiness [42, 43] as well as positive outcomes [44], an individual pursues to receive meaning in its work and in its live [26].

The relation of the individual employee to the role he or she assumes to perform in the organization has been widely examined, as well [45]. The perceived fit between an individual's self-concept and his or her role will lead to experienced meaning because they have thus the opportunity to express their values and beliefs [46-48]. In

other words, work-roles which are aligned with individuals' self-concepts are supposed to increase meaningfulness in their work. There exist various labels and definitions of this fit (e.g., work-role fit or person-job fit). In the following, we follow the definition of work-role fit by Kristof [45].

Besides the perceptions related with the own job, another important driver for meaningfulness of work are the employee's co-worker relations [41]. Employees who have good interpersonal interactions with their co-workers perceive their job as more meaningful [41]. For Hackman and Oldham, co-worker relations are not part of the core job characteristics. However, they stated that the employee's co-worker relations which they labeled as 'dealing with others' are "*helpful in understanding jobs and employee reactions to them*" [12, p.162]. According to them, dealing with others is understood as "*the degree to which the job requires the employee to work closely with other people in carrying out the work activities*" [12, p.162]. Accordingly, Humphrey et al. [26] integrated the employee's co-worker relations into the core job characteristics, labeled as 'social support'.

The perception of the job itself and the individual's relationship to it does not take the wider process environment into account. Similar to work-role fit, the way employees see their job influences the meaningfulness of their work. But, not only the perception of the job (in terms of job characteristics) [49] is relevant, also the way how they perceive their job to be involved or embedded in 'the bigger picture' of an organization's business activities is of great relevance. Drawing on the concept of 'self-construals', which describe an individual's self-perception as being rather interdependent vs. rather independent in relation to others [50, 51], as well as on the concept of 'task interdependence' [52], we propose a new theoretical construct here: 'job construals' referring to an individual's perceived interdependence between his/her work and the work of his/her colleagues, ranging from independence in terms of a loosely coupled job with high degrees of freedom, autonomy, (perceiving the own job as an intellectual or artistic task) vs. strong interdependence, perceiving the own job being a cog in the wheel).

In the following section, we apply and integrate the introduced concepts into a theoretical model that explains the (non-)openness of employees towards business process standardization initiatives.

### **3 Development of Propositions**

Based on Barrick and Mount's theory of higher-implicit goals [25], we assume that business process standardization creates a discordant work situation because it comes with new task instructions, bureaucracy, and increased control [35]. As a consequence, from an employee's point of view, a business process [53] becomes more controlled and rigid whereby the employee is not able to fulfill his/her higher-implicit goals anymore. In the following, we develop propositions on how different job characteristics and other job-related factors perceived by the employees determine their openness or non-openness to BPS, resp. the acceptance of the appearing discordant work situation. Within this argumentation, higher-implicit goals are core elements of



the propositions because they decisively influence the employees' perception of meaningfulness of work.

High *skill variety*, as a first job characteristic, means that a job requires several different skills [14]. Employees executing such jobs are trained very well and have the required skills. Due to the acquired expertise, they gain control over their job and the job environment. Thereby, they create a full understanding of all aspects of their job. On the one hand, based on this understanding and controllability, personal development and growth become possible (higher-implicit goal of autonomy). On the other hand, the skilled employees could demonstrate competence and accomplishment (higher-implicit goal of achievement) [25]. If now a process involving such jobs gets standardized, these skills can become obsolete [54] because the job's complexity is decreased or the job gets more specialized. Due to the fact, that the employee is not able to expose his/her various skills anymore, his/her striving for autonomy and achievement cannot be fulfilled anymore.

*Proposition 1: Employees who have currently jobs that require a high degree of skill variety are less likely to accept business process standardization.*

If a job has a high degree of *task identity*, a whole and identifiable piece of work is its outcome [14]. The employees do a job with a clear beginning and ending and the outcome is visible. Executing the overall job, the employees are able to bring in themselves and their expertise to a large extent (higher-implicit goal of achievement). [25]. In cases in which BPS changes their job in a way that they would not produce an own and identifiable piece of work anymore (e.g., when the job gets more fragmented), employees are not able to bring in themselves in the way they did before. Thus, they would be hindered to fulfill their higher-implicit goal of achievement striving.

*Proposition 2: Employees who have currently jobs that require a high degree of task identity are less likely to accept business process standardization.*

A job with high *task significance* has a substantial impact on the job of others. By performing such a job, employees are able to influence colleagues and their work [14]. This allows the employees to pursue their higher-implicit goal for status [25]. Due to standardization, their job can lose significance and the impact on others' work can become smaller. As a consequence, the opportunity to strive for status could be diminished or the employees are even hindered to fulfill their striving for status.

*Proposition 3: Employees who have currently jobs that require a high degree of task significance are less likely to accept business process standardization.*

A job with high *autonomy* provides a certain level of freedom, independence, and discretion to the employees executing the job [14]. Due to this freedom and the opportunity to define applied procedures on their own, employees can create their job in a controllable and understandable manner (higher-implicit goal of autonomy). Based on

the freedom regarding designing and executing their job, the employees can demonstrate their competence (higher-implicit goal of achievement) [25]. If a process is standardized, the job's autonomy often gets reduced or even lost. The employees are then not able to decide on execution of the process because they have to adhere to standardized work routines [55]. Consequently, they are hindered to fulfill their autonomy striving. Besides, the opportunity for demonstrating their competence is diminished whereby striving for achievement is prohibited.

*Proposition 4: Employees who have currently jobs that grant them a high degree of autonomy are less likely to accept business process standardization.*

Those employees who have a job which gives them a high degree of *feedback* receive direct and clear information about the effectiveness of their work [14]. So, they gain experienced knowledge about their own results and performance. Based on that, they can check their accomplishment and their competences and consequently adjust them (higher-implicit goal of achievement). Process standardization might change that. Feedback could become more indirect and general because it has to reach every employee who works in the standardized process. As a consequence, the employees are not able to gain knowledge about their own results anymore because they merely see the overall results of all involved employees. Therefore, the striving for achievement cannot be fulfilled anymore [25].

*Proposition 5: Employees who have currently jobs where they obtain a high degree of feedback are less likely to accept business process standardization.*

In a job with a high *work-role fit*, the work roles are aligned with an individual's self-concept. Thereby, the employees have the opportunity to express their values and beliefs [46-48]. If the process in which the employees are involved becomes standardized, the work roles could change and get unaligned with the employees' self-concepts. Due to the fact, that the self-concept includes all of the higher-implicit goals, they cannot be pursued by the employee anymore.

*Proposition 6: Employees who have currently jobs that require a high work-role fit are less likely to accept business process standardization.*

Not only the perception of the job itself and the employees' relation to their job are crucial for the perception of meaningfulness of work, but also the wider perception of the embeddedness of their job in the work or process environment. Taking this into account, we developed the concept of job construals referring to the perceived interdependence respectively independence between an employee's work and the work of his/her colleagues. We argue that employees who perceive their jobs to be a cog in the wheel, i.e., exhibiting an interdependent job construal, will think in a more process-oriented manner. Accordingly, they will more likely see value in the process standardization initiative and rather share their organization's BPS objectives than individuals

that exhibit an independent job construal, perceiving their job to be rather self-contained, intellectual and/or artistic.

*Proposition 7: Employees who exhibit independent job construals are less likely to accept business process standardization.*

Employees who have good interpersonal interactions with their colleagues perceive their job as more meaningful. Thereby, dignity, respect, and value which they receive for their contributions are central aspects [56]. In addition, meaningfulness can also derive from salient group membership in terms of sense of belonging, sense of social identity and meaning [41, 57]. If the process in which they execute some tasks gets standardized, their roles, their responsibilities and even the overarching governance structure can change. In all of these areas, personal interactions play a central role and individuals are motivated to achieve and maintain meaningful contacts (communion striving) [25]. If the employees have good co-worker relations in their current jobs, they would not be willing to lose these rewarding contacts and their opportunity to strive for communion.

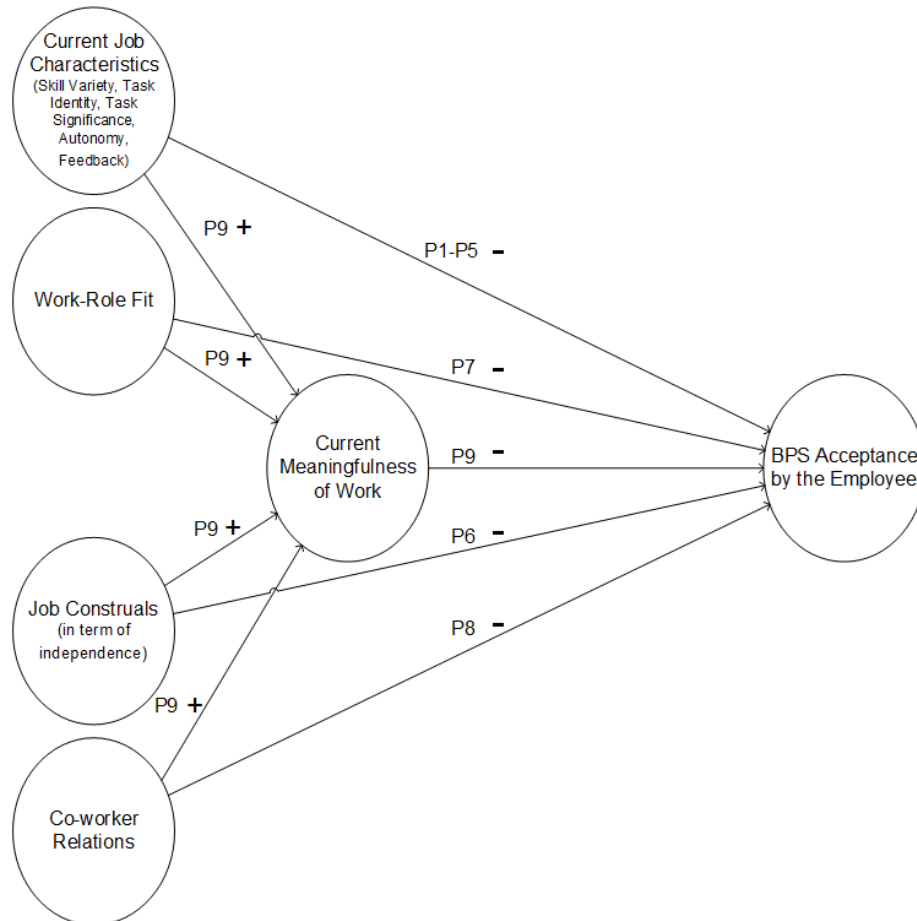
*Proposition 8: Employees who have good co-worker relations are less likely to accept business process standardization.*

According to Humphrey et al. [26], meaningfulness is “*the best mediator of the relationships between [job] characteristics and work outcomes*” [26, p.1346]. Hackman and Oldham [14] showed that skill variety, task identity, and task significance impact work outcomes through experienced meaningfulness. Similarly, the impact of autonomy and feedback is mediated by meaningfulness [26]. All human beings strive for meaning in their lives [29], which promotes wellbeing and happiness [42, 43]. Since meaning can be achieved by promoting intrinsic motivation [29], Humphrey et al. [26] suggest that all job characteristics that are linked to internal work motivation support meaning. Therefore, we assume:

*Proposition 9: Meaningfulness of (current) work mediates the relationships between current job characteristics, co-worker relations, work-role fit, job construals, and the acceptance of business process standardization.*

Summarizing, our research transfers job characteristics theory as well as the concepts of work-role fit, and co-worker relations to the context of business process standardization. Moreover, we add a new construct of ‘job construals’ which reflects employees’ perception about the relationship of their work to the wider process environment. We added job construals because not only the employees’ perception of the job [49] is relevant but also the way how they perceive their job to be involved or embedded in an organization’s business activities. Fig. 1 presents our research model which posits that for the individual acceptance of a process standardization initiative, the meaningfulness of work which an employee perceives in his/her work is crucial.

Fig. 1. Research model



#### 4 Evaluation Strategies

To refine our model, we will proceed with qualitative research by conducting several interviews. Further, we conduct a smaller survey-based study in the F&A function of a public organization in order to develop and to refine our measurement instrument. This rather controlled setting will allow us to do measurement development without confounding the results by contingencies and contextual factors. Finally, we will do a comprehensive survey-based study in a multi-national corporation, which conducts various process standardization initiatives, in order to corroborate our conceptual research model. Beside a confirmatory analysis of the propositions developed, this will give us also exploratory insights about the differential impact of the proposed acceptance determinants on the various types of changes induced by BPS initiatives, such as task vs. workflow changes etc. (cf. Table 1 above). This will give managers

detailed insights about their employees' potential reactions towards different kinds of BPS-induced changes to their workplace and will hopefully contribute to making business process standardization initiatives and their impact on the organization's performance more successful and lasting.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper, we have developed a theoretical model which describes the relationship between employees' job-related attitudes, and the acceptance of BPS-related changes by examining the impact of current job characteristics, work-role fit, job construals, co-worker relations, and current meaningfulness of work during a BPS initiative.

Although our model has not been evaluated, so far, it has interesting implications. It is supposed to help designing and implementing BPS initiatives as it leads to a better understanding of employees' acceptance of BPS-related changes. Hence, our model is aimed to put the human factor into the focus of BPS research and practice. For practitioners, our research will provide dedicated adjustable screws to successfully implement a business process standard and to increase acceptance of the affected employees. Rigid process changes due to standardized processes prohibit the achievement of employees' higher-implicit goals. Knowing this helps derive the right management actions.

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