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When do daily unattained tasks boost job performance? The moderating role of employee reflexivity and mindfulness

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ABSTRACT

Although unattained work goals and tasks are often viewed by management as an undesired state, the present paper proposes that daily lack of closure can sometimes boost rather than block job performance. Lack of closure is defined as an employee state or subjective feeling whereby the tasks, goals, or projects of a working day remain incomplete. This state is hypothesized to positively relate to job performance for high trait-level employee reflexivity and high day-level employee mindfulness and to negatively relate to job performance for low reflexivity and low mindfulness. To test expectations, a diary survey study was conducted among 209 employees of different sectors. Results supported both hypotheses but with a different temporal pattern for each moderator: On the one hand, previous-day lack of closure negatively related to day-level performance for low employee mindfulness and positively related to day-level performance for high employee mindfulness. On the other hand, day-level lack of closure negatively related to same-day performance for low employee reflexivity and positively related to same-day performance for high employee reflexivity. Theoretical implications of the findings are discussed and practical recommendations are formulated about how employee reflexivity and mindfulness can be enhanced, for example, through workplace interventions.

KEYWORDS

Lack of closure; job performance; mindfulness; reflexivity

Either through memos, to-do lists, and mental notes or through soft and hard deadlines, the contemporary working life is hectic and demanding. Workload seems to be one of the main challenges for employees, which may create a constant and distressing feeling of pending assignments, unattained goals and, generally, a lack of closure, in terms of tasks, goals or projects (Smit, 2016). The idea that unfinished tasks create tension and call for closure as people manage their life space

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dates back to Lewin's (1943; in Burnes & Cooke, 2013) field theory. Because of this tension, interrupted tasks are easier to recall by individuals, which has been called the 'Zeigarnik effect' (Syrek et al., 2017, p. 227; Zeigarnik, 1927). We know already that this tension impairs the executive functions of individuals (Masicampo & Baumeister, 2011a) and even their well-being (Syrek et al., 2017). What we also know is that by regulating their behavior successfully, participants in lab experiments may make this tension less detrimental for themselves (Masicampo & Baumeister, 2011b). What we, however, know less well is (1) how this knowledge translates to employees dealing with lack of closure in real-life organizations and (2) what employees can concretely do in order not simply to survive this tension but, rather, to use it in such a way that will boost their task performance. Lack of closure is integral to most contemporary jobs, independent from employee characteristics or occupational sectors and it cannot be eliminated. Therefore, rather than trying to combat it, it is wiser for organizations and employees to examine how they can embrace it and use it as a motivating force.

For instance, consider an example from practice involving an academic working at a university. Her job involves coordinating and performing teaching, supervising students and PhD candidates, designing and conducting research, writing and publishing scientific papers. On top of that, her supervisor recently informed her that she is expected to start bringing grants in the department and to increase her 'societal impact' in a measurable way. Even if this academic carefully plans her work with only a limited amount of goals per day, it is very likely that she often leaves her work with unattained tasks. When does this lack of closure drain her, thus, hindering her performance? And when does it energize her to do her best, thus, boosting her performance?

To address these questions, the present study focuses on the boundary conditions of the effects of employee's daily lack of closure on their task performance. Lack of closure is defined as the subjective feeling of individuals that the most important tasks and goals of their working day remain unfulfilled (cf. Syrek et al., 2017; also see Baas et al., 2011). Two moderating conditions will be addressed under which lack of closure may lead to task performance, one focusing on how people experience the present moment (i.e. day-level) and one focusing on how they experience and reflect upon themselves overall (i.e. trait-level). To capture these conditions in a way that is specifically relevant for lack of closure, on the one hand, the focus will lie on one state of mind representing whether employees are mentally sharp and non-judgmental and can, thus, view lack of closure as a challenge rather than threat. On the other hand, the focus will lie on one trait ensuring that employees deal with lack of closure in a self-reflective, motivated and

learning-oriented way. Accordingly, the two moderators tested by the present study are day-level mindfulness and trait-level reflexivity of employees.

Although literature uses the term mindfulness to refer to different things (e.g. see Leary & Tate, 2007), the present paper adopts a cognitive perspective as to how lack of closure can best be managed. Therefore, for the purpose of the present paper, mindfulness is defined as a cognitive attentional state of mind, and is, thus, operationalized as a daily state, namely, displayed by employees on a specific working day (Hülsheger et al., 2013). This conceptualization agrees with views of mindfulness as a unidimensional state of consciousness (Brown et al., 2007) that involves ‘attention to the experiences occurring in the present moment, in a non-judgmental or accepting way’ (Baer et al., 2006; p. 27). Trait-level reflexivity refers to an employee’s overt reflection upon his/her goals, strategies, decision-making processes as well as his/her adaptation to the circumstances (Schippers et al., 2003). First, by preventing negative judgments about the lack of closure, day-level mindfulness of employees can be expected to strengthen the relationship between lack of closure and task performance. Second, by urging employees to critically approach and understand their goals and strategies fully, trait-level reflexivity is also expected to strengthen the relationship between lack of closure and task performance. The two tested moderators can be positioned within the overarching framework of the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which suggests that awareness is essential to self-regulation (Schultz & Ryan, 2015). In other words, cognitive awareness of themselves and their surroundings guides and informs individuals in reaching their goals. To test a nuanced and refined version of this proposition, the present paper addresses moderators that differ in terms of how ‘reflexive’ (Brown et al., 2007, p. 216) or intentional they are. As such, even though the two moderators are similar to each other (both are states of consciousness), they are also different. While mindfulness is a pre-reflexive state of consciousness (i.e. mere awareness of what takes place), reflexivity is a reflexive state of mind (i.e. reflection upon this awareness and, thus, one step further from mindfulness).

The contribution of the present paper to the literature is two-fold. First, rather than viewing lack of closure as a threat, which is a common view among organizations (Moberly & Watkins, 2010), the present paper proposes that lack of closure is part of working life and, under circumstances, it can motivate rather than block employees. Second, the present paper aims to uncover the conditions under which lack of closure relates to employee performance. The two proposed conditions can be utilized by and are, thus, meaningful for management. On the one hand,

mindfulness can be enhanced by workplace interventions (Aikens et al., 2014). On the other hand, employee reflexivity can be the target of employee training or become the focus of workplace interventions. Although reflexivity is typically seen as a trait, interventions can enhance employees' ability for self-reflection and learning (Daudelin, 1996).

To achieve its aims (see [Figure 1](#) for the hypothesized model), the present study makes use of a daily diary survey study conducted over five working days among different occupational sectors. Diary studies are powerful tools for organizational research because they limit recall biases and, due to the proximity of the measured variables to each other, they uncover the situational predictors of human behavior (Ohly et al., 2010). Additionally, diary studies can be used to uncover the stable employee characteristics or traits (in this case, reflexivity) that amplify the relationship between day-level variables, thus, uncovering person-situation interactions within the studied phenomena.

Daily lack of closure at work

Classic and modern psychological theories address lack of closure directly or indirectly. The theoretical underpinnings of lack of closure are two-fold. A first set of theories addresses the effects of unfulfilled tasks. For example, the field theory (Lewin, 1943; in Burnes & Cooke, 2013) suggests that unfinished tasks create tensions in peoples' minds, while ego depletion theory (Baumeister et al., 1998) suggests that such tensions deplete the ego resources of individuals. Similarly, goal pursuit theories suggest that pursuing goals creates a sense of commitment that is only eased once one resolves the relevant task (Klinger, 1975). Another set

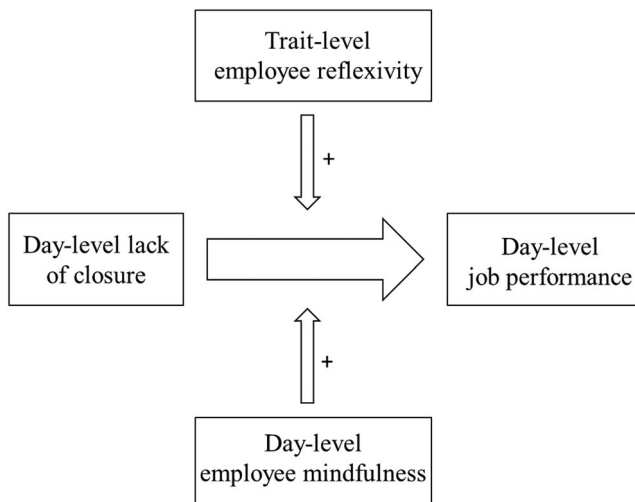


Figure 1. The hypothesized model.

of theories refers to how individuals deal with lack of closure. For example, the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991) suggests that purposeful self-regulatory action is required from individuals to address unfulfilled tasks. Similarly, future-oriented cognitive strategies, such as planning, are necessary so that individuals reach closure (Masicampo & Baumeister, 2011b).

In practice, employees' perception of lack of closure is a very common yet highly ambiguous situation. Lack of closure by no means signifies work failure, since successful performance is not incompatible with additional unattained tasks and completing a task, in fact, only leads to new tasks. Similarly, lack of closure by no means signifies a concrete success, since there are clearly still projects that have not been completed. The present paper, thus, does not view lack of closure as the opposite of job performance but, rather, it views the two concepts as two unrelated states. This ambiguous role of lack of closure can be found in the literature. On the one hand, unattained, goals interfere with individuals' executive functions and impede their task performance (Masicampo & Baumeister, 2011a); and they may cause stress and inability to detach from work (Moberly & Watkins, 2010; Smit, 2016). On the other hand, unattained goals have been found to encourage employees to persist (Brunstein, 2000) and even to display problem-solving behaviors (Baas et al., 2011). It is the stance of the present paper that when the right boundary conditions are present (i.e. mindfulness and reflexivity), lack of closure is not simply unable to harm but, rather, it may boost employee performance.

The diary context of the present paper provides different possibilities that can be addressed. A day in is an important unit on basis of which people plan and organize their lives, which manifests as a day-to-day phenomenon (Nezlek, 2001). In addition, employees' strivings do not only influence their job performance on the same day, but they have further implications for their next-day strivings as well (Foulek et al., 2019). As such, lack closure can mobilize individuals and influence their behaviors both on the same day it occurs and on the next day. Since both possibilities are legitimate, the present paper will address in an exploratory fashion the effects of day-level (today's) lack of closure as well as lagged (previous-day) lack of closure on day-level (today's) task performance.

The moderating role of mindfulness

Mindfulness is rooted in Buddhism and is, in some respects, at odds with modern western psychology. However, in their commentary, Ryan and Brown (2003) argue that mindfulness is, in fact, compatible with

the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), especially with the notion of acting authentically. When acting authentically, one is more likely to act in agreement not only with one's inner self but also with what really happens to oneself (e.g. what 'is' rather than what 'should be'.) This authentic functioning essentially involves mere awareness of what takes place (which agrees with the cognitive attentional conceptualization of mindfulness that the present paper adopts) rather than the interpretation of what takes place. As such, mindfulness may help employees to regulate their behavior in the face of unfulfilled goals (Masicampo & Baumeister, 2007) by facilitating flexible and adaptive reactions to events (Brown et al., 2007). Therefore, by inhibiting automatic or habitual dysfunctional thought patterns, individuals with mindful awareness are more likely to experience lack of closure as momentary thoughts yet part of one's daily life and they are less likely to see it as indicator of low self-worth (e.g. inability to perform). In other words, mindfulness improves individual self-regulation by increasing people's self-control (e.g. stopping oneself from displaying undesired habitual tendencies; Bowlin & Baer, 2012). This process is similar to what is often called 'decentering' in psychotherapy (Sauer & Baer, 2010, p. 35). Accordingly, people are more able to manage their life when they observe their thoughts and feelings as transitory mental events rather than interpreting them as indicators of truth or self-worth.

To date, there is scarce empirical evidence viewing mindfulness as a moderator in the link between unfulfilled goals and performance. However, there is plenty of literature that seems to be in the same line with the propositions of the present paper. For example, mindfulness can act as a buffer mechanism, thus, protecting employees from the experience of stress (Grover et al., 2017) or work frustrations (Schultz et al., 2015). Going one step further, mindfulness has been suggested to contribute to employees' psychological capital or to maximize the effects of their psychological capital (Roche et al., 2014), meaning that employees do not simply deal with difficulties but they also grow in the face of these difficulties (Good et al., 2016). Indeed, individuals who focus their attention to the present in non-judgmental ways have been found to grow and to flourish throughout everyday events at work (Catalino & Fredrickson, 2011). The reasoning behind this line of research is that mindfulness enhances the ability of individuals to regulate their behavior in attentive and non-judgmental ways, which enhances their performance despite of or perhaps precisely because of any job challenges that they face (Glomb et al., 2011). Lastly, mindfulness trainings have been found to improve the executive functions of participants (Zeidan et al., 2010), and it is already known that hindered executive functions is an issue when people deal with unattained tasks

(Masicampo & Baumeister, 2011a). Therefore, mindful employees who experience unattained goals should be less likely to react in dysfunctional ways to the lack of closure and are more able to regulate their behavior and attain task performance.

Hypothesis 1: The link between day-level lack of closure and day-level job performance is negative for employees low on day-level mindfulness and positive for employees high on day-level mindfulness.

The moderating role of reflexivity

Next to individual states of awareness (i.e. mindfulness), scholars have also examined individual traits that moderate the link between lack of closure and its outcomes. For example, one trait that has been used to describe the cognitive and behavioral elements of how employees deal with setbacks or unattained goals and translate them to future actions is the concept of reflexivity. Reflexivity has been used both as an individual trait and as a team aspect. For example, reflexivity may refer to an individual's use of self-reflection for the purposes of adaptive learning (Edwards et al., 2002). Similarly, reflexivity represents a team's overt reflection upon its goals, strategies, decision-making processes as well as its adaptation to the circumstances (Schippers et al., 2003). The present paper uses Schippers et al.'s (2003) conceptualization of reflexivity at the individual level, thus, suggesting that reflexivity is not only a team ability but also an individual ability. Organizational research on the team level has theorized and found that when teams score high on reflexivity, they are more able to translate their prior low performance to future improved performance. Reversely, lack of reflexivity thwarts future team performance (Schippers et al., 2013). In fact, reflexivity does not simply help teams to learn but also to unlearn behaviors that no longer work (Matsuo, 2020), which can optimize future performance. However, no empirical research so far has tested whether this phenomenon also holds for individual employees.

Exactly like reflective teams, reflective employees should be expected to have a fuller understanding of their goals (met or unmet) and to be more ready to take alternative courses of actions when confronted with setbacks. In fact, the ability of individuals for self-reflection is an important asset making employees more self-efficacious (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Furthermore, the ability for self-reflection or self-questioning helps employees to see problems as opportunities (Cope, 2003) and to attain development (Van Woerkom, 2004), learning from failure (Ellis et al., 2014) and improved performance (Totterdell & Leach, 2001). Even more relevant for the scope of the present paper, when individuals are flexible and ready to adjust their plans and their behavioral strategies

(cf. reflexivity), unattained goals do not interfere with their performance anymore (Masicampo & Baumeister, 2011a; Smit, 2016). Going one step beyond this 'buffer' mechanism of reflexivity, reflective employees should also be expected to display higher job performance in the face of lack of closure. This is because the behavioral readiness of reflective employees is not simply targeted at corrective actions but also at improvement actions on basis of the lessons learned (Schipper et al., 2013).

Hypothesis 2: The link between day-level lack of closure and day-level job performance is negative for employees low on trait-level reflexivity and positive for employees high on trait-level reflexivity.

Methods

Sample and procedure

Respondents were 209 employees (103 men and 106 women) from different organizations in the Netherlands with a mean age of 38.6 years ($SD=13.2$). On average, they worked 9.5 years ($SD=16.4$) at their organization and 36.4 h per week ($SD=5.0$). Their occupational sectors included the health sector (39%), followed by government (30%), business (21%), education (18%), finance (17%), industry (11%), construction (10%), commerce (9%), and communication (4%). The remaining 32% participants indicated that they worked in other occupational sectors, such as ICT, marketing, transportation, culture, entertainment, or catering. Compared to the general working population of the Netherlands, the present sample has roughly similar gender distribution. However, it slightly overrepresents employees between 25 and 34 years old; it slightly underrepresents employees between 35 and 44 years old; it overrepresents part-time employment and it overrepresents the health, education, finance and construction occupational sectors (Statistics Netherlands, 2019).

The present study was part of a larger research project addressing unattained work goals. In the present paper, only the respective measures are reported that are relevant for the present publication. Respondents were recruited through network sampling by research assistants who were psychology students, which involved the use of the research assistants' professional contacts, social media and the snowball sampling technique. This method is common in organizational research and usually leads to heterogeneous samples; all the suggestions of Demerouti and Rispens (2014) have been followed to guard the quality of the data. In total, 775 participants received an email invitation informing them about the aims of the study as well as the confidential and voluntary nature of participation. Furthermore, the email invitation contained the link to the online baseline survey and the dates when the invitations to the daily surveys could be expected, namely, after two

weeks. The baseline survey included demographic variables and trait-level reflexivity, while the daily surveys included all day-level variables (i.e. lack of closure, mindfulness, and task performance). In total, 209 respondents filled in the baseline survey and at least three daily surveys, forming the final sample for the analyses (response rate = 27%). Participants filled in an average of 3.9 daily surveys ($SD=0.7$). Dropouts (i.e. 46 respondents who filled in only one or two daily surveys) did not significantly differ from the sample on most of the study variables; with the only exceptions being that they were younger, $t(253) = -2.73$, $p < .01$ and that they scored lower on day-level mindfulness, $t(253) = -2.29$, $p < .01$.

Measures

The baseline survey comprised demographic variables as well as trait-level reflexivity, which was rated with an answering scale ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 6 = total agree. Unless otherwise indicated, all day-level items (i.e. lack of closure, mindfulness and task performance) followed the word 'Today...' and were rated with an answering scale ranging from 1 = totally disagree to 7 = totally agree.

Trait-level reflexivity was measured with 10 items from Schippers et al. (2007) which were adjusted to refer to individual rather than team reflexivity (for a similar approach, see Matsuo, 2018; Otte et al., 2017). Sample items are 'I review my working methods as a result of changes in the environment' and 'I evaluate the results of my actions'. Cronbach's alpha was .86.

Day-level lack of closure was measured with a self-constructed 4-item scale. Items followed the phrase 'During my working day today...' and comprised '...I had the feeling that I hadn't completed all my work goals', '...there were work tasks that were not complete yet', '...I had the feeling that there are "pending" tasks', '...I had the feeling that I hadn't finished everything in my 'to-do' list'. Cronbach's alpha ranged from .85 to .89. Because the scale has not been previously validated, the Mplus software was used to run a multilevel confirmatory factor analysis over the five days. A one-factor solution revealed excellent fit to the data, CFI = .99, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .04, SRMR = .02 (between-level) and .02 (within-level). Cronbach's alpha ranged from .85 to .89 over the five days. To further address the divergent validity of lack of closure next to other similar concepts (e.g. workload), data have been used from an unreported cross-sectional study among 201 employees from different occupational sectors in the Netherlands (i.e. 60% female and 40% male; mean age = 35.18, S.D. = 15.26 and the sampling method was similar as in the present study). Respondents had to think of a typical working

day when indicating agreement with the items of lack of closure as well as four items measuring workload (validated by Van Veldhoven & Meijman, 1994). Results revealed that lack of closure ($\alpha = .86$) and workload ($\alpha = .82$) correlated positively ($r = .47, p < .001$), suggesting that the two concepts are similar but different. Most importantly, CFA analyses revealed that a two-factor solution fit the data exceptionally well, $\chi^2(19) = 28.16, p = .08, CFI = .99, TLI = .98, RMSEA = .05, RMR = .04$ and considerably better compared to a one-factor solution whereby all items of workload and lack of closure loaded on the same factor, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 176.04, p < .001$.

Day-level mindfulness was measured with the five-item state measure (Hülsheger et al., 2013) of the Mindful Attention and Awareness Scale (MAAS; Brown & Ryan, 2003). Sample items are ‘I found it difficult to stay focused on what’s happening in the present’ and ‘I found myself doing things without paying attention.’ All items were reverse and answers were coded such that higher scores correspond to higher mindfulness. Cronbach’s alpha ranged from .74 to .80.

Day-level job performance was measured with the 3-item individual task proficiency scale by Griffin et al. (2007). Items were ‘I carried out the core parts of my job well’, ‘I completed the core tasks well using the standard procedures’ and ‘I ensured my tasks were completed properly’ and Cronbach’s alpha ranged from .65 to .82.

Analytic strategy

Daily repeated measurements were nested within individuals, therefore, multilevel analyses were conducted, using MlwiN, in order to test the hypotheses. A two-level null model with day-level task performance as the dependent variable fit the data better, compared to a one-level null model, $\Delta\chi^2(1) = 130.22, p < .01$, justifying the multilevel approach. Furthermore, the intraclass correlation (i.e. amount of variance at the between-level of analysis) was 36% for task performance, revealing that considerable amount was left to be explained by within-level variation. Finally, the intraclass correlation was 42% for day-level lack of closure and 54% for day-level mindfulness.

Following previous practice and recommendations (e.g. Ohly et al., 2010), the only trait-level (between-level) independent variable (i.e. reflexivity) was centered around the grand-mean, whereas all within-level (day-level) independent variables were centered around the person-mean. To test hypotheses, two sets of nested models were built, with the only difference being that while the first set (see Table 1) used lagged (i.e. previous-day or day ‘t-1’) lack of closure as independent variable, the second set of analyses (see Table 2), used day-level (today’s or day ‘t’)

Table 1. Multilevel regression estimates for previous-day lack of closure predicting day-level task performance ($N = 209$ employees and 513 occasions).

Model Variables	M1			M2			M3a			M3b		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Intercept	5.51	.05		5.51	.05		5.51	.05		5.51	.05	
Previous-day lack of closure	-.02	.03	-.02	-.02	.03	-.02	-.02	.03	-.03	-.01	.03	-.01
Day-level mindfulness				.08	.05	.06	.08	.05	.06	.08	.05	.06
Trait-level reflexivity				.27**	.09	.17**	.27**	.09	.17**	.28**	.09	.18**
Previous-day lack of closure \times Day-level mindfulness							.15**	.05	.12**			
Previous-day lack of closure \times Trait-level reflexivity										-.09	.06	-.06
$-2 \times \log$		1237.59			1226.07			1217.93			1222.25	
$\Delta - 2 \times \log$		670.65**			11.52**			8.14**			3.82	
df		1			2			1			1	
Level 1 intercept variance		.46(.04)			.45(.04)			.44(.04)			.43(.04)	
		.28(.05)			.27(.05)			.28(.05)			.27(.05)	

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

lack of closure as independent variable. Each set of analyses comprised first a null model, followed by models comprising successively lack of closure (Model 1), mindfulness and reflexivity (Model 2), and the interaction between lack of closure and mindfulness (Model 3a) or the interaction between lack of closure and reflexivity (Model 3b). Before including the cross-level interaction (i.e. lack of closure by reflexivity), the random slope variance of lack of closure was modelled and is, thus, present only in Model 3b of Table 1 and in Model 3b of Table 2.

Results

The measurement model

Before proceeding to the main analyses, Mplus was used to test the measurement model for all study variables. A seven-factor multilevel CFA model was built with all trait-level reflexivity items loading on one factor only at the between-level of analysis and the items of each day-level variable (i.e. lack of closure, mindfulness and job performance) respectively forming one factor at the between-level and one factor at the within-level of analysis. This seven-factor solution had good fit to the data, CFI = .93, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .03, SRMR = .04 (within-level) and .09 (between-level). Most importantly, it fit the data better compared to a five-factor model merging mindfulness with job performance at both levels of analyses, $\Delta\chi^2(5) = 511.92$, $p < .01$, $\Delta\text{AIC} = 540.24$, $\Delta\text{CFI} = .15$ and to a three-factor model merging all day-level items into one factor at both levels of analyses, $\Delta\chi^2(10) = 1,686.57$, $p < .01$, $\Delta\text{AIC} = 1,471.76$, $\Delta\text{CFI} = .49$.

Testing the hypotheses

Table 3 reveals the intercorrelations between all study variables. Tables 1 and 2 present the results of the formal hypotheses-testing analyses. Although not hypothesized, trait-level reflexivity was positively related to day-level task performance (i.e. the higher one's reflexivity, the higher one's aggregate score of task performance over the five days).

As revealed by Table 1 (see Model 3a), the interaction between previous-day (i.e. lagged) lack of closure and day-level (today's) mindfulness was significantly related to day-level (i.e. today's) task performance, $\beta = .12$, $p < .01$. Simple slope analysis revealed that the link between previous-day lack of closure and day-level task performance was negative when day-level mindfulness was 1 SD below the mean, estimate = $-.12$, $S.E. = .05$, $p < .01$, and non-significant when day-level mindfulness was 1 SD above them mean, estimate = $.07$, $S.E. = .04$, $p = .09$ (see Figure 2). Additionally, tests for regions of significance (Preacher et al., 2006) were run to detect the

Table 2. Multilevel regression estimates for day-level lack of closure predicting day-level task performance (N=209 employees and 810 occasions).

Model Variables	M1		M2		M3a		M3b		SE B		SE B		SE B		SE B	
	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β	B	β
Intercept	5.55		5.55		5.54		5.54				5.55				5.55	
Day-level lack of closure																
Day-level mindfulness																
Trait-level reflexivity																
Day-level lack of closure × Day-level mindfulness																
Day-level lack of closure × Trait-level reflexivity																
-2 × log Δ-2 × log df	1906.3															
Level 2 intercept variance																
Level 1 intercept variance																

Note. *p < .05, **p < .01.

Table 3. Means, standard deviations and intercorrelations of study variables.

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Trait-level reflexivity	4.70	.54	–				
2. Day-level lack of closure	3.90	1.22	-.06	–			
3. Previous-day lack of closure	3.92	1.27	-.05	.97**	–		
4. Day-level mindfulness	4.90	.92	.14*	-.21**	-.19**	–	
5. Day-level task performance	4.56	.87	.21**	-.23**	-.24**	.20**	–

Note. Correlations above the diagonal refer to within-level of analysis, whereas correlations below the diagonal refer to the between-level of analysis; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

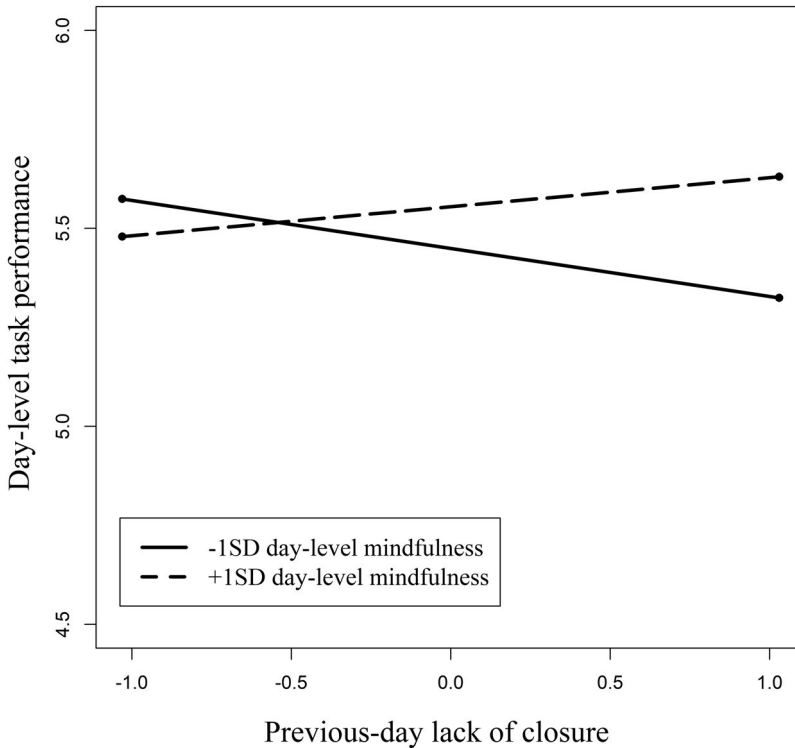


Figure 2. The link between previous-day lack of closure and day-level performance moderated by day-level mindfulness.

cut-off points of the moderator above or below which the regression slope became significant. Analyses revealed that the negative link between previous-day lack of closure and day-level task performance became significant when day-level mindfulness was lower than 0.4 SD below the mean. Furthermore, when day-level mindfulness was higher than 1.3 SD (rather than 1 SD) above the mean, the positive link between previous-day lack of closure and day-level task performance became significant. These results overall provide support to Hypothesis 1. Notably, the interaction between day-level lack of closure and mindfulness was unrelated to day-level task performance, $\beta = -.02$, $p = .49$ (see Model 3a of Table 2).

Before testing cross-level interactions, Model 2 was rerun adding the random slope variance for both previous-day and for day-level lack of

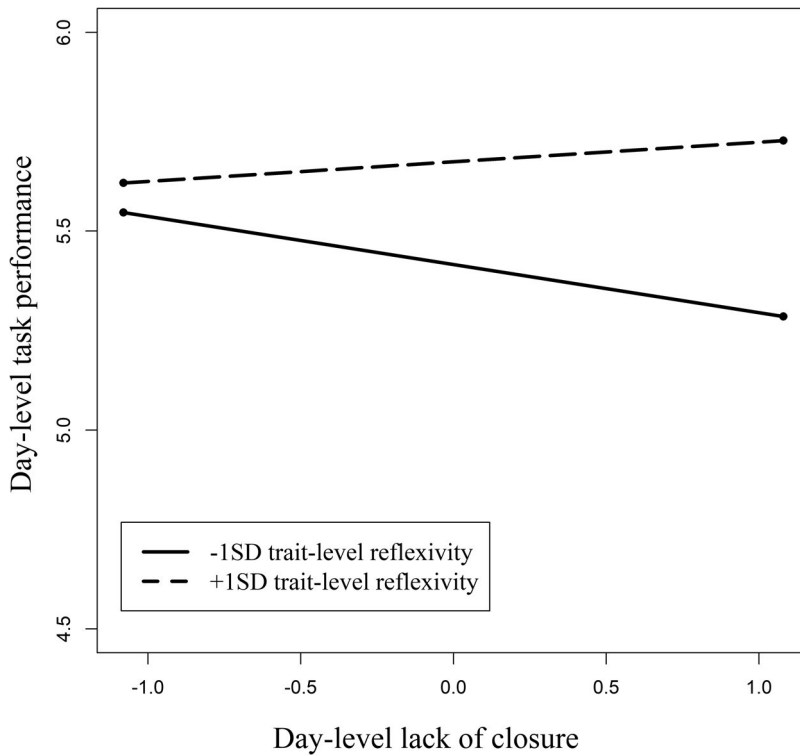


Figure 3. The link between day-level lack of closure and day-level performance moderated by trait-level reflexivity.

closure, which were both non-significant, respectively, estimate = .02, S.E. = .02, $p = .27$ and estimate = .02, S.E. = .01, $p = .07$. However, following methodological literature (LaHuis & Ferguson, 2009) and previous practice (Stollberger & Debus, 2020) arguing that significant cross-level interactions may occur even if the random slope variance is not significant, both cross-level interactions were tested. Consequently, the cross-level interaction between previous-day lack of closure and trait-level reflexivity was unrelated to day-level (today's) job performance, $\beta = -.06$, $p = .12$ (see Model 3b of Table 1). However, the interaction between day-level lack of closure and trait-level reflexivity was significantly related to day-level task performance, $\beta = .11$, $p < .01$. Simple slope analysis revealed that the link between day-level lack of closure and day-level task performance was negative when reflexivity was 1 SD below the mean, estimate = $-.12$, S.E. = .03, $p < .01$, and non-significant when reflexivity was 1 SD above the mean, estimate = .05, S.E. = .03, $p = .12$ (see Figure 3). Additionally, tests for regions of significance revealed that the negative link between day-level lack of closure and day-level task performance became significant when reflexivity was lower than 0.1 SD below the mean. Furthermore, when reflexivity was higher than 1.2 SD (rather than 1 SD) above the mean, the positive link

between day-level lack of closure and task performance became significant. These results overall provide support to Hypothesis 2.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to address day-level mindfulness and trait-level reflexivity as the moderators in the link between day-level lack of closure and day-level job performance. Results confirmed the hypotheses by revealing that the link between previous-day lack of closure and day-level performance was positive for high day-level mindfulness and negative for low day-level mindfulness. Furthermore, day-level lack of closure and day-level (same-day) performance were positively related for highly reflective employees and negatively related for employees scoring low on reflexivity.

Taken together, these results are in line with existing literature suggesting that both mindfulness (Good et al., 2016) and self-reflection (Edwards et al., 2002) help people manage their working lives, learn, and perform successfully on their assigned tasks. One important contribution of the present study is to uncover that whether unattained goals (i.e. lack of closure) relate to improved or impaired work performance may depend on certain boundary conditions that have to do with the awareness and the perception of an employee. By being here and now and avoiding judgments (i.e. mindfulness) and by reflecting on their goals critically (i.e. reflexivity), employees manage to deal with lack of closure and to prevent it from creating loss spirals and from blocking their performance. Even more importantly, mindful and reflective employees do not simply manage to deal with this lack of closure but they even translate it to successful job performance. Regarding mindfulness, these findings lend support to theorizing (Dane, 2011) according to which performance can best be achieved within dynamic and challenging work environments when employees operate in mindful ways that help them appropriately address their environmental demands. Regarding reflexivity, the present results advance knowledge (e.g. Schippers et al., 2013) by showing that exactly like team reflexivity, individual reflexivity can help employees learn, not only from prior task performance but even from a more ambiguous state, namely, lack of closure. These findings inform and extend theorizing about the role of self-regulation in the context of unfulfilled tasks (Masicampo & Baumeister, 2011b) and do so among employees, outside the research lab.

The findings of the present study may also help to begin to uncover the role of time within the phenomenon under examination. For example, scholars (e.g. Masicampo et al., 2020) have called for more research on the temporal dynamics of the link between individuals' conscious

thought and self-regulation. Notably, the two supported interaction effects of the present paper did not follow the same temporal pattern. While mindfulness moderated the relationship between previous-day lack of closure and day-level performance, reflexivity moderated the relationship between lack of closure and same-day performance. One interpretation may have to do with the nature of the moderators. While reflexivity has a strong proactive element (Schippers et al., 2003), the conceptualization of mindfulness that the present paper uses is not targeted at achieving outcomes (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Because mindfulness entails acceptance (Bishop et al., 2004), it is likely that a mindful state does not necessarily prompt people to 'correct' lack of closure immediately. Similarly, while mindfulness is a pre-reflexive concept (it precedes reflection; Brown et al., 2007), reflexivity represents the actual reflection phase. As such, it could be that it may take a while for mindful people to move from the phase of mere awareness to the action phase and to translate lack of closure to performance. It could also be that mindful employees never really go into an explicit and conscious 'action' phase in the sense that they do not view their performance as a way to fulfil unattained tasks but, rather, as the normal state of affairs. Mindful employees could, thus, go home and recover without ruminating, which enables them to go back to their incomplete tasks with a fresh outlook on the next working day. However, such interpretations are only speculative and future research is yet to tackle them.

Limitations and future research

Contributions notwithstanding, the current study has its limitations. First of all, convenience sampling may have created unintended selection biases. Also, the use of self-report for all study variables may create common-method bias. However, within Lewin's field theory, the tension associated with unfinished tasks is a purely subjective matter following from individual perception rather than objective reality (Burnes & Cooke, 2013). In addition, detecting significant interactions (Schmitt, 1994) especially of cross-level nature (Lai et al., 2013), as well as temporally separating predictors from outcomes (Ohly et al., 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2003) which the present study has done, should help to address common-method bias. Second, the aforementioned possibility of having uncovered different temporal dynamics for our moderators should be further examined by future research that replicates our study or uses different time frames. Third, previously it was suggested that mindful employees may ruminate less at home and, therefore, return to their unfulfilled tasks with a clear mind on the next day. Future diary research could test this possibility by, for example, measuring evening rumination. Last but not least,

although the current paper operationalizes lack of closure independent from the tasks at hand, future research may want to align operationalizations of lack of closure with typologies of work tasks and perhaps test whether different temporal patterns apply to different tasks.

Implications for practice and conclusion

Independent from the dynamics of the studied phenomenon (either it concerns same-day or previous-day lack of closure), the present findings seem to suggest that organizations and managers will benefit from a workforce with heightened reflexivity and mindfulness. These attributes seem to help employees not simply to cope with unattained goals but also to transform them to job performance successfully. Typically, mindfulness can be the target of workplace interventions, which have been found to increase actual levels of state-mindfulness among the participants (Aikens et al., 2014). Reflexivity can be stimulated by organizations and leaders through counseling or communication that addresses the right questions. For instance, ‘What have I done wrong?’ should be replaced by ‘How should I adjust myself in the future?’. Such effective cognitive reframing and learning strategies have been the targets of successful workplace interventions (e.g. Kimura et al., 2015).

Conclusion

All in all, the present paper has advanced knowledge by showing that an otherwise ambiguous or even distressing state such as lack of closure may, in fact, relate to job performance under two boundary conditions: First employees need to be mindful and, second, they need to be self-reflective. It is also the ambition of the present paper that these findings will inform organizational practice and will be translated accordingly so as to be relevant for the work reality of many employees and organizations. As such, unattained goals and tasks constitute a normal work situation that calls for mindful attention rather than for distress or worrying. By being critically self-reflecting and ‘present’, here and now, employees should continue performing well even in the face of daily challenges.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Open Science Framework at <https://osf.io/8zbfaf/>, doi: 10.17605/OSF.IO/8ZBFA; the current paper uses the same sample (but not the same variables) as Petrou, P., Baas, M., & Roskes, M. (2020). From prevention focus to adaptivity and creativity: the role of unfulfilled goals and work engagement. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 29, 36-48.

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