

Understanding How Employees Manage Non-Preferred Tasks at Work

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ABSTRACT

Employees experience increasing workloads in today's organisations and are expected to be more proactive in managing their work roles. In this paper we examine how employees manage non-preferred tasks within their work roles. We also identify the role of job autonomy in managing non-preferred tasks at work. Across 2 data collections in different settings we used purposive sampling to interview 20 hotel workers and 20 university academics. Respondents in both samples reported having non-preferred tasks within their work roles. Results suggest that autonomy played a significant role in helping employees manage non-preferred tasks. We discuss implications for theory and practice, and outline future research directions.

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With a change in economy from traditional economy to knowledge based economy, there has been a significant increase in work pressure in the workplaces (Green, 2004). Tighter budgets due to recent financial crisis and the search for improved productivity and greater competition mean that organisations are taking stringent measures such as reducing staff numbers and increasing the workload on staff that are left behind (Reisel, Probst, Chia, Maloles, & Konig, 2010; Vis, van Kersbergen, & Hylands, 2011).

These challenges have created significant pressure on employees' performance and well-being (Epstein & Buhovac, 2014). More than ever before, organisations are constantly on the hunt for proactive employees who can help address these challenges (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010). More recently, literature on proactivity has gained significant attention due to the above-mentioned economic conditions and organisations desire to employ proactive employees. Having a proactive employee is no longer a novelty, but it has become a major necessity (Parker & Collins, 2010). While it is important to have proactive employees, there is only so much an individual can do (Combs, Liu, Hall, & Ketchen, 2006). Although proactivity literature suggests that to be a proactive employee, one has to be self- starting, take charge and be future focused (Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006), more recently researchers have begun investigating the phenomenon of job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Job crafting has been suggested as a way of being proactive whereby, employees find ways to craft their jobs (alter what they do in their work roles) to make the jobs more meaningful for them (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013). The majority of the work on job crafting focuses on employees arranging their jobs to complete tasks that are preferred activities that the employees find interesting.

According to Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), employees may craft their jobs in three different forms: (1) employees can increase or decrease the number of tasks they need to perform or change how they perform their tasks (i.e., crafting the task boundaries); (2) employees can change the number and intensity of interactions with others both on the job and outside of the organization (i.e., crafting the relational boundaries); and (3) employees can change the meaning of their job by reformulating the impact their work has on themselves or others (i.e., crafting the cognitions about the job). More recently, Berg, Grant, and Johnson (2010) suggested that people craft their jobs towards their personal preferences so that they may find their work more meaningful. Despite this focus in the job crafting literature we note that most jobs involve aspect of the job that people enjoy and aspects that people do not enjoy (non preferred tasks).

The present research focuses on how employees craft their jobs. Specifically, we initially examined whether employees reported preferred tasks and non-preferred tasks within their job roles. While previous studies have examined job crafting as assisting employees to design their work roles towards their strengths and preferences (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010), our focus in this study is on an issue that has not been addressed previously, how employees deal with non preferred tasks. Specifically, we develop this research by asking our first research question: How do employees deal with non preferred tasks? In other words, given work roles often have responsibilities that employees cannot avoid, and given employees will favour preferred tasks, what do they do to manage non-preferred tasks? Clearly, simply avoiding them cannot be sustained for any period of time, so we predict that there must be other ways in which these non-preferred tasks are managed.

In contrast to the findings of Berg, Wrzesniewski, et al. (2010), where they did not find autonomy to play a significant difference between higher level employees and lower level employees, we consider that autonomy may play a role. If autonomy provides the latitude to make decisions on what task to complete and how to complete them, then it follows that employees with more autonomy will also have greater scope for making decisions about their work, particularly in terms of completing non-preferred tasks. On this basis, we therefore pose the 2nd research question: What impact does autonomy play in employees dealing with non-preferred tasks? To answer these 2 research questions we conducted a study across 2 organizational settings.

Method

Context and sample

To answer our research questions, we conducted an interview study across 2 organizational settings that include an Australian Hotel and two Australian Universities. They were selected for this study, for three key reasons. First, both, hotels and universities employees generally have to perform a range of tasks in their work roles which consist of both preferred tasks and non-preferred tasks. Second, the hotels and universities have very different frameworks within which they work. While both are customer / student focused, one is very focused on customer satisfaction by giving customers what they want, while the other is supposed to establish standards that have to met by their students (customers). Finally, the universities and hotels both vary in the level of autonomy provided to employees. These two samples should give us a comprehensive view on exploring whether employees have preferred or non-preferred tasks and how employees in both setting deal with non-preferred tasks in their work roles.

We used purposive sampling in both settings to gain deep insights to this phenomenon from a range of jobs within each sector. In the hotel setting, 20 participants from a five star hotel chain based in Australia were interviewed. Employees and their managers were interviewed simultaneously across 2 operational and 2 administrative departments in the hotel. There were 12 male (60%) and 8 female (40%) participants. Their mean organizational tenure was 5.01 years (SD = 5.34 years). Job roles varied between housekeeping staff and managers (operations), food and beverage staff and managers (operational), human resources (administrative) and finance (administrative).

The university sample consisted of 18 participants who were interviewed from two universities in Australia. The sample was taken from across disciplines. The sample included academics whose roles included teaching, research and service component. The sample consisted of 10 male (55%) and 8 female (45%). Their mean organizational tenure was 9.35 years (SD = 4.75 years). Job roles varied between PhD students (27.7%), Lecturer (22.2%), Senior Lecturer (16.6%), Associate Professor (16.6%) and Professor (16.6%).

Procedure

We created an interview protocol using a semi-structured framework with open questions that were designed to answer the research questions. The participants in both samples were initially asked to describe their day-to-day work and were then asked if they experienced preferred or non-preferred tasks in their work roles. Once the participants reported a number of non-preferred tasks the interviewer then asked a series of questions to understand how they dealt with their non-preferred tasks. The first author conducted all interviews. The interviews were tape recorded, and averaged approximately 30 minutes in length, ranging from 20 to 40 minutes (Boyce & Neale,

2006). The university ethics committee approved the research and the interview protocol.

Data Analysis

The interview data from the two samples were analysed independently and the data in each sample guided to determine the themes that emerged. In the first phase, the hotel interviews were analysed and we attempted to understand participants' accounts of dealing with their preferred and non-preferred tasks. A number of broad themes and patterns within and between managerial administrative staff and line staff emerged. We used sentences as unit of analysis and extracted all quotes by employees where they mentioned preferred and non-preferred activities. We then searched and identified themes and patterns of data within and between managerial administrative and line staff. We engaged in several iterations of coding and discussion until no new themes emerged and we had a stable set of codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the second phase, we analysed the data collected from our university sample following the same steps as the first phase. We combined data across samples to form two groups - a group of who had low autonomy that included all the operational staff in the hotel chain and a group that had high autonomy that included all managerial administrative staff at the hotel chain and all academic participants. All the participants were consistent in describing at least two non-preferred tasks and two preferred tasks, and all participants' suggested ways they deal with their non-preferred tasks. The researchers carried out inter-rater reliability with an experienced academic in qualitative research in line with Morse (2008) to make sure the themes were accurately reflected.

Results

In the sections that follow, we present our interview findings and explain the themes that emerged and show that employees with high autonomy in their work roles

dealt with their non-preferred tasks in a different way to those employees with low autonomy. We start this section by presenting the challenges the employees with low autonomy faced to deal with non-preferred tasks and then move on to examine the high autonomy group.

Overall, our findings suggest that employees with low autonomy or lack of autonomy found it extremely challenging to deal with their non-preferred tasks as they were mostly micro-managed and whenever they did try to find ways to deal with their non-preferred tasks, they had a fear of being reprimanded by their supervisors. In contrast, employees who enjoyed high autonomy found ways to easily deal with their non-preferred tasks such as delegating, outsourcing, avoiding challenges. The major themes that we uncovered from our data collection directly supported differences based on the low autonomy versus the high autonomy conditions.

Dealing with Non-preferred tasks by Low Autonomy Workers

The single theme that emerged from the data from low autonomy workers was that of challenges of being micro managed. In this theme the employees basically suggested that they always felt that there were a set of eyes watching them while they were working and they could not make any mistakes. When they did make mistakes they were reprimanded for their actions and they tried not to make those mistake again. This approach also resulted in non-preferred tasks being completed as directed by their supervisors with little variation to approved procedures or policies.

Challenges of being Micro Managed

The front line employees in the hotel setting clearly identified a number of non-preferred tasks. They found it challenging to do anything about their non-preferred tasks as their supervisors regularly monitored them. For example the following quote suggests,

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“ I don't prefer cleaning toilets, sometimes guests leave them in very bad condition. I have no choice, I have to clean them, the supervisor will not be happy, you know they check every room after we finish cleaning” (Participant 2).

In addition, it also suggests that the staff members not only performed their non-preferred tasks, but they had to perform it with perfection. Another statement that suggests that the operational employees are constantly monitored by their supervisors is:

“I clean 22 rooms in a day, cleaning the bathroom becomes very hard to clean and we are expected to rush. It used to be 15 rooms a few years ago and now...they just keep increasing rooms. We try best but sometimes rushing. Bathroom is not cleaned properly. Then supervisor comes and wants us to clean again, and I have no choice but go back and clean again” (Participant 1).

These two statements clearly indicate that for operational hotel workers, it is nearly impossible for them to get away with any kind of variation to non-preferred tasks as they are constantly being micro-managed by their superiors. The statements suggest that these employees have to rush through the tasks as they have high job demands and that these demand are ever increasing. The participants indicated that they try to spend less time and effort at some tasks that they do not prefer, however mostly they cannot avoid the tasks. This seems consistent with Hobfoll (1989, 2001) conservation of resources theory, where employees want to save and invest their resources, time and energy where they find more benefits. One of the front line staff said:

“Ah, I hate polishing cutlery, it's a pretty straight forward one, but in all honesty, I just put on a brave face and deal with it. I clean them properly, or else I feel embarrassed when I stand next to the guest and the cutlery on their table has water marks on it and supervisor walks past me” (Participant 8)

This statement suggests that even though, the employees may not have a preference for certain tasks, those tasks cannot be avoided as they are an important aspect of their job, and once again, they were closely monitored by their superior. In summary, employees with low autonomy struggle to deal with their non-preferred tasks.

Dealing with Non-preferred tasks by High Autonomy Workers

From the high autonomy group 3 broad themes emerged in relation to dealing with non-preferred tasks: *challenge avoidance, outsourcing/delegating and conserving personal resources (taking short cuts)*. These themes that emerged from the data of high autonomy workers (hotel managers and academics) reflected that they could rearrange work, which they did not find directly beneficial to their personal goals. For example, high autonomy workers could outsource/delegate some of their work without facing any consequences because they were accountable for the end results and not the process that was involved in achieving the end results. Another theme that emerged was challenge avoidance. For example, high autonomy workers in this data set managed to find ways to avoid challenges that did not have an effect on their desired outputs. The final theme was conserving personal resources (taking short cuts). This theme signified the ways high autonomy workers managed to save their time and energy by taking short cuts for the tasks that did not have an effect on their desired goals. The next section will display the results and quotes from the data set.

Challenge Avoidance

The managerial/administrative participants' with high autonomy from the hotel described non-preferred tasks as challenging. They suggested that some tasks such as dealing with employees' disciplinary action was a challenge for them and they avoided these challenges as much as they possibly could. The following statement by Participant 6 says,

“I hate to give disciplinary warnings to staff members, especially when you work with them everyday and you are having good times together, and all of a sudden you have to confront them with warning. I try to just go and say in their ears, I received a complaint about you, be careful or next time I won't be able to help”.

Although they found this task of giving warning challenging and they avoided it to a certain extent, ultimately they had to confront the staff members. The next

statement by the academic staff Participant 23 in high autonomy group suggests their way of avoiding challenges with their department secretary by avoiding any confrontations and just accepting the bureaucracy in their workplace,

“the bureaucracy of this place, specially dealing with the department secretary.... is so slow, but I have no choice, I have.....get my paperwork. I can't get pissed off at her, because in the past....and I tell you it wasn't good result. Just be good to her without confrontation, your work will eventually be done”

Another participant in the high autonomy group in hotel dealt with confronting a team member for disciplinary action but they recognised that it was a hassle in going through all the paperwork that it involved. Participant 10 explains,

“I mean the process is 3 verbal warnings and then 3 written warning and you are out of here. All the verbal warnings need to be recorded too. Have you seen the paperwork, I am telling you, it's a joke. In my 6 years of service, I have given a few recorded verbal warnings but only 1 written warning.”.

This statement suggests that the manager/supervisor had the autonomy to make that decision on whether to give written or verbal warnings. They wanted to avoid the lengthy paperwork that was involved in warnings.

Conserving Personal Resources (Taking short cuts).

The managers in the service area suggested that their staff members wanted to take short cuts so that they could focus on better tasks such as spending time with guests. Following statement was said by one of the participants,

“They are in a rush to finish cleaning the back of the house, no one likes cleaning back of the house, they don't understand the importance of a well organised.....it helps front run smoother and faster, but they all want to be with guests, they want to take short cuts, what needs to be done they need to do it” (Participant 9).

Another participant with high autonomy from university suggested that they take short cuts in marking student assignments. This academic seemed to save their time and energy, by taking short cuts in marking student essays. One such statement came from Participant 37,

“With my experience, I don’t have to read the whole essay, I get a rough idea of the quality by looking at the reference list and introduction and conclusion. I give marks accordingly. Quality tells me if they are here to learn or not”

Outsourcing / Delegating responsibilities

The theme of outsourcing and delegating was a common way in dealing with the non-preferred tasks for high autonomy workers. One of the high autonomy participants’ from the university sample suggested that they saved time during the marking tasks as they felt that marking was not very important in their scheme of things. Specifically it was found that participants in the university sample who had a higher position indulged engaged in more outsourcing than the early career workers. Some of the senior academics suggested that they outsource their marking to others by using their research funds. A quote to reflect this was said by Participant 40,

“I can’t be bothered marking, when the university expects us to do produce so many A and A* articles a year and do teaching and do service, why should one waste time in marking, that’s for my PhD students. They are happy as they get paid to pay their bills and I am happy as I put effort in my research”.

One early career participant suggested that they preferred to avoid doing literature reviews as they found them waste of their time. They suggested that rather do multiple projects at the same time to cope up with the demand of their performance appraisal, they outsourced their literature reviews. Following quotes by Participant 22 determines this behaviour,

“I’m not really a fan of literature reviews. ... I just don't have time for it. So, doing literature reviews means putting everything on halt for two days ... that's two hours or two days that I could be writing up something I will pay someone to do it for me and its mostly trial and error trying different people”.

Another high autonomy manager from the hotel group suggested that they delegated their non-preferred tasks of going to the meetings to their subordinates and

suggested that it helps their staff learn about managerial role and they get away by focusing on their desired outcomes,

“I kill two birds with one arrow, I mean I send my supervisor for inter department meetings, they like it, they get to learn. I don’t care about meetings. I know what they will talk there- about budget. I actually find them waste of my time, hotel pushes us to save labour cost, I stay behind with my other staff and make sure things get done faster”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore whether employees have their preferred and non-preferred tasks at work, and how did they deal with their non-preferred tasks. For the purpose of this paper, we interviewed participants from two organisations. We had two distinct types of participant groups, one with high autonomy and the other with low autonomy. We found that all the employees in both organisations had some tasks that they preferred and some tasks that they did not prefer. We further found that those employees who had high autonomy in both organisations exercised their autonomy to deal with their non-preferred tasks, whereas employees with low autonomy could not do much except display their frustration.

The interesting finding in this was how the employees dealt with their non-preferred tasks in their work role. The employees in the front line of the operational departments seemed to be micro-managed to such an extent that they could not find ways to avoid the tasks that they did not prefer. They had to do the tasks or they had to face the consequence of supervisor’s disciplinary action. It was challenging for the employees in the front line to deal with their non-preferred tasks. This in some instances then led to frustration. The research suggests that work overload, time pressure, and emotional demands have been positively related to burn out (Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou, & Kantas, 2003).

Although previous studies have suggested that people craft their jobs towards preferred activities when the job demands are higher and have focused on those preferred activities (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010), ours is the first study to investigate how employees deal with their non-preferred tasks in low autonomy and high autonomy roles. Further, previous studies in job-crafting literature have mainly used knowledge workers and education workers as their samples (Berg, Grant, et al., 2010; Berg, Wrzesniewski, et al., 2010; Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2012). In this study, however, we use samples across disciplines and occupations where we investigated employees with high autonomy and low autonomy.

The managers from the hotel sample managed to find ways to deal with their non-preferred tasks. This was mainly due to having some sort of autonomy in their jobs. Job autonomy in the past has been related to various outcomes such as job satisfaction and motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). We found that the managers could delegate their jobs to others, or they could just avoid the tasks and reduce their demands with no consequences as long as they met their targets. More recently, Berg, Wrzesniewski, et al. (2010) conducted a research in the domain of job crafting whereby they did not find autonomy as an important factor when it came to lower level employees and higher level employees job crafting. They found that the lower level employees crafted their jobs more than the higher-level employees. In addition, their sample was only from knowledge workers. Our two samples covered a broader range of occupations.

The findings from our high autonomy group revealed that autonomy makes a difference; hence they found it very easy to reduce demands by findings ways to deal with their non-preferred tasks. Previous research with knowledge workers shows they were more driven by their performance appraisals and therefore they wanted to invest

more time, energy and resources (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) in those tasks where they could see a greater benefit to them. Therefore, they managed to outsource or demonstrate ignorance in some tasks that they believed did not serve their purpose. While our research did not look at this aspect, it may be an area for future research.

Practical Implications

At a time when organisations are increasing demands from their employees and cutting their budgets (Epstein & Buhovac, 2014; Vis et al., 2011), it has become challenging for the employees to sustain a high level of productivity. With employees suggesting that their workload has become significantly higher than a few years ago (Chan & Lam, 2011), our research shows that within this framework employees still have preferred and non preferred tasks. Our findings also support the idea that in order to deal with the ever-growing challenges at work, employees try to craft their jobs (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001).

But not all employees have the freedom or the autonomy to craft their jobs. Although, most of the employees in organisations have a list of preferred and non-preferred tasks, it is challenging for employees with low autonomy to focus on the tasks that they prefer. From a manager's perspective, if employees started exercising their autonomy at lower levels, the organisations could face challenges with the quality of work output. At the same time, to get the best out of workers managers need to enable workers to finding meaning in their work. We believe that managers should work with operational employees to enable some level of autonomy to make decisions that do not impact the goals and vision of the organisations.

Limitations and Future Research

While our study has made significant progress in understanding the fine characteristics of employees preferred and non-preferred work tasks, our perspective is

limited by our data and study design. Firstly, we studied only two distinct organizations and only a few departments in each organisation. Future research must investigate a wider array of organisations and departments to understand the concept of preferred and non-preferred tasks. Secondly we could only get a few instances where employees described their way of dealing with their non-preferred tasks. Further research should take into account, more instances of dealing with non-preferred tasks across distinct samples.

Surprisingly, employees did not report engaging in any deviant behaviour in relation to non-preferred tasks. We were expecting that employees might be indulging in deviant behaviours to counteract the frustrations for their non-preferred task, particularly in the low autonomy condition. This could be because the employees believed deviant behaviour would be immediately recognized as a result of the close monitoring of their work. It will be interesting in future research to explore the relationship between how employees deal with their frustrations of non-preferred tasks and acts of deviance.

In addition, it will be interesting to know that even though the operational lower level employees were expected to perform their tasks with perfection, do employees have any stress related to these non-preferred tasks. Further, future research should compare the number of preferred tasks and non-preferred tasks that employees have in their work role. If the proportion of the non-preferred tasks is high, how do employees with low autonomy deal with the stress and if the non-preferred tasks are less do they engage more in extra role behaviours? Similarly, future research should investigate, if the employees with high autonomy have low non-preferred tasks, do these employees engage in more extra role behaviours? We believe that the future research could investigate these questions and extend this research further.

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