

ARTICLE

Three Layers of Workplace Well-Being: Job Design, Job Crafting, and Individual Well-being Behaviors

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Abstract

While work provides opportunities for personal development and growth, it can also harm individual well-being. This article presents a three-layered approach to workplace well-being. It argues that if we want to take workplace well-being seriously and want to improve it, we need to consider the three layers of job design (i.e., objective features of a job as set by top-down organizational processes), job crafting (i.e., employees' deliberate efforts to change features of their jobs), and individual well-being practices (i.e., spontaneous and intervention-driven stress management approaches). This article describes the conceptual foundations of the three layers and presents empirical evidence on the benefits of improving job design, job crafting, and well-being practices. It discusses interconnections between the three layers, demonstrating their interdependence in people's work lives.

Key words: Work, Well-being, Job design, Job crafting, Stress management

Work is an important life domain for many adults. Although work offers opportunities for fulfillment and growth (Allan et al., 2019), it can have detrimental consequences for employee well-being. Increased stress and burnout typically emerge from unfavorable work situations (Sonnentag et al., 2023). For instance, in the European Union, 37% of the workforce reports feelings of overall fatigue due to their work and 27% reports feelings of stress, depression, or anxiety (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work., 2022). A recent 19-country survey (including non-European countries as well) showed that 58% of the workforce in a broad range of jobs experiences daily stress and 31% has unfavorable well-being scores (Manpower Group, 2025). These numbers highlight the need to investigate the causes of poor workplace well-being and develop countermeasures.

The psychological literature differentiates between various well-being concepts. One of the main differentiations is between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. Hedonic well-being refers to the experience of happiness (Oishi and Westgate, 2022) and has been generally characterized by high levels of positive affect, low levels of negative affect, and high levels of satisfaction (Diener, 2000). Eudaimonic well-being refers to the experience of meaning and purpose (Oishi and Westgate, 2022). Research on workplace well-being mainly focused on hedonic well-being and incorporated affective, energetic, and psychosomatic facets of (un)well-being (Sonnentag, 2015). Importantly, the consequences of poor workplace well-being are not limited to experiences at the workplace but spill over into other life domains, impairing a person's well-being, for instance, also in the home domain (Allen and French, 2023).

This paper argues that an effective approach towards protecting and fostering well-being through work needs to consider three areas of influence (i.e., layers): objective features of the workplace set by the design of the specific job (job design) as the foundation, employees' efforts to improve their work situation (job crafting), and practices such as stress management, off-job recovery, and a healthy lifestyle that directly improve well-being (well-being practices). Figure 1 displays the three-layer framework.

The First Layer: Job Design

Job design refers to the "content and organization of one's work tasks, activities, relationships, and responsibilities" (Parker, 2014, page 662). Usually, a job's design results from a top-down process comprising explicit and implicit decisions and priorities of managers and other organizational decision makers. Building on a long research tradition on favorable versus detrimental job characteristics, Parker and Knight (2023) introduced the SMART framework of job design. In essence, this framework describes that stimulation, mastery, autonomy, relationships, and tolerable demands are essential features of good workplaces. First, stimulation implies that a job should provide skill variety, task variety, problem-solving requirements, and information-processing requirements. Second, mastery refers to role clarity, job feedback, and feedback from others as desirable job features. Third, the autonomy feature highlights that well-designed jobs provide employees control over work methods, control over task scheduling, and control over decision-making. Fourth, relational aspects of a job are important, comprising social support, task significance, and beneficiary contact. Finally tolerable demands means that taxing aspects of a job such as workload and work-home conflict should not be excessive (Parker and Knight, 2023).

Various streams of empirical research have examined how the features specified in the SMART framework are associated with employee well-being. Numerous primary studies and meta-analyses demonstrated that employees whose jobs score high on the SMART principles, enjoy a better well-being comprising more vitality, less exhaustion, less tension, and less psychosomatic symptoms (for a summary, Sonnentag, 2025). Longitudinal research showed that being exposed to high job demands that exceed a tolerable level is associated with a decrease in well-being (e.g., increased exhaustion) over time (Ford et al., 2014; Guthrie et al.,

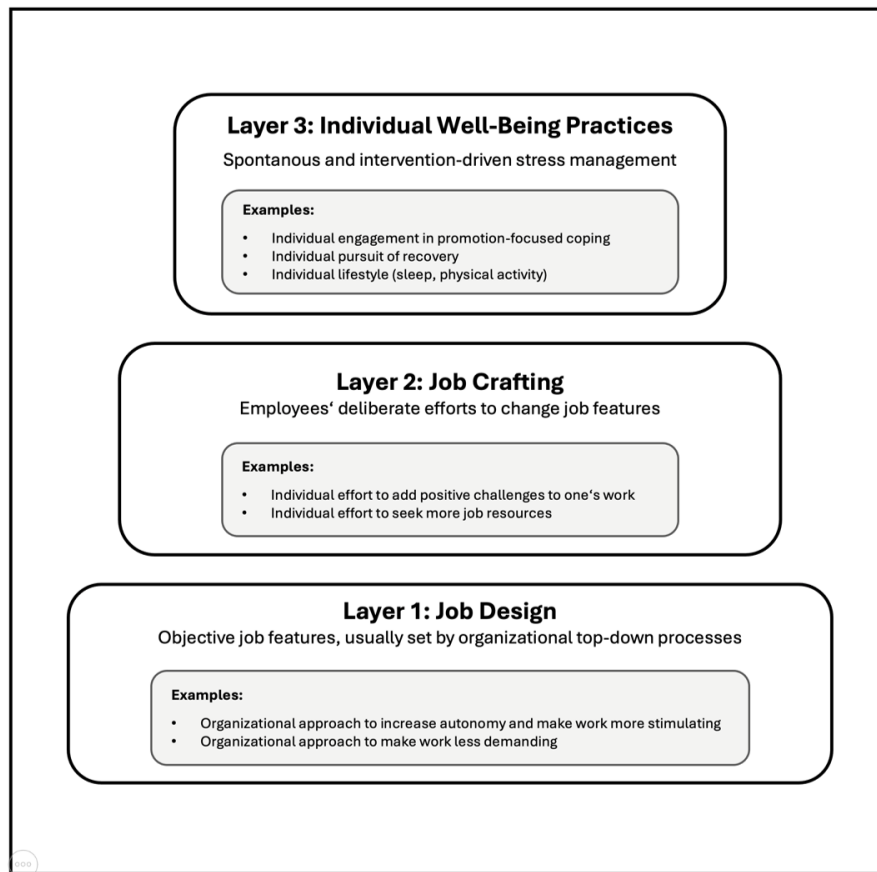


Fig. 1. Three layers of work-place well-being.

2020). Intervention studies in organizations illustrated how a good job design can improve well-being (Busch et al., 2017; Holman and Axtell, 2016). However, effects sizes of such intervention studies are usually small, particularly when compared to other types of intervention studies (Richardson and Rothstein, 2008). To be effective and to result in an increase in well-being, it is essential that objective improvements in job design are reflected in job holders' experience that their job has actually improved (Holman et al., 2009).

Taken together, objective job-design features are the basis for people experiencing well-being in their jobs and for protecting well-being outside work. However, objective aspects of job-design alone cannot fully explain variance in people's well-being on the job.

The Second Layer: Job Crafting

Although usually the design of an employee's job is set by managers and other organizational decision makers, employees can influence certain features of their jobs by themselves. Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001, page 180) coined the term "job crafting" to describe such bottom-up influences that "shape, mold, and redefine ... jobs". Whereas Wrzesniewski and Dutton's 2001 job-crafting concept referred to employees' attempts to adjust their roles by changing task boundaries (i.e., alter type and number of job tasks), relational boundaries (i.e., alter specific interaction partners and number of interactions), and cognitive boundaries (i.e., alter one's view of work), more recent concepts focus on how employees address the demands and resources of their jobs (Lopper et al., 2023; Tims et al., 2012). For instance, to indirectly increase workplace well-being, employees could increase job resources (e.g., job autonomy, social support) and positively-valued job demands (e.g., challenges) and decrease negatively-valued demands (e.g., hassles). At a more general level, an approach-oriented perspective on job crafting can be distinguished from an avoidance-oriented perspective (Zhang and Parker, 2018). While approach job-crafting refers to efforts to change one's job by adding positive features, avoidance job-crafting refers to efforts to eliminate or reduce undesirable aspects of one's job.

During the past decades, empirical research of job crafting flourished. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that job crafting relates negatively to strain symptoms (e.g., burnout) and positively to work engagement (i.e., feeling vigorous, absorbed, and dedicated, Rudolph et al., 2017). Job crafting is more strongly related to work engagement than to low strain symptoms (Rudolph et al., 2017), suggesting that it is mainly an energizing experience and limited in counteracting negative working conditions and impaired well-being. A meta-analysis focusing on longitudinal studies showed that promotion-focused (i.e., approach-oriented) job crafting predicted an increase in work engagement and a decrease in burnout, whereas prevention-focused (i.e., avoidance-oriented) job crafting predicted a decrease in work engagement and an increase in burnout (Lichtenthaler and Fischbach, 2018). Thus, well-being benefits originate from approach-oriented crafting; avoidance-oriented crafting seems to backfire.

To sum up, employees can indirectly influence their well-being by taking actions to improve the design of their jobs. Job crafting turned out as a particularly promising approach. The popularity of the job-crafting concept during recent years, however, may

have led to a too broad use of the term. Not every single action that aims at improving one's day at work (e.g., asking for social support, negotiating a more lenient deadline) is necessarily job crafting as these single actions do not change the overall design of one's job.

The Third Layer: Individual Well-Being Practices

Whereas the first and second layers focus on changes in the characteristics of a person's job, the third layer concentrates on individual well-being more directly. Various types of processes and intervention approaches belong to this layer that can be subsumed under the umbrella term of "occupational stress management" (Murphy, 1984), comprising traditional stress-management approaches, job-stress recovery, and lifestyle features.

In a broad sense, traditional stress management in occupational settings refers to the process by which individuals deal with stressful and other unfavorable aspects of their jobs. Stress management can occur spontaneously during daily work (i.e., coping) or as a result of deliberate stress management interventions. Research on coping showed that it is important to differentiate between promotion-focused and prevention-focused coping. Whereas promotion-focused coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts that aim at increasing the match between one's actual situation and one's hopes and aspirations, prevention-focused coping refers to cognitive and behavioral efforts that aim at decreasing the mismatch between one's actual situation and one's desired state and one's duties and obligations (Zhang et al., 2019, p. 1298). Examples for promotion-focused coping include planning, seeking instrumental or emotional support, accepting the situation, and using humor; examples for prevention-focused coping include suppression of competing activities, denial, distancing, and venting of emotions. According to a meta-analysis of job-related coping, promotion-focused coping tends to be positively related to well-being, whereas prevention-focused coping is negatively related to well-being (Zhang et al., 2019).

In terms of deliberate stress management interventions, a broad range of different approaches have been evaluated in empirical studies. Among the most effective ones are cognitive-behavioral (Richardson and Rothstein, 2008) and mindfulness interventions (Monzani et al., 2021). Whereas cognitive-behavioral interventions focus on changing individual thought patterns when encountering a stressful situation and strengthening adaptive behavioral responses, mindfulness intervention focus on awareness and acceptance. The effects of these interventions in occupational settings are similar to those targeting other life domains (Khouri et al., 2015; Svärdman et al., 2022). Whereas these traditional stress management interventions do not have an impact on the job design per se (e.g., objective levels of autonomy or demands) they can influence how employees perceive and react to specific job-design features. For instance, participation in a stress-management intervention can increase self-efficacy (Ebner et al., 2018). Low perceived stressor levels and high self-efficacy, in turn, should result in better well-being (Shoji et al., 2015; Spector et al., 1988).

The job-stress recovery perspective addresses individuals' behaviors and experiences during leisure time (Sonnetag et al., 2022). The core idea is that unwinding during leisure time and restoration of psychological resources (e.g., energy) that have been used up during work need to be replenished. Research has focused on both leisure-time behaviors (Alameer et al., 2023) and experiences (Sonnetag and Fritz, 2007) and examined how they relate to well-being. Meta-analyses have demonstrated that specific recovery experiences (e.g., psychological detachment from work during leisure time) positively relates to various well-being indicators (Headrick et al., 2022; Steed et al., 2019). Importantly, meta-analytic evidence suggests that effective recovery processes can improve through interventions (Karabinski et al., 2021).

Finally, aspects of a person's lifestyle can be important for workplace well-being. Related to job-stress recovery, sleep is an important factor for improving well-being. There is broad empirical evidence that sleep duration and sleep quality are associated with various well-being outcomes, with the effect sizes being larger for sleep quality than for sleep duration (Litwiller et al., 2017). For instance, Wiegmann et al. (2023) showed that sleep quality during the previous night predicts employees' energy levels throughout the day, with good sleep quality being most relevant in the morning and losing its relevance later during the day, particularly on days when workload is high.

In addition, physical activity is important for well-being at work. The general finding in health psychology that physical activity improves well-being (Buecker et al., 2020; Marquez et al., 2020) generalizes to the workplace (Wiese et al., 2017). For instance, Roswag et al. (2023) showed that morning physical activity is positively related to engagement at work and negatively related to job-related anxiety and emotional exhaustion.

Interrelations Between the Three Layers

The three layers provide specific perspectives on how work and well-being are intertwined. The processes captured within the layers, however, do not operate in isolation but show interdependencies between them.

First, job design and job crafting are interconnected (Holman et al., 2023; Parker et al., 2025). On the one hand, job characteristics resulting from top-down processes set the stage for how far a person can go in their job-crafting efforts (Parker et al., 2025). Most obviously, a certain degree of job autonomy is a prerequisite for job crafting. Without any discretion in one's job, it is not possible to make any changes in how one is doing one's work. On the other hand, successful job-crafting behaviors will ultimately result in a change in actual job design. Such a change could occur, first, when a significant single act of job crafting results in a major change in one's job characteristics, and second, when smaller acts of daily job crafting cause small changes in one's daily work environment that accumulate over time (Parker et al., 2025). Initial research indeed shows that job crafting can change job characteristics over time (Tims et al., 2013).

Second, job design exerts influence on individual stress-management practices. For instance, this has been demonstrated with respect to coping processes, job-stress recovery, and other well-being promoting processes such as sleep and physical activity. Regarding coping processes, research has shown that aspects of job design are associated with coping processes (Zhang et al., 2019). More specifically, so-called challenge stressors (e.g., workload and stimulating aspects of work) are positively related to promotion-focused coping and negatively to prevention-focused coping, whereas so-called hindrance stressors (e.g., role ambiguity and interpersonal conflict) are negatively related to promotion-focused coping and positively related to prevention-focused coping (Zhang et al., 2019). Regarding the interrelation between job design and job-stress recovery, a "recovery paradox" becomes apparent

(Sonnentag, 2018): When working in an unfavorable job environment (mainly characterized by high demands and unsupportive interpersonal relationships), employees have a high need for recovery. At the same time, arousal resulting from highly demanding and unsupportive relationships make it particularly difficult to mentally detach from work and to relax, making successful recovery unlikely (Steed et al., 2019). Thus, unfavorable job features result in a paradoxical situation where a high need for recovery is not matched with enacted recovery processes. Regarding to sleep and physical activity as important antecedents of well-being, research has shown that unfavorable working conditions make these processes less likely. For instance, low job autonomy and high workload are associated with poor sleep quality (Litwiller et al., 2017). Similarly, low-autonomy and high-demand work situations make it less likely that people are physically active (Häusser and Mojzisch, 2017).

Third, individual well-being practices may have an indirect impact on the type of jobs people are working in. Although this process is less obvious than the other interdependencies described here, at least two potential pathways are possible. The first pathway refers to better coping skills and higher vitality resulting from individual stress-management practices (Hohnemann et al., 2024; Tetric and Winslow, 2015). Better coping skills and higher vitality may make people more confident to apply for well designed, high-quality jobs that provide stimulation and opportunities for autonomy and mastery. In addition, one may speculate that applicants with better coping skills and higher vitality might have better changes to be hired for challenging, high-quality jobs. The second pathway works indirectly via well-being resulting from individual stress-management practices. People with poor well-being may be less successful at staying in a high-quality job or finding one after job loss. This process implies that, over time, they move into poorly designed low-quality jobs – a process described as “drift” in the sociological literature (Fox, 1990).

Fourth, also individual well-being practices and job crafting show some interconnections. For instance, research demonstrated that evening recovery experiences such as psychological detachment from work and relaxation are positively related to promotion-oriented job crafting on the next day (Hur and Shin, 2022; Rhee et al., 2024). Tests of indirect effects showed that this relationship was due to positive morning states such as feeling recovered (Hur and Shin, 2022) and feeling resilient (Rhee et al., 2024). With respect to the reverse pathway, however, promotion-oriented job crafting (i.e., increasing challenging demands) is negatively related to psychological detachment from work during the evenings, whereas prevention-oriented job crafting (i.e., decreasing hindrance demands) is positively related to psychological detachment (Sanz-Vergel et al., 2023). Although we should not over-generalize the results from a few single studies, these findings suggest that the interrelations between various layers may not always be reciprocal. At the same time, the specific results on job crafting and lack of psychological detachment from work illustrate that high demands – even if they are deliberately crafted and the crafting process may have positive effects on well-being (Lichtenthaler and Fischbach, 2018) – hinder psychological detachment from work.

In summary, previous research described above demonstrates that factors across the three layers are not isolated but highly interconnected and interdependent. Most of these interconnections suggest potential gain cycles (Hobfoll, 1998) where positive features in one layer may lead to positive developments in the other two layers. On the flipside, however, unfavorable conditions and processes in any layer may cause negative, mutually reinforcing effects throughout the other layers.

Future research should go beyond just describing the interrelations between the layers. It should address the processes in greater detail that link the various levels. For instance, how do job-crafting and individual well-being practices result in changes of a person’s job design? Through which affective, motivational, and cognitive processes do job design and job crafting change individual well-being processes? Potentially, a combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches will be most promising with quantitative studies requiring multiple measurement points so that they can address temporal patterns during which mutual influences unfold (Voelkle et al., 2012).

Conclusion

Workplace well-being is a complex phenomenon, influenced by multiple factors. To improve and protect workplace well-being a three-layered approach is needed. A good job design is the first, fundamental layer. Jobs need to be stimulating, providing mastery experiences, granting autonomy, allowing for supportive relationships, and keeping demands at a tolerable level (Parker and Knight, 2023). As second layer, job-crafting can help to further improve job features and to better adjust the job to one’s needs (Tims et al., 2012), with approach-oriented crafting showing more convincing well-being benefits than avoidance-oriented crafting (Lichtenthaler and Fischbach, 2018). Finally, individual well-being practices as the third layer can foster well-being further. When aiming at better workplace well-being, organizations and policy makers need to take all three layers into consideration. Initiatives that focus on one layer only (e.g., individual well-being practices) will not be successful in the long term.

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