

Task flexibility is a fundamental and perpetually positive job resource, or is it?

(Commentary on Hornung, Höge & Rousseau)

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The authors sought to test the main and interactive effects of top-down (providing task autonomy), bottom-up (proactively altering work through task crafting) and hybrid processes (negotiating idiosyncratic deals) of task flexibility on different aspects of the quality of working life. Confirmatory factor analyses showed strong support that these three facets are clearly distinguishable dimensions of task flexibility, albeit with high intercorrelations between the focal measures. The results of the study can be interpreted in a way that work characteristics (i.e., task autonomy) and proactive work behaviors (i.e., task crafting and i-deals) can have synergetic positive effects on most of the assessed indicators of the quality of working life. Task crafting appeared to be, as the authors state, „the most ambivalent of the three forms of task flexibility“, as it was associated with a mixture of positive and negative consequences, such as missing beneficial main effects and acting as a predictor of work-home conflict.

The conceptual strength of the article lies in the fact that it brings together three previously separate theoretical perspectives of autonomous, flexible work design. With that, the study contributes to a more holistic picture of important structural and process-related aspects of humane work design. Specifically, the mixed findings on task crafting may stimulate future research, in which the circumstances of proactive behavior are examined in more detail, and which also further illuminates potential negative effects (Parker, Wang & Liao, 2019). A more detailed description of the tested interaction effects would have further increased the contribution of the study. For example, it remains open whether the three aspects mutually reinforce each other or whether there are compensatory interaction effects. Opting for a cross-sectional design does not necessarily extenuate the results of this study, but rather invites future longitudinal research of this integrative model.

The study's approach is timely and highly relevant. With both calls for a broader adoption of flexible working arrangements by political actors and employees, research on individual-focused flexible work design becomes more and more relevant. Additionally, digitalization continues to revolutionize the world of work, including dissolution of boundaries between life domains (e.g., between employed work and non-employed work), increasing service work (e.g., gig-economy), and higher flexibility (such as flexitime and telework). Therefore, traditional psychological models of work design, which can be seen as both a critique and response to Taylor's principles regarding the „partialized“ design of industrial work, must be put to the test. Accordingly, recent perspectives on work design (van Veldhoven et al., 2019) challenge the assumption of universally positive effects of job resources. Indications arise that, for instance, under specific circumstances, high levels of task autonomy might lead to negative effects, like work intensification and self-exploitation (Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson & Andrey, 2008; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). For example, a recent paper by Berdicchia and Masino (2019) found that under high task autonomy task crafting may augment the presence of job stressors, like role overload. The authors argue that task autonomy may function as a source of self-imposed stress through work extensification and intensification. Mechanisms of indirect control, e.g. through goal setting or transactional leadership (e.g., Knecht, Meier & Krause, 2017), might be potential moderators turning the positive effects of task flexibility into negative effects by contributing to self-triggered or self-enacted forms of work extensification and intensification. Thus, there is a need for further research that examines under which conditions, job resources like task flexibility support employees' quality of working life – and under which conditions they do not.

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