



The role of goal pursuit in the interaction between psychosocial work environment and occupational well-being[☆]

Katriina Hyvönen^{a,*}, Taru Feldt^a, Asko Tolvanen^a, Ulla Kinnunen^b

^a University of Jyväskylä, Finland

^b University of Tampere, Finland

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ABSTRACT

The relation of the core components of the Effort–Reward Imbalance model (ERI; Siegrist, 1996) to goal pursuit was investigated. Goal pursuit was studied through categories of goal contents – competency, progression, well-being, job change, job security, organization, finance, or no work goal – based on the personal work goals of managers (Hyvönen, Feldt, Salmela-Aro, Kinnunen, & Mäkikangas, 2009). The study focused on the contribution of the ERI components (effort, reward, effort–reward imbalance, OVC) to goal contents, as well as on the mediating and moderating effects of goal contents between the ERI components and occupational well-being (burnout, work engagement) among young Finnish managers ($N = 747$, age range 23–35 years). First, multinomial regressions showed that effort, reward, and effort–reward imbalance contributed to the membership of the goal categories. Secondly, hierarchical GLM (General Linear Model) indicated that the goal categories mediated the relationship between the ERI components and occupational well-being. Effort, reward, and effort–reward imbalance had an indirect effect through goal categories on burnout and work engagement, but overcommitment only on burnout. In addition, the goal categories moderated the relationship between reward and work engagement. Taken together, psychosocial work environment contributes to the contents of personal work goals, which also function as mediators, particularly between the work environment and occupational well-being.

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1. Introduction

In spite of research advances with respect to the relation between psychosocial work environment and occupational health and well-being (for reviews, see Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001; Kahn & Byosiere, 1992; Stansfeld & Candy, 2006; Tsutsumi & Kawakami, 2004; Van Vegchel, de Jonge, Bosma, & Schaufeli, 2005), the question of the role of personal work goals has so far remained open in this process (Hyvönen et al., 2009; Pomaki & Maes, 2002; Pomaki, Maes, & ter Does, 2004). Previous research suggests, however, that the effect of personal goal processes on health and well-being at work should not be overlooked, since both goal contents (Hyvönen et al., 2009; Salmela-Aro & Nurmi, 2004) and goal appraisals (e.g., Harris, Daniels, & Briner, 2003; Maier & Brunstein, 2001; Pomaki et al., 2004) have shown to account for individual differences in occupational well-being. It is possible, therefore, that psychosocial work environment plays a strategic role behind goal pursuit and also contributes to the orientation of personal work goals as well as to occupational well-being.

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* Corresponding author. Address: Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, FI-40014 Jyväskylä, Finland.

E-mail address: katriina.hyvonen@jyu.fi (K. Hyvönen).

This study aims to clarify the role of work goals in the traditional psychosocial work environment–occupational well-being process. The study adopts a theoretical framework from Little's social ecological model of well-being (e.g., Little, 2000, 2007), which is now applied and tested within the occupational domain. Little (2007) theorized that well-being is the product of the negotiation of personal and contextual features, which can be stable or dynamic in nature, in order to pursue the core projects in life. Psychosocial work environment and personal features are approached through a reasonably new theory – the Effort–Reward Imbalance model (ERI; Siegrist, 1996) – comprising effort, reward, and effort–reward imbalance (contextual features) and overcommitment (personal feature). Firstly, we look at the contribution of the ERI components to the contents of personal work goals. Secondly, we investigate the mediating and moderating role of goal contents between the ERI components and occupational well-being (burnout, work engagement) among young Finnish managers who are under the age of 36.

1.1. *The Effort–Reward Imbalance (ERI) model and well-being*

Especially for managers, work demands are more psychological than physical challenges in the modern work environment (Kinnunen, Feldt, & Mäkikangas, 2008). These psychosocial demands of the workplace can be construed through the ERI model (e.g., Siegrist, 1996; Siegrist, Siegrist, & Weber, 1986; Siegrist et al., 2004). The model is based on a social exchange theory according to which the costs and gains of social exchanges direct our behavior with others. In the workplace, this means that employees invest effort in their work and, in turn, expect rewards. Efforts represent job demands and responsibilities on the part of the employee (e.g., interruptions, overtime, obligations imposed by the employer), whereas rewards include esteem, job security, and career opportunities. Therefore, this model incorporates distal labor market conditions in addition to the immediate job conditions (Siegrist, 1996).

Effort–reward imbalance describes the perceived mismatch of spent efforts and received rewards in the workplace (e.g., Peter & Siegrist, 1997; Siegrist, 1996; Siegrist et al., 2004). A situation where an employee is investing overtime hours into completing projects with tight deadlines, but has poor career prospects and fears of being laid off, would be an example of a harmful imbalance. An extended period of harmful imbalance can cause strain reactions that may contribute to various physical and psychological illnesses (for reviews, see Stansfeld & Candy, 2006; Tsutsumi & Kawakami, 2004; van Vegchel et al., 2005), such as increasing risks of cardiovascular mortality (e.g., Kivimäki et al., 2002), poorer general mental health (e.g., Stansfeld, Bosma, Hemingway, & Marmot, 1998), and psychological distress (Shimazu & de Jonge, 2009).

Although an employee would typically aim towards a balance between efforts and rewards, an employee's overcommitment (OVC) to work can be seen as a risk factor for the harmful imbalance of effort and reward (Siegrist, 1996). OVC describes a motivational pattern that includes strong ambition and commitment towards work in addition to the need to control and gain esteem from others, that is, essentially the "inability to withdraw from work" (Siegrist et al., 2004). Furthermore, OVC has shown to be a reasonably stable personal feature (De Jonge, van der Linden, Schaufeli, Peter, & Siegrist, 2008) and high neuroticism has been associated with higher OVC (Vearing & Mak, 2007). In terms of background factors, higher educational level has been related to higher scores of OVC (Siegrist et al., 2004), and managers and professionals have reported higher efforts and OVC than manual workers (Rydstedt, Devereux, & Sverke, 2007). Therefore, the investigation of OVC is also clearly applicable to managers. OVC is seen as an intrinsic (personal) feature, whereas efforts and rewards are extrinsic (contextual) features (Siegrist, 1999).

Research evidence has recently been connecting the ERI components with indicators of work-related well-being, such as burnout and work engagement used in the present study. The psychological syndrome of burnout is typically described as exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced professional efficacy caused by prolonged job stress (e.g., Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996; Maslach & Leiter, 2008). The core component of the syndrome, exhaustion, refers to the depletion of emotional and physical resources in doing one's work. Cynicism describes a negative or distant attitude towards one's work in general, and it can be characterized as dysfunctional coping, in which employees detach themselves from their work. Reduced professional efficacy represents feelings of incompetence and ineffectiveness in regard to both the social and non-social aspects of occupational achievements.

Work engagement, in turn, aims to capture employees' positive work-related states of vigor, dedication, and absorption at work (e.g., Bakker & Demerouti, 2008; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Vigor describes high energy and mental resilience towards work. Dedication refers to the employee's feelings of pride, meaningfulness, and enthusiasm about the work. The absorption component describes being fully concentrated and immersed in work as well as losing the sense of time while working. There is already evidence from a longitudinal study regarding the motivational process of job resources (e.g., autonomy, social support, and opportunities for professional development) predicting higher levels of work engagement (Hakanen, Schaufeli, & Ahola, 2008). As opposed to job resources, job demands (e.g., high workload, poor working environment) can instigate health impairment processes resulting in higher levels of burnout (Hakanen et al., 2008; for a review see, Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004).

Previous studies have associated higher ERI with higher burnout (e.g., Dai, Collins, Yu, & Fu, 2008; Willis, O'Conner, & Smith, 2008), and particularly with emotional exhaustion, as well as with lower job satisfaction (for a review, see van Vegchel et al., 2005). Similarly, higher OVC has been associated with higher burnout (e.g., Dai et al., 2008; Willis, O'Conner, & Smith, 2008) and with lower job satisfaction (Calnan, Wainwright, & Almond, 2000). Among managers, higher ERI related to turnover intentions and lower vigor and dedication, which are the core constructs of work engagement (Kinnunen et al., 2008).

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