



Self-determination as a moderator of demands and control: Implications for employee strain and engagement

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ABSTRACT

Does job control act as a stress-buffer when employees' type and level of work self-determination is taken into account? It was anticipated that job control would only be stress-buffering for employees high in self-determined and low in non-self-determined work motivation. In contrast, job control would be stress-exacerbating for employees who were low in self-determined and high in non-self-determined work motivation. Employees of a health insurance organization ($N = 123$) completed a survey on perceptions of role overload, job control, work self-determination, and a range of strain and engagement indicators. Results revealed that, when individuals high in self-determination perceived high job control, they experienced greater engagement (in the form of dedication to their work). In addition, when individuals high in non-self-determination perceived high job demands, they experienced more health complaints. A significant 3-way interaction demonstrated that, for individuals low in non-self-determination, high job control had the anticipated stress-buffering effect on engagement (in the form of absorption in their work). In addition, low job control was stress-exacerbating. However, contrary to expectations, for those high in non-self-determination, high job control was just as useful as low job control as a stress-buffer. The practical applications of these findings to the organizational context are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Occupational stress literature focuses on identifying moderators or “buffers” of job demands that enable individuals and organizations to alleviate the negative effects of specific stressors on the experience of strain. One of the earliest and most influential models of occupational stress, Karasek's (1979) job demands-control model (D-CM), proposes that high levels of perceived job control acts as a stress-buffer, alleviating the negative effects of job demands on strain. Within the D-CM, job demand is conceptualized as role overload (e.g., high time pressure and workload) which occurs when an individual feels pressured by difficult deadlines, excessive workloads, and a general inability to fulfill organizational expectations in the time available (Peterson, Smith, Akande, & Ayestaran, 1995). Job control, originally conceptualized as decision-making latitude, has been reformulated in later years to reflect a broader construct of behavioral control, encapsulating control over tasks, methods, scheduling, pacing, and the physical workspace (see Ganster, 1989; Jackson, Wall, Martin, & Davids, 1993; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Recent theoretical reviews on the D-CM suggest these work characteristics are still relevant to today's globalized and post-tayloristic workforce (Hvid, Lund, & Pejtersen, 2008; Johnson, 2008).

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Research on the D-CM has traditionally focused on the negative implications of jobs with high demand and low control on a range of variables tapping psychological strain (i.e., depression, anxiety, mental health, burnout, and job dissatisfaction, see van der Doef & Maes, 1999) and physical health (see van der Doef & Maes, 1998). However, positive psychology has brought about a shift in emphasis, moving from human weaknesses to human strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihayi, 2000). In light of this, more recent research investigating the effects of demand and control has sought to examine the learning outcomes of active jobs (i.e., jobs with high demands yet high control), for example, the work by de Jonge, Dollard, Dormann, Le Blanc, and Houtman (2000), de Jonge, van Breukelen, Landerweerd, and Nijhuis (1999) examining motivation and job challenge, and the work by Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, and Taris (2008), Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) as well as Mauno, Kinnunen, and Ruokolainen (2007) examining engagement. In these studies, engagement is defined as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (p. 295) and is not simply the positive antipode of burnout (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Together, these findings suggest that active jobs are experienced as more challenging and have positive implications for motivation and engagement (i.e., provide support for the active learning outcomes of the D-CM).

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a well-established theory of motivation that considers both the type and intensity of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gagné & Deci, 2005). In fact, Meyer and Gagné (2008) have noted the applicability of SDT to engagement, contending that engagement, as an outcome, should be embedded within motivation theory and that SDT is well-suited for this. More specifically, self-determination provides a distinct multidimensional conceptualization of motivation (i.e., self-determined versus non-self-determined forms) which has implications for differential effects on employee outcomes (i.e., work engagement). Thus, the primary goal of this study is to establish the role of types of work motivation (i.e., self-determined and non-self-determined forms) as moderator variables within the D-CM, more specifically, assessing the utility of job control as a stress-buffer at different levels and types of work motivation. A secondary goal is to further extend the central propositions of the D-CM to learning and motivation outcomes (i.e., work engagement).

1.1. The demands-control model

As discussed by van der Doef and Maes (1998, 1999), two propositions of the D-CM have received considerable research attention. First, is the *strain hypothesis* which posits that the combination of high job demands and low job control has the most detrimental implications for employee well-being. Second, is the *stress-buffering hypothesis* which maintains that, under conditions of high job demands, the presence of high job control can have a stress-alleviating effect on strain. Furthermore, this combination of high demands and high control can potentially engender favorable learning outcomes (i.e., enhanced motivation and performance). This motivational aspect of the D-CM is referred to as the active learning axis (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Although there is considerable support for the proposed main effects of demand and control on strain outcomes, there is inconsistent support for the model's interactive effects, despite decades of research and use of varied and sophisticated methodologies (de Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2003; Jones & Fletcher, 1996; Terry & Jimmieson, 1999; van der Doef & Maes 1998; van der Doef & Maes 1999). In fact, in their review, de Lange et al. (2003) concluded that many of the findings from longitudinal research mirrored that of cross-sectional research, indicating that methodology may not be a valid explanation for inconsistency of the interactive effects of demand and control.

An alternative explanation for the inconsistency of interactive effects is the presence of conjunctive moderators, such as individual difference variables related to personal control (Terry & Jimmieson, 1999). These individual difference variables include desire for control (Parker, Jimmieson, & Amiot, in press), self-efficacy (Jimmieson, 2000; Meier, Semmer, Elfering, & Jacobshagen, 2008), locus of control (Daniels & Guppy, 1994; Meier et al., 2008; Parkes, 1991), Type A personality (Day & Jreige, 2002), and a proactive personality (Parker & Sprigg, 1999). Taken together, these findings suggest that the proposed stress-buffering effects of job control may only be evident for individuals who are high in attributes related to personal control or self-directedness. Moreover, when these attributes or abilities are lacking, the presence of high job control may in fact be stress-exacerbating. Theoretically, individuals who have the desire, need, or ability to utilize high job control opportunities would thrive under such conditions, whereas for those who do not possess such qualities, the presence of high job control would potentially be stress-exacerbating, as the absence of rules, procedures, and structure would increase role ambiguity and responsibility for outcomes (see Burger, 1989).

Personal control is not always desirable; there are specific instances when control can actually have a negative impact on the performance of, or engagement in, an activity (Burger, 1989). These include (1) when predictability of an outcome is uncertain, (2) when there is high visibility, and (3) when responsibility for outcomes is attributable. Ostensibly, when job control is high (i.e., employees are given the freedom to plan, organize, and complete their work as they see fit), there is less certainty about what the results of one's efforts will be. In addition, there is more visibility and responsibility for outcomes. In this way, self-determination (Deci, 1975), as an individual difference variable, has theoretical relevance to the D-CM. When someone is sourcing their motivation from external sources such as job security, rewards, and recognition (i.e., a non-self-determined work motivation), these undesirable aspects of job control may be more salient, or might make job control seem like a barrier or hindrance to getting work done. Conversely, when someone is oriented towards a self-determined work motivation, the freedom that high job control affords might be seen in a more positive light; as it enables choice and also alignment of one's work activities with inner goals and values (i.e., preferred ways of doing things).

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