



# Innovating under stress: The role of commitment and leader-member exchange



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## ABSTRACT

This study sheds light on the relationships between workplace stressors and employee innovation by jointly considering mediating processes and boundary conditions. Using the challenge-hindrance model, we combine social exchange and conservation of resources theory to propose that challenge (i.e., role overload) and hindrance (i.e., role ambiguity and role conflict) stressors exert positive and negative indirect effects, respectively, on employee innovation through affective organizational commitment. We further posit that the strength of these relationships depends on the quality of leader-member exchange (LMX). In support of these predictions, a time-lagged study of 134 employees from various Canadian firms found affective commitment to mediate the differential relationships of challenge and hindrance stressors to employee innovation. Moreover, when LMX was high, the positive effects of role overload were enhanced while the negative effects of role ambiguity and role conflict were attenuated. We discuss the implications of these findings for theory and practice.

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## 1. Introduction

Employee innovation, defined as the intentional generation, promotion and realization of novel and useful ideas (Chen, Li, & Leung, 2015; Janssen, 2000; Scott & Bruce, 1994), is widely recognized as essential to nurturing organizational success and competitiveness in today's uncertain and complex economic environment (Anderson, Potočnik, & Zhou, 2014; Van de Ven, Polley, Garud, & Venkataraman, 2008). Yet, the instability of this environment increases the exposure of employees to job stressors, which has been shown to impede effective work behaviors (Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Dawson, O'Brien, & Beehr, 2016). Accordingly, it is important to understand how the potentially harmful effects of stressors can be forestalled in order to protect and promote employees' innovation in the workplace.

To clarify work stressors' effects on employee innovation, scholars have adopted the challenge-hindrance model of stress, which suggests that two dimensions of stressors – i.e., challenge and hindrance – exert positive and negative effects, respectively, on employee behaviors (Lepine, Podsakoff, & Lepine, 2005). Consistent with this framework,

research findings have shown that the presence of favorable environmental conditions enhances the benefits of challenge stressors to employee innovation (e.g., Janssen, 2000; Sacramento, Fay, & West, 2013), whereas the absence of such conditions intensifies the impairing effects of hindrance stressors (e.g., Leung, Huang, Su, & Lu, 2011; Zhang, LePine, Buckman, & Wei, 2014).

However, the mechanisms that may account for the effects of stressors on employee innovation remain largely unexplored, thereby limiting our understanding of stressor-innovation relationships. Addressing these issues is crucial from both a theoretical and practical perspective. Indeed, recent statistics from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development suggest that the proportion of workers exposed to job-related stressors and reporting related mental health problems has increased significantly in OECD countries (including Canada, where the present study was conducted) (OECD, 2012, 2015). This phenomenon is particularly problematic if considered in relation to innovation, as the latter requires a conspicuous investment of individual resources, such as time, energy and attentional focus (Janssen, 2004; Kiazad, Seibert, & Kraimer, 2014; Mumford, Scott, Gaddis, & Strange, 2002). Such resources can be seriously compromised by the health-impairing effects of workplace stressors (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, 2008; Lepine et al., 2005). Accordingly, examining the mediating variables that underlie stressor-innovation relations would provide an integrative understanding of the specific mechanisms accounting for the resource-depleting effects of stressful job conditions on employee innovation. A

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social exchange lens (Colquitt et al., 2013) might be particularly relevant to such an understanding, since employees are consistently involved in exchange relationships with their organizations. Importantly, researchers have shown that the quality of these relationships is not only vulnerable to the depleting effects of stressors (Zhang et al., 2014) but also highly influential on employee innovation (Baer, 2012). Although these research streams are meaningful, they have not been combined into an integrated theoretical model that can explain how social exchange relationships (e.g., organizational commitment) might account for the effects of stressors on employee innovation.

Our theoretical understanding is further constrained by the limited research attention devoted to the contextual conditions that influence the intervening role of social exchange mechanisms, such as organizational commitment, in the stressor-innovation relationship. Uncovering these mechanisms would help advance the management of innovation by offering organizations and executives evidence-based information regarding the managerial practices that help employees maintain thriving exchange relationships and innovate and that protect them from the resource-depleting effects of stressors. The conservation of resources (COR) perspective (Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that in a stressful environment, the quality of relationships with employees built by leaders can help employees restore their resources. Thus, leaders may influence the extent to which job demands impede employees' commitment to their organization, thereby playing a key role in the management of employee innovation. Taken together, these premises suggest that in order to advance current theory and management of employee innovation under stressful work conditions, it is important to investigate the following research questions: How do work stressors influence employee innovation? What social exchange mechanisms explain this influence? How does the relationship with the supervisor alter these effects?

In an attempt to address these questions, and building upon the assumptions of the challenge-hindrance framework, the present study uses social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Colquitt et al., 2013) and COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001, 2011; Van Woerkom, Bakker, & Nishii, 2016) to propose that the relationships between role stressors and employee innovation are mediated by affective organizational commitment (AOC) and that the quality of exchanges with the supervisor (i.e., leader-member exchange; LMX) acts as a boundary condition. Specifically, social exchange theory suggests that employees with challenging job demands (i.e., role overload) are likely to perceive a balance

between the coping efforts needed to meet such demands and the expected rewards (González-Morales & Neves, 2015). As a consequence, they respond to challenge stressors by showing stronger AOC and, consequently, engagement in organization-supportive behaviors (i.e., employee innovation). Conversely, hindrance stressors (i.e., role ambiguity and role conflict) detract from quality exchange relationships with the organization, as they threaten the accomplishment of valued outcomes (Zhang et al., 2014). Thus, hindrance stressors may reduce AOC and ultimately employee innovation. We further argue that COR theory helps explain how high-quality LMX, by lessening the resource-depleting effect of stressors (Loi, Ngo, Zhang, & Lau, 2011), preserves employees' AOC and acts as a boundary condition for the relationships between stressors and AOC and innovation. Therefore, we propose a moderated mediation model in which LMX acts as a moderator that influences the intervening role of AOC in the relationship between a work stressor and employee innovation (see Fig. 1).

Our study contributes to current research on stressors and employee innovation in three important ways. First, it identifies AOC as a key mediating mechanism linking stressors to employee innovation. Thus, it offers a new perspective through which to understand the consequences of stressors on workplace behaviors and suggests that job demands can be either beneficial or detrimental to employee innovation, depending on how they affect the relationship to the organization (Zhang et al., 2014). Second, the present study examines a neglected moderator, LMX, which is expected to buffer the relationship between stressors and AOC and indirectly employee innovation. In doing so, it expands knowledge of the contextual resources that can simultaneously enhance the benefits of challenging job demands and prevent the impairing consequences of hindrance stressors (Leung et al., 2011). Third, research on the relationship between stressors and employee innovation has mostly focused on creativity, disregarding how the application-oriented components involved in the innovation process are shaped by stressful work conditions (e.g., Glaser, Seubert, Hornung, & Herbig, 2015; Sacramento et al., 2013). Effective innovation depends on having novel and useful ideas and on developing these ideas beyond their initial states via promotion and implementation-related activities (Anderson et al., 2014; Choi & Chang, 2009; Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2013). This study extends prior research by examining how and under what conditions different workplace stressors affect the overall spectrum of employee innovation rather than solely its input stages (i.e., creativity) (e.g., Sacramento et al., 2013).

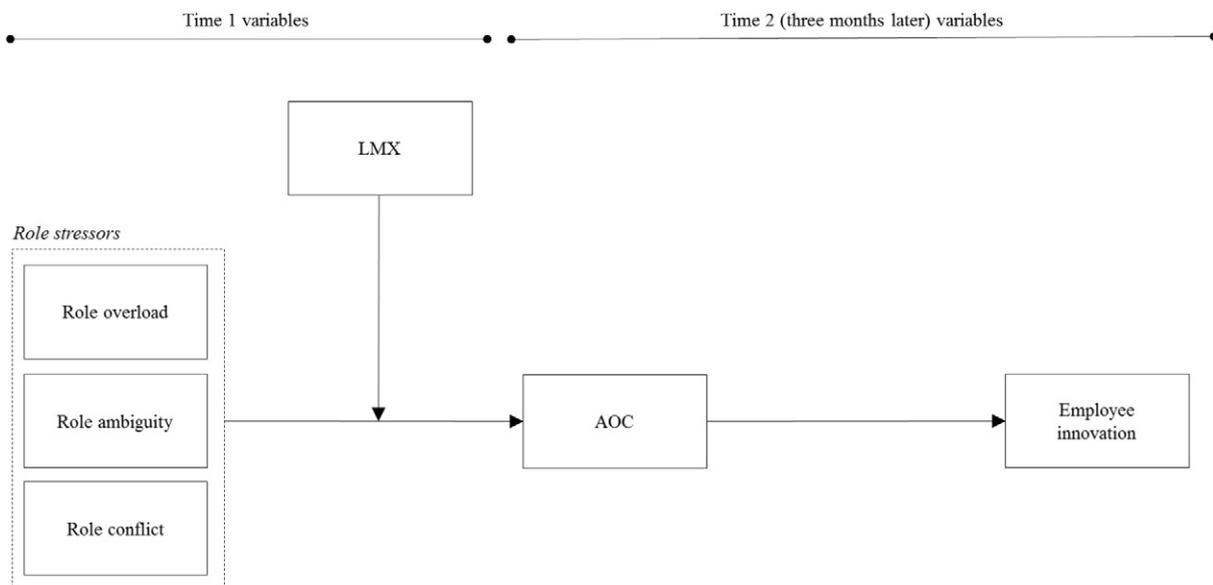


Fig. 1. Conceptual Model. AOC = affective organizational commitment; LMX = leader-member exchange.

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