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The Work Science Center Podcast

Episode 10

Making Your Job Work for You: Job Crafting and Proactive Work Behavior

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Sibley Lyndgaard: Welcome to the Work Science Center Podcast, brought to you by the Work Science Center of the Georgia Institute of Technology. I am your host for this episode, Sibley Lyndgaard. You can find out more about the Work Science Center at our website www.WorkScienceCenter.GATech.edu. In today's podcast, I have the pleasure of speaking with Dr. Dorien Kooij, Professor at Tilburg University School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. We will discuss the benefits of job crafting and proactivity in the workforce as well as the potential benefits that these topics offer for older workers.

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today. First I would like to ask if you could give an overview of your background and your research interests as well as how you came to be interested in job crafting.

Dorien Kooij: Yes, I would like to do that. So my background is actually in economics. So I studied business economics. But, then I did a PhD in management and organization, and I studied the role of HR practices in motivating older workers. Still my interests are in successful aging at work.

I am interested in what happens when people age at work. Which changes do they experience? How do these changes influence their motivation at work? How can older workers, themselves, and also the organizations they work for deal with these changes, for example with their HR policy? And then, one age-related change that I am particularly interested in is future time perspective. Because we have shown that mediates the relationship between age and work motivation.

Actually, due to this interest in successful aging at work, I also became interested in job crafting for several reasons. First of all, the lifespan development literature shows that older workers are actually active when it comes to their aging process. So, they engage in all types of strategies to deal with these age related changes. And, also, what we know is that motives and abilities change when people get older, and at the same time their job often stays the same. Or, at least in the Netherlands, older workers are not so mobile so they stay in their job for a long time. And this might then cause misfit, in the end. When their motives and abilities change and their job stays the same, then this is likely to cause misfit. Therefore, I thought, well actually if we combine these two things, so this active role of older workers and the fact that they need to do something to maintain their fit at work, I came across job crafting. which is actually about "how can I adjust my job in such a way that I can do what I am good at, and I can do what I like?" Therefore, I started to study this to see do older workers do that? What does it bring for them? What does it do for their successful aging at work?

SL: I think that is really interesting especially given the rising number of older workers in the workforce. I want to touch on something you mentioned in that there is this broader idea of being proactive at work and person-directed activities. So, looking at job crafting as maybe part of, but not necessarily all of that. So, in your view, what exactly does it mean to engage in job crafting? What sort of activities or behaviors does it consist of?

DK: First of all, job crafting is definitely a type of proactive behavior. It is really something that is initiated by the employee and the supervisor might not even know that the employee is doing



it. It actually is really proactive behavior. I have done many interviews with employees of different ages, working in different types of occupations, different organizations, and I came across many types of activities that these people engage in. So, for example, there was this HR advisor and she took on the role as a career counselor to add meaning to her work. I came across a project manager who actually asked colleagues to always put the offers into the computer because he really did not know how to do that. I came across the head of a department and he said well if there are clients calling that were angry, he would always say “give them to me” because he had a lot of experience in customer services. And he really enjoyed, and he was also really good at making people happy again. Finally, there was also this guy, he worked in the kitchen as a chef de partie. So that is actually below the head chef and below the sous chef. But, he would actually add all of these tasks to his job, like designing the plates, thinking about the recipes, supervising the student chefs. And, actually that wasn’t part of his job, but he could just experiment with these tasks and also show to his boss, “hey I can do this, and I also like to do this.”

Actually, there are many different types of job crafting. Also, when you look at the literature, there is this distinction between task, relational, and cognitive crafting. Cognitive crafting is more about changing the way you view your job; the way you see your job. Relational crafting is about changing the relationships you have with other people in your work. And then, task crafting is about, as the word says, about changing your tasks. But, can mean that you add tasks to your job, but it can also mean that you try to get rid of certain tasks. I think this distinction is very well known, because this is the distinction made by Wrzesniewski and Dutton when they first introduced the concept, and then later on there were also these distinctions in job crafting based on the job demands-resources model. So, changing demands, changing resources. And recently, I, together with some colleagues, introduced strengths and interests crafting. So, more starting from the person, so these other types of crafting really start with the job. It’s about changing the job demands, job resources. It’s about changing the tasks. But, we wanted to look at, or to start from the person and look at the personal resources, like strengths and interests, and so we introduced these two types of crafting which are really about changing your job in such a way that you can either do what you enjoy, or changing the job in such a way that you can do what you are really good at.

There are actually many types of job crafting that you can distinguish, so I think, in that sense, the literature on job crafting is also still in its infancy. It really should be studied more to see, OK, which types can we really distinguish? What are their effects, etcetera?

SL: I think something that is really striking about a lot of the examples you just gave is how different they all are. And how you are talking about how this is really a very wide and varied range of activities. And that across all different occupations and levels of occupations and types of industries this is something you can see and something that in your work you have talked to a lot of different diverse people about. But, a common thread between all of those examples is the idea of person-job fit, and how can I really adjust the work that I am doing to be more suitable. So, what I wanted to then ask is what are some of the benefits of a better person-job fit. How does that change the way that people experience their work and their jobs?



DK: Yeah, so first of all, there are two types of person-job fit that we can distinguish. So, there is needs-supplies fit. So, are the needs of the individual employee actually satisfied by the job? And then there is also the demands-abilities fit. So, this is more about whether the abilities of the person match the requirements of the job. What we know from literature is that having a good, or a high person-job fit, so when there is really a fit between the needs and abilities of the person, and the supplies and demands of the job, then this has a range of positive outcomes at work, such as higher work engagement, lower turnover intentions, high performance, higher commitment, higher satisfaction. So, actually, having a good fit at work has all of these positive outcomes for individual employees but also for their employer.

SL: So, I want to return, I think, to something that you mentioned earlier on in your introduction where you were mentioning your interest in successful aging at work. So, some of your more recent publications have focused on older workers and how they job craft, specifically. I wanted to ask you, what psychological benefits are older workers receiving through participation in job crafting? Maybe, perhaps, motivation or a sense of increased agency?

DK: Yes, both. So, as I mentioned, by crafting the job they actually make sure that the job fits themselves, so fits their changing motives and abilities. So, it helps them to use their knowledge and their strengths, something that really increases with age. In addition to that, we know from the literature so far, that there are a range of positive work outcomes of job crafting. Many studies have shown that when people job craft, they are more engaged with their work, the meaningfulness of their work increases, they perform better. It also actually changes the job design. So they, indeed have more autonomy. There are many positive outcomes of job crafting, and I think also in this labor market that we have now and the work context which is very dynamic, it is also very important for employees to be proactive. So, it also helps them, I think, to sort of live up to the expectations in the current work setting. So, as an example, I think that employees are held much more responsible nowadays for their own career, than when the older workers were young. So, I think by job crafting it also helps them to be active and to really be aware of the fact that the job is not a static thing, I can change it. And, by changing the job, they also notice that they are still able do other things. It helps them also adjust to technological developments, etcetera. I think it helps them to start small, but then by crafting their own job, gradually also seeing “OK, I can do other things.” In that way, it helps them also to adjust to other changes in the work environment, I think.

SL: I think it is a really interesting point that you mentioned, that changing use of technology in the workplace, and I think that given the way that now more and more jobs are expecting people to perform more tasks that are automated or more tasks that require them to interact with technology, I think that job crafting could be a really great way to help people to feel more comfortable with those changes. So, do you think that an increase in automation, or more generally, the use of technology in the workplace might change the ways that older workers engage in job crafting, or maybe just the frequency, or neither?

DK: I think it is difficult to say. There is also no research available on that. I would expect that automation, or indeed use of technology, would help reduce physical demands for older workers, which is good because we know that physical abilities might decrease when people get older.



And hopefully this will then help them because they have enough resources left then, not only their physical abilities and also time maybe, that they can use to engage in job crafting behavior. And to think about, “OK, so maybe this part of my job is now being done by a computer, so how can I still then make my work maybe challenging or maybe more interesting? How can I use some of the knowledge and skills that I have that weren’t used yet? How can I try to use that more?” I actually hope that by automation it frees up some energy and time for older workers to engage in job crafting and to really have this job that fits their current motives and really uses their knowledge and their abilities.

SL: I agree. I think that is a really interesting avenue for potentially future research to look at. So, clearly this is an area that can benefit, not just older workers, but almost everyone in the workforce. So, I want to zoom back out a little bit and ask more broadly in your experience, what does the evidence tell us about who is more likely to engage in these job crafting behaviors? Is it a question of person-level characteristics like age or, maybe personality? Or, is it a more of a nuanced situation that depends on the environment of the workplace as well?

DK: Yeah, actually both individual and situational factors have been shown to influence job crafting. So, for example, we know that proactive personality and also self-efficacy that these two personal factors influence job crafting so that people that are more proactive by themselves and also have a higher self-efficacy, that they will craft more. But still, the environment is also very important, because we also know that job design has an influence on job crafting. So when people work in a more autonomous work environment they also feel that they have more opportunities to job craft and they will also engage in more crafting behavior. Also, it has been shown that people with an active job, so not only with high autonomy, but also with a high workload, that these people also engage in more job crafting behavior. And, recently, I have also conducted a study to see whether specific HR practices can trigger or stimulate job crafting behavior, and what I found was that opportunity enhancing HR practices, so these are HR practices that provide employees with the opportunity to perform, so these could be decentralized decision making, teamwork, information sharing, broad job descriptions, that these types of HR practices increased psychological empowerment of older workers, and then, in turn, their job crafting behavior. So, I think that these are interesting studies to see “OK, how can we stimulate job crafting behavior among employees, not only older workers, but also more in general.”

SL: That’s great. So it sounds like everybody within a workplace, from the individual to their manager, to the broader HR system has a role to play in encouraging these positive behaviors.

DK: Definitely. Yes, I think, as I said, older workers, themselves, they also need to be aware of the fact that the job is not static, it is a dynamic thing. “I can make changes, myself.” Then again, the supervisor also needs to be open to that, or even stimulated by implementing these HR practices. And the organization, of course. It would be great if an organization could design HR practices, like these opportunity enhancing HR practices, for their organization, and really communicate those HR practices throughout their organization.

SL: I just have a couple more questions. For these last few minutes, I would like to shift a little bit and talk about how things are changing in the world of work outside of just the rising use of



technology and automation. For example, one shift happening currently that I think it is important to discuss is the rise of alternative work arrangements. Things like gig work, precarious work, that are changing the way we might expect a “job” to look, do we also have to change the way we think about job crafting, then?

DK: I don’t think so. I think job crafting is really about changing your job and I think for example, gig work this is more about short tasks, so this is not really a job, or at least not yet. I think that people that do gig work they sort of craft their own job by adding these short tasks together, but I am not sure because, well, there are no boundaries to craft here. So, it is not really a job.

I do think job crafting can help vulnerable employees, by adjusting the job to their specific needs, to their specific abilities. But, I also think that vulnerable employees need help in crafting because I think they might lack the resources. They might not be so proactive by their personality. They might have low self-efficacy, actually. So, I think that here, the organization, the supervisor, should really stimulate job crafting much more than for other employees. And for precarious work, I think that actually much more is needed there than only job crafting, well in these kinds of situations, we just need good HRM policies and HRM practices. I think that job crafting is not enough. It won’t help in that situation.

SL: So it’s about not just these types of behaviors that individual employees should look into doing, but also encouraging broad more impactful policy that can help as well.

DK: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

SL: So one last question. Going forward, what do you think are some pressing issues you think that researchers or practitioners should consider if they are interested in this topic of job crafting and proactive behavior at work?

DK: I think one thing that we already just briefly touched upon is that some employees, they job craft out of their own initiative. They are much more proactive. They have high self-efficacy, etcetera. So, they will make it work for themselves. There is also a big group of employees who is not so proactive. And these are oftentimes also the vulnerable employees, so I think they need more help. I think for HR practitioners it is good to keep an eye open for this particular group of employees and to really help this group of employees and stimulate their job crafting behavior.

Also, I think that organizations should consider changing their performance management system if they stimulate employees to job craft. Because if you start changing your job, and you are actually doing other things, then you should also be assessed on the right criteria that also fit these new tasks. So, this is also something for organizations to think about.

Finally, I think it is also important to not only look at individual crafting, but also to look at team crafting. Because, nowadays, lots of the work that we do is done within a team and that actually gives great opportunities to, on a team level, really see what are the tasks and activities that we need to do? And based on each individuals’ strengths and interests, how can we divide the tasks so that we get the best possible division for everybody. So, I think that team crafting is also



something for HR practitioners to look into and to see, well how can we stimulate that? How can we facilitate that? And hopefully it will benefit the individual employee but also the organization.

SL: Alright, well as you said, it is a young field, a young literature, so lots of exciting places left to go.

DK: Definitely, yes. Lots of work to do.

SL: Absolutely. Okay, Dr. Kooij, thank you again for talking to me and the rest of us at the Work Science Center here today. It has been a great conversation, and I hope to see more of the work you are doing on this in the future.

DK: Thanks a lot.

SL: For anyone again who is interested in hearing more about the Work Science Center or for checking out more of the podcasts in this series, you can find our website online at www.worksciencecenter.gatech.edu.

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