Theory Y Embedded in Theory X: The Limited Role of Autonomy in Decreasing Perceived Stress among IT Consultants

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ABSTRACT

Using the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, this cross-sectional study tests whether the direct effects and interaction effects of job demand and motivators affect the level of perceived stress among information technology (IT) consultants. A web-based questionnaire survey was conducted among 380 IT consultants at ten IT consultancy companies in Sweden. The results showed that job demands, autonomy, and motivators are important factors that explain perceived stress among the IT consultants. Those consultants with a high level of job demands and a low level of autonomy had a four times higher risk of perceived stress than the consultants with the theoretically lowest level of strain. However, the interaction effect of job demands/autonomy and the interaction effect of job demands/motivators on perceived stress were non-significant. It is suggested that IT consultants’ autonomy exists within the demands dictated by others - Theory Y embedded in Theory X. Future avenues for research are suggested.

Keywords: Job Autonomy, Job Demands, Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model, Motivators, Perceived Stress, Theory X, Theory Y

1. INTRODUCTION

The study extends the body of organizational psychology research with its use of the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model in an investigation of the causes of perceived stress among IT consultants in Sweden. In their use of the JD-R model, Bakker and Demerouti (2007) integrate two psychological processes (the job stress process and the motivational process) as predictors of organizational outcomes. Other researchers have found that job demands are originators in the job stress process (e.g., Karasek, 1979; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and that motivators (job resources per Demerouti and Bakker, 2011) are originators in the motivational process (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985; Hackman & Oldham, 1980). According to Bakker, Demerouti, and Verbeke (2011), both processes—job stress and motivation—result in positive organizational outcomes such as work engagement and good performance.

Many believe that knowledge-intensive organizations are the future of business and working life. It is claimed that the global economy has increased, and will continue to
increase, the number of such organizations (e.g., Le Blanc, de Jonge, & Schaufeli, 2000). In this environment, the commitment of knowledge workers, such as IT consultants, is critical to the success of these knowledge-intensive organizations. To elicit commitment from subordinates, it is necessary that managers understand their work motivation.

Because of their substantial influence on, and their power over, other employees, managers of knowledge workers need to take an interest in employee well-being and motivation. Managers may benefit from education in this area that informs them on how best to motivate employees. In this education, managers may need to examine their pre-conceptions about employee well-being and employee motivation.

This issue recalls the early managerial research by Douglas McGregor (1960) on how managers lead/control their employees. His study resulted in the now well-known dual model of workforce motivation – Theory X and Theory Y. These theories, with their assumptions about managers’ perceptions of their employees, distinguish between two contrasting models of employee motivation. Theory X assumes managers think employees, who require strict control, must be closely supervised. Theory Y assumes managers think employees, who are capable of self-control, can be trusted with some degree of work autonomy. Given the contextual changes in the work environment in the years after McGregor’s proposal of this dichotomy, it may be argued that his theories have lost some of their relevance. However, I find McGregor’s narrative still resonates in a discussion of managerial perceptions of employee motivation.

2. THE JOB DEMAND-RESOURCES MODEL

The JD-R model is a business model that integrates the job stress process with the motivational process as a way to improve both employee well-being and employee job performance.

The job stress process, a psychological process which is associated with workplace health, assumes that high job demands increase job pressure, leading to negative influences on organizational outcomes (e.g., draining an individual’s energy such that employee breakdown is the eventual result; see Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Numerous studies have established the association between psychosocial work factors and (poor) health. For example, Cox, Griffiths, and Rial-Gonzales (2000) cite stress as one such factor that creates a negative psychological condition originating from the dynamic interaction between individuals and their work environment. Kalimo and Mejman (1987) conclude that stress often results from job demands that exceed employees’ abilities, from their frustrated aspirations, and from their dissatisfaction with organizational goals. In the JD-R model, job demands are associated with high work pressure, an unfavorable physical environment, and emotionally demanding interactions with clients (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The motivation process assumes that job resources increase motivation and lead to a positive influence on organizational outcomes (e.g., high work engagement, low cynicism, and excellent performance; see Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). According to Robbins (1997), motivation—the willingness to act—is prompted by the action’s ability to satisfy an employee’s needs. Because the reasons for adopting and/or sustaining certain behaviours over time differ from person to person, individual motivation varies with each person’s attitudes, needs, and goals. In the JD-R model, job resources are associated with autonomy, possibilities for professional development, and social support from colleagues (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Job autonomy has long been recognized as an important factor in employee motivation and satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959; McClelland, 1987). Employees in knowledge-intensive firms desire a high degree of job autonomy (e.g., Robertson & Swan, 2003, Swart & Kinnie, 2003; Wallgren & Johansson Hanse,
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