



“The relationship between Job Autonomy, Job Satisfaction and the mediating role of Job Crafting”

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Abstract

Job satisfaction has always been a matter of interest for both employees and employers, because of its profound effects and consequences. Autonomy is a predictor of job satisfaction and becoming more prominent in the workplace. In addition, job autonomy provides the perfect conditions for employees to craft their jobs. The purpose of this study is to further investigate to which extent the relationship between job autonomy and job satisfaction exists. It was also hypothesized that job crafting mediates this relationship between job autonomy and job satisfaction. The study used a cross-sectional design and data was collected from Dutch employees (N=372) in organizations in multiple industries. The results showed a small but significant positive effect between job autonomy and job satisfaction ($r=.271$, $p < .01$). Contrary to expectation, no significant mediation effect of job crafting was not found. However, this study did find a partial mediation of increasing job resources (subscale of job crafting) in the relation between job autonomy and job satisfaction.

Keywords: Job Autonomy, Job Crafting, Job Satisfaction

Introduction

Research that focuses on employees' feelings towards their job and their job satisfaction has been long and extensive (Millán, Hessels, Thurik & Aguado, 2013; Spector, 1997). Job satisfaction has always been a matter of interest for organizations and employees because the lack of or the presence of job satisfaction has its consequences for both parties. Poor job satisfaction can result in higher turnover intentions (Lambert, Hogan & Barton, 2001), which can be very costly for organisations (Tracey & Hinkin, 2008). On the other hand, job satisfaction is known for its positive outcomes such as work engagement, organizational citizenship behaviour, organizational commitment and well-being (Nadiri & Tanova, 2010; Zeinabadi, 2010; Saks, 2006; Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2005).

Just like job satisfaction has many outcomes (e.g. turnover intentions, engagement, and well-being), it has many predictors as well (e.g. social support, career opportunities, compensation and benefits). Job autonomy is also one of the many antecedents of job satisfaction (Spector, 1997) and it concerns the amount of freedom and independence individuals have in terms of doing their job (Breugh, 1999; Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Autonomy is of particular interest in this study because of its increasing prominence in the workplace (CBS, 2005). This is also noticeable, for example, in the rising number of self-employed employees, as having job autonomy is a primary motive for small business starters (Van Gelderen and Jansen, 2006). Moreover, the importance of job autonomy in relation to job satisfaction has been acknowledged in many studies (Waymer, 1995; Nguyen, Taylor & Bradley, 2003). Nguyen et al. (2003) found that job satisfaction can be explained by autonomy to a great extent. Employees with a high amount of autonomy can make their own decisions and have more control over their jobs. This dynamic relationship between autonomy and job satisfaction can be explained by The Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R model) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

In addition, job autonomy influences an employee's perception of control of the work environment (Parker, Bindl & Strauss, 2010). Grant and Ashford (2008) argued that individuals are more likely to engage in proactive activities under conditions of autonomy. An example of such proactive activity is asking for advice from colleagues/supervisor or requesting more responsibilities at work. Job crafting concerns an employee's proactive behaviour in shaping his or her work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Through job crafting, employees try to proactively improve their work situation. Slemp and Vella-Brogdrick (2014) also found that employees engage in job crafting to improve their job satisfaction. So, as job autonomy provides for the perfect conditions for employees to craft their jobs, and the latter leads to job

satisfaction, it is expected that the relationship between job autonomy and job satisfaction is mediated through job crafting. Hence, this study aims to answer the following question: *“To what extent does job autonomy influence job satisfaction, and does job crafting mediate this relationship?”*

The theoretical framework will be as follow: First, the concepts of job satisfaction, job autonomy and job crafting will be explained. Secondly, using the JD-R model and the theory of work role transitions, the link between these three concepts will be discussed and hypotheses will be formed. Then, a possible explanation for the mediating effect of job crafting is provided. Next, the methods and results will be presented in order to reflect on the findings and hypotheses. At last, the discussion and conclusion section will contain an answer to the research question and suggestions for future research.

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the relationship between job autonomy and job satisfaction, and how this can be facilitated through proactive behaviour, by introducing job crafting as its mediator. By gaining this insight, this study also has practical contributions as both organizations and employees can benefit from the research. First of all, it does not have to be costly for organizations to implement more job autonomy, on the condition that it is properly regulated. Moreover, this study argues that job autonomy influences job crafting, which will lead to job satisfaction. Organisations should take this knowledge into consideration in the design of their human resource practices. They should not only provide more room for autonomy, but also encourage employees to engage in job crafting as it will most likely lead to higher levels of job satisfaction (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). When organisations emphasize autonomy and job crafting in their human resource policies, it can change employees’ view about the organisation in a more positive way. Employees feel trusted by their organisations to make their own decisions, which in turn makes them more comfortable in doing their work.

Theoretical Background

The relationship between Job Autonomy and Job Satisfaction

Previous researchers have well established the relationship between autonomy and job satisfaction (Waymer, 1995; Nguyen et al., 2003). The findings have been mostly consistent, concluding that job autonomy leads to job satisfaction (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Nguyen et al., 2003). According to Lock (1976), job satisfaction is the “pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from an appraisal of one's job or job experiences” (p. 317). This definition suggests that job satisfaction is as an emotional response towards one’s job. However, there have been a swift in the job satisfaction literature. Recently, scholars have argued to approach job satisfaction as positive evaluative judgments that individuals make about their job, and to treat it as an attitude instead (Briefly, 1998; Weiss, 2002; Mullins, 2007). Many factors can affect the level of job satisfaction. One of these factors influencing job satisfaction is job autonomy. Hackman and Oldham (1975) defined job autonomy as “the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the employee in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out” (p.162).

The relationship between job autonomy and job satisfaction can be explained by the use of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). According to this model, all work characteristics can be either categorized as (1) job demands or (2) job resources. Job demands are associated with certain physiological and/or psychological costs, whereas job resources may reduce job demands and its physiological/psychological costs, and stimulate growth and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In addition, the JD-R model assumes that the job demands and job resources initiate two underlying psychological processes with consequences for employee well-being. The first one, health impairment process, refers to chronic exposure of job demands, causing exhaustion of mental and physical resources. The long-term effect may be a burnout, depletion of energy or health problems. Secondly, the motivational process assumes that job resources allow for more motivation and energy, which will lead to higher levels of engagement and improved performance. As autonomy is identified as a job resource, it can act as a buffer against the negative effects of job demands. In turn, a lack of autonomy will result in higher levels of stress which in turn can lead to dissatisfaction in one’s work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). So, following the motivational process, job autonomy being a job resource leads to positive consequences for employee well-being such as job satisfaction. Lastly, a meta-analysis on autonomy and participation found that higher levels of perceived

control by employees lead to higher levels of job satisfaction (Spector, 1986). This leads to the first hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Job Autonomy is positively related to Job Satisfaction.

The mediating effect of Job Crafting

Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) first introduced the term job crafting. The authors defined job crafting as “the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work” (p.179). Physical changes refer to altering the form of job activities or for example, changing the physical workspace. On the other hand, cognitive changes indicate an alteration in how employees view their job. Relational changes refer to the relationships and interactions in the workplace, with whom and how often one interacts with other employees. In short, job crafting means that individuals modify aspects of their jobs to meet their personal needs, abilities and preferences (Tims, Bakker & Derks, 2013).

The context of work and its job characteristics affect individuals’ attitudes and behaviours at work (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Job autonomy belongs to the structural context of work and is an important predictor of job crafting (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1992). This link can be explained using the theory of Work Role Transitions (Nicholson, 1984). The theory focuses on variables that predict how individuals will adjust to work role changes, so called “mode of adjustment” (Nicholson, 1984). Those who experience job autonomy develop more flexible role orientations. Individuals are also more likely to altering tasks in their roles in the organization when the job gives them the freedom to choose the methods they perform (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1992). Employees with very little autonomy have to put in a great deal of effort to create opportunities to craft (Berg, Wrzesniewski & Dutton (2010). So, job crafting will be difficult for employees – if not impossible – without any autonomy in how to carry out their jobs. Besides, control over one’s environment is an essential part of human motivation to engage in proactive behaviour (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Thus, autonomy provides the perfect conditions for employees to engage in job crafting activities.

Moreover, like job autonomy, job crafting is related to job satisfaction. Leana, Appelbaum and Shevchuk (2009) found job crafting to be associated with higher levels of job satisfaction. This relationship can also be explained by the JD-R model. According to Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman (2011), job satisfaction is defined as work circumstances where individuals can fulfil their needs. As job crafting is a form of proactive behaviour in the work place, it can act as both job resource and job demand. Job crafting is a job resource when employees make constant adjustments to their jobs to fulfil their needs. Job crafting being a

job demands does not necessarily have to be negative if they are challenging job demands. It may promote an active coping style and stimulate individuals to reach difficult goals (Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010). At last, Tims et al. (2013) found job crafting to have a positive impact on employee well-being. Employees engage in job crafting because it makes the job a more positive and meaningful experience (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). This positive attitude towards one's work is job satisfaction (Weiss, 2002).

Based on the above literature, it is expected that job autonomy influences job satisfaction through job crafting. Job autonomy provides the perfect conditions for employees to engage in job crafting activities. When employees want to alter their job in order to fit their personal needs or abilities, they have the freedom to do so. This increased person-job fit will subsequently lead to higher levels of job satisfaction. Therefore, the following mediation effect is expected:

Hypothesis 2: Job Crafting mediates the relation between Job Autonomy and Job Satisfaction.

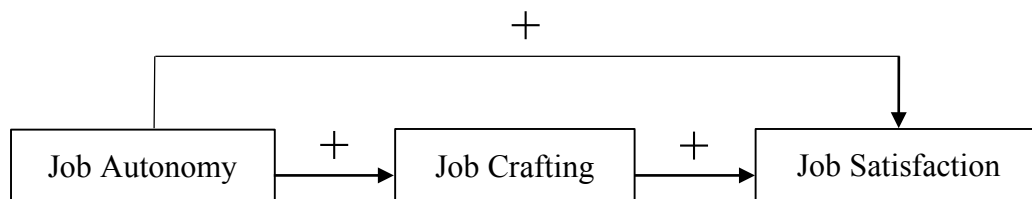


Figure 1. Conceptual model

Methods

Procedure

This study has a cross-sectional design and data was collected by students of Human Resource Studies of Tilburg University as part of a research course. Each student was responsible for finding two departments. A department had to consist of at least 7 employees who all reported to the same manager in order to be included in the sample. There were no restrictions regarding the type of organization. Students were permitted to make use of convenience sampling, finding respondents within their own networks. Questionnaires were distributed in print at the organizations by the students themselves. A cover letter was attached to each questionnaire to inform the respondents about the research and to emphasize confidentiality. Each department had two different questionnaires. The first questionnaire was for the manager, and the second questionnaire for the employees. Based on implicit stratified sampling, only five employees were selected to also participate in the study. They were chosen based on their gender and date of birth. By using this sampling method, sampling errors such as representativeness of the department (involving employees who normally would not participate) were taken into account. Employees and managers both returned the questionnaires in a closed envelop in order to remain anonymous. At last, they also signed a verification form to guarantee confidentiality.

Sample

A total of 372 Dutch employees returned the questionnaires resulting in a response rate of 89.9%. Questionnaires were filled in by both employees and their manager as part of a larger research, but for the purpose of this study only the data from the employees were relevant. The distribution of gender was 44.3% male and 55.7% female. On average, respondents were 36.85 years ($SD=12.89$) with a minimum age of 17 and a maximum age of 69. Respondents worked an average of 28.12 hours a week ($SD=14.50$). The highest level of education was middle education for the majority of the respondents (38.3%), followed by higher professional education (31.5%), university (20.2%), lower secondary education (8.4%), and primary school (1.6%). The respondents in this study worked in many different organisations in multiple industries. The most common industries were health, education and hospitality.

Measures

To attain the results, construct validity was tested with the use of factor analysis. Also, scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. Previous research suggests job satisfaction can be measured reliably with the use of a single-item measure (Wanous, Reichers & Hudy,

1997). Taking this into consideration, *job satisfaction* was measured with the single-item measure from Dolbier, Webster, McCalister, Mallon and Steinhardt (2005): “Taking everything into consideration, how do you feel about your job as a whole?”. Respondents scored this question on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = Extremely dissatisfied, 7 = Extremely satisfied).

Next, *job autonomy* was operationalized by the psychological empowerment scale of Spreitzer (1995). This scale consists of twelve items, but in order to measure job autonomy specifically, only three items regarding self-determination were used in this study. A sample item was: “I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job”. Each answer was scored on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). A Cronbach’s analysis was conducted on the “self-determination” subscale of the psychological empowerment scale. It was found that the subscale’s alpha level was .78, which indicates the subscale has an adequate level of inter-item reliability.

At last, *job crafting* was measured by thirteen items using the scale of Petrou, Demerouti and Schaufeli (2005). All items were answered on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Very often). The questionnaire was designed to measure three dimensions of job crafting: *increasing job resources* (e.g., “I ask others for feedback on my job performance”), *increasing challenging job demands* (e.g., “I ask for more responsibilities”), and *decreasing hindering job demands* (e.g., “I make sure that my work is mentally less intense”). Cronbach’s alpha for job crafting was .86. Inter-item reliability for the subscales were .85 for increasing job resources, .86 for increasing challenging job demands, and .83 for decreasing hindering job demands.

Control variables

In addition to the variables described above, Gender (coded male=0, female=1), Age and Educational level were also included in this research. Any differences caused by these variables were controlled for in the analyses.

Methods of analysis

To test for a mediating effect, a method designed by Baron and Kenny (1986) has been used. Their method describes a four step approach using multiple regression analyses, in which several conditions must be met to demonstrate a mediation (see figure 2). First, there must be a significant correlation between the dependent variable and independent variable (path c). The second step requires the independent variable to correlate with the mediator (path a). Thirdly,

the mediator must be significantly related to the dependent variable (path b) while controlled for the independent variable. The final step is full mediation. This occurs when the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable is non-significant when the mediator is included in the model (path c'). If this last effect is significant, there is only partial mediation.

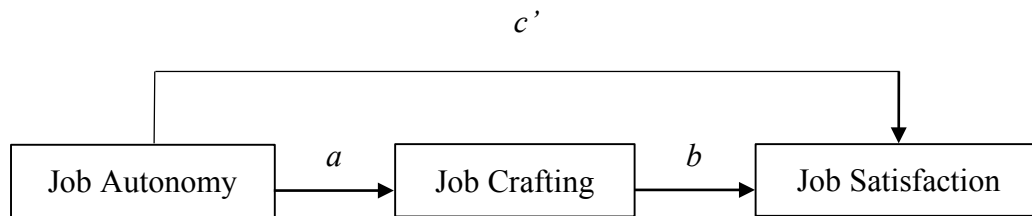


Figure 2. Illustration of mediation effect of Job Crafting

Results

Descriptive statistics

The descriptive statistics and correlations between the constructs job autonomy, job satisfaction and job crafting are presented in table 1. Results show that that some control variables are significantly related to job autonomy, job crafting and job satisfaction. Education is positively related to both job autonomy and job crafting, $r(371) = .23, p < .01$, and $r(371) = .25, p < .01$, indicating higher level of education with higher levels of job autonomy and job crafting. Age is found to be negative related to job satisfaction, $r(366) = -.105, p < .05$, and job crafting $r(368) = -.254, p < .01$. Gender is negatively related to job autonomy, $r(366) = -.193, p < .01$, and job satisfaction $r(366) = -.136, p < .01$.

Respondents score relatively high on the variables job satisfaction ($M = 5.33$, on a scale of 7, $SD = .95$) and job autonomy ($M = 3.68$, on a scale of 5, $SD = .74$). This means that the employees in this study feel satisfied about their job, and they experience job autonomy. Respondents score relatively low on job crafting ($M = 2.74$, on a scale of 5, $SD = .64$), meaning they do not engage in job crafting much. The results also show that job autonomy is positively related to job satisfaction, $r(371) = .27, p < .01$. In addition, there is a positive correlation between job crafting and job satisfaction, $r(371) = .11, p < .05$, and also between job autonomy and job crafting $r(371) = .20, p < .01$. Contrary to expectation, results show a significant negative relation between job satisfaction and decreasing hindering job demands $r(371) = -.118, p < .05$. The more employees craft their jobs to decrease hindering job demands, the lower the level of job satisfaction experienced.

Table 1.

Mean, standard deviations, Pearsons correlations, internal consistencies

<i>Measure</i>	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	6.1.	6.2.	6.3.
1. Gender	---								
2. Age	-.016	---							
3. Education	-.141**	0.00	---						
4. Job satisfaction	-.136**	-.105*	.009	---					
5. Job autonomy	-.193**	-.001	.234**	.271**	---				
6. Job crafting	-.003	-.254**	.254**	.113*	.204**	---			
6.1. Increasing JR	.007	-.224**	.288**	.213**	.234**	.840**	---		
6.2. Increasing JD	-.017	-.196**	.153**	.127*	.173**	.779**	.537**	---	
6.3. Decreasing JD	-.001	-.155**	.107*	-.118*	.038	.880**	.268**	.315**	---
Mean	.56	36.85	3.6	5.33	3.68	2.74	3.26	2.57	2.07
Standard deviation	.497	12.89	.05	.95	.74	.64	.75	1.01	.84

**Significant at .01 level (2-tailed), *Significant at .05 level (2-tailed)

Note: 6.1, 6.2 & 6.3 are subscales of Job crafting

Hypotheses testing

The goal of determining the ability of job autonomy and job crafting to predict job satisfaction was explored by performing a regression analysis. The results from the analysis are displayed in table 2. A simple linear regression was calculated to predict job satisfaction based upon the levels of job autonomy. A significant regression equation was found ($F(1, 370) = 29.398, p = 0.000$), with an R^2 of .074. The results indicated that job autonomy explained 7.1% of the variation of job satisfaction. There is a significant direct effect of job autonomy on job satisfaction, so hypothesis 1 is confirmed.

To test the second hypothesis, in which job crafting mediates the relation between job autonomy and job satisfaction, the mediation analysis as described by Baron and Kenny (1986) was performed. Results indicated that job autonomy was a significant predictor of job satisfaction, $B = .350, SE = .065, p < .001$ (table 2). This was already confirmed with the first hypothesis, as it tested the direct effect of job autonomy on job satisfaction. Next, results showed that job autonomy is also significant predictor of job crafting, $B = .176, SE = .044, p < .001$. To test if job crafting predicts job satisfaction above and beyond the effect of job autonomy, a hierarchical multiple regression was performed. Results showed a change in R^2 from .074 to .077, which is a small increase in variability. However, job crafting did not predict job satisfaction significantly, $B = .090, SE = .076, p = .237$, so not all conditions of mediation were met. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is rejected and job crafting in fact does not mediate the relationship between job autonomy and job satisfaction.

Since the subscale “Increasing Job Resources” (In-JR) was stronger related to job satisfaction than job crafting, another mediation analysis has been performed to test for a possible mediating effect of In-JR (table 3). Results showed that job autonomy predicted In-JR significantly, $B = .236, SE = .051, p < .001$. Next, a hierarchical multiple regression, to test if In-JR predicts job satisfaction while controlling for job autonomy, showed significant results, $B = .202, SE = .065, p = .002$. The relation between job autonomy and job satisfaction still exists, but in a smaller magnitude ($\beta = .271$ to $\beta = .234$) when In-JR was added in the relation. Results also showed a change in R^2 from .074 to .097. The Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) showed the mediation to be significant, $Sobel\ test\ statistic = 2.58, SE = .018, p = .01$. So, In-JR partially mediates the relation between job autonomy and job satisfaction.

Conclusion and discussion

This study focused on the relationship between job autonomy and job satisfaction, and the mediating role of job crafting. A total of 372 employees participated in the research. The first hypothesis concerns the direct effect of job autonomy on job satisfaction. As expected, these two concepts had a positive significant relation, thus confirming the hypothesis. The second hypothesis predicted job autonomy to be positively associated with job satisfaction through job crafting. However, the results did not show a mediating effect of job crafting. Another mediation analysis was performed and found a partial mediation of In-JR in the relation between job autonomy and job satisfaction. These findings will be further discussed in the next section.

Interpretation

The results have shown that job autonomy is positively related to job satisfaction. This finding confirms that employees who experience more autonomy in their jobs than employees who do not experience job autonomy so much, have higher levels of job satisfaction. This can also be rationalized using the JD-R model. Job autonomy identifies as a job resource and act as a buffer against stress, which lead to more satisfaction in one's work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The findings are also in line with previous research, which found similar results of job autonomy leading to job satisfaction (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Spector, 1986).

Conversely, this study did not find a mediation effect of job crafting on the relation between job autonomy and job satisfaction. This was unexpected, as the hypothesis was built on both theory and research. However, a mediation effect was found in one of the subscales of job crafting, namely increasing job resources. This could explain why the subscale was a significant mediator, but job crafting itself was not. An effect in one subscale and a non-effect effect in another scale could lead to no effect at all. In addition, results showed a negative correlation between hindering job demands and job satisfaction. Although the relation is rather weak ($r = -.118$), it should not go unnoticed. Having to decrease hindering job demands suggests there might be some job dissatisfaction in the first place. This could also have influenced the overall outcome of job crafting in the prediction of job satisfaction.

Limitations

In this study, several limitations must be taken into account. First, this study used a cross-sectional design, which indicates that all data was collected at one point in time. Consequently, it was not possible to make any assumptions about the casualty of the relationships. Also, the

mood of the respondent at the time could have influenced their answers in the questionnaire. Especially in this study, where job satisfaction was measured with one question at one time, the current mood could have been influenced the answer heavily.

This study was also limited as regards to measuring job autonomy. The data collected from the questionnaires measured only a very specific part of job autonomy (self-determination), whereas it is actually a multidimensional construct (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Another issue concerns the measurement of job crafting. The questions regarding increasing job resources were all regarding social job resources, whereas theory suggest another dimension of crafting structural job resources too.

Future research

This study solely focused on the positive effects of job crafting. However, there are some negative effects too, where job crafting can become counterproductive (Demerouti, Bakker & Halbesleben, 2015). It would be interesting for future research to considerate the negative effects of job crafting in relation to job satisfaction. It might change how job crafting will be promoted in the workplace.

Moreover, this study assumed job crafting to predict job satisfaction. However, it could be also the other way around. This study found a negative relation between decreasing hindering job demands and job satisfaction. In order to want to decrease hindering job demands, one must already experience some dissatisfaction prior engaging in that specific job crafting behavior. Also, it could be argued that satisfaction or dissatisfaction could be determining whether employees engage in proactive behavior or not. Overall, this study suggests to examine each dimension of job crafting more extensively in relation to job autonomy and job satisfaction.

This study has solely looked at job autonomy as a predictor of job crafting. However, there are more factors provoking job crafting behaviors. For example, it could be interesting for future research to also look into the personality of the employees. Job autonomy gives employees the perfect opportunity to engage in proactive activities. But it is the employee with the proactive personality who is more likely to recognize these opportunities of job autonomy to change and improve its current circumstances (Bateman & Crant 1993).

Practical implications and conclusion

Job autonomy is inversely related to job satisfaction. Organizations should take this job characteristic into consideration when designing work. It does not have to be costly to

implement more job autonomy, but it must be properly regulated and it requires some degree of trust between the organization/manager and employees. The same applies for job crafting. It should be stimulated in the workplace, not only because of the employee's job satisfaction, but also because of its positive effect on organizations (Nadiri & Tanova, 2010).

In conclusion, this study found an effect of increasing job resources mediating the relation between job autonomy and job satisfaction. So, high levels of job autonomy will lead to employees who seek more job resources, which in turn lead to higher levels of job satisfaction. It is important to note that job autonomy is a predictor of job crafting and fairly important for employees. Therefore, organizations should focus on the positive aspects of job crafting, while controlling for the negative effects of job crafting behavior.

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