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An introduction to micro job crafting: How job crafting for 12 minutes or less a day contributes to sustainable positive behaviour change

Conference paper

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Summary

Job crafting is an intentional activity undertaken by people to personalise their approach to work through redesigning and shaping elements of their work. While research on job crafting is compelling in terms of its positive relationship with well-being, engagement, performance and resilience, this area of study is still growing and little evidence has been collected in relation to the make-up and types of job crafting that people undertake. Specifically, to date, there has been limited study of job crafting in terms of personal motivations to craft, time investment and impact on work.

In this paper we share evidence collected from a small study which analysed the content of job crafting activity. A key finding is that over 74% of the job crafting examples we collected took employees less than 12 minutes a day. This has clear implications for researchers, practitioners and organisations looking to encourage people to job craft and a more personalised approach to work.

Introduction

Organisations are increasingly considering practical approaches to improve employee well-being, engagement and performance. In particular, talent management, involving the development, engagement and retention of staff, is consistently highlighted as a critical strategic and operational priority by organisations globally.[1]

Despite the stated importance of talent retention and development, organisations appear to be failing at this task. Over 87% of workers across 142 countries report that they are not engaged. And almost one in two people state that they would not recommend their current employer to a peer.[2] A pervasive explanation for low levels of engagement and motivation is the failure to acknowledge and harness individual strengths, interests and values.[3]

The need to create an environment which allows people to express their whole self at work and utilise their diverse strengths, passions and interests is only going to increase as our work environment evolves. Increasingly, people are highlighting the desire to feel engaged, recognised and supported at work.[4] More broadly, forecasts and predictions for the future of jobs and work consistently highlight the need for greater agility and flexibility and a need to maximise individual strengths and talents.[5]

An introduction to job crafting

Creating opportunities for employees to tailor aspects of their work fulfils the current and future demand for a more personalised work experience. This provides employees with the autonomy and opportunity to proactively shape elements of their core role or duties to reflect aspects of their individual talents, passions and interests. This bespoke approach to working is referred to as job crafting within academic literature and is the focus of our study.

What is job crafting?

Job crafting is an intentional work-based activity undertaken by an employee to redesign and shape elements of their job. It captures the active changes employees make to their own job designs in ways that can bring about numerous positive outcomes, including engagement, job satisfaction, resilience and thriving.[6]

Why job crafting matters – the benefits of job crafting

Although research into job crafting is still growing, there have been a number of studies that have identified tangible and lasting individual and organisational benefits. Specifically, research has shown a positive relationship between active job crafting behaviour and engagement, performance and well-being (see Zhang and Parker[7] for a review).

Motivations for this study and our research question
Why organisations should care about job crafting

There are a number of compelling reasons for this study and, more broadly, why organisations should be curious about fostering job crafting. This proactive approach to job design and delivery has three key strengths that make it particularly attractive:

- near universal applicability
- cost-effectiveness in terms of both time and other resources
- growing evidence of links to beneficial behaviours and outcomes from both an employee and organisational perspective.

While employees may not be able to completely redesign their roles to reflect their strengths, skills and values, there will almost always be an opportunity to flex, change or adapt tasks, social interactions or perceptions. The physical costs of job crafting appear to be minimal; indeed, no intervention studies to date have provided examples of job crafting that would require significant monetary or resource investment on behalf of the individual or organisation.

Research into job crafting continues to develop, with the majority of research to date being correlational and quantitative in nature. There are clear opportunities for further intervention studies to add to the research agenda. Specifically the actual make-up, size and nature of the job crafting being carried out is ripe for further investigation.[8]

Greater insight into the mechanics of how job crafting is being applied could be used to refine how job crafting interventions and training are delivered. For example, sharing stories and anecdotes of the types of crafting done by others may help to give ideas to participants in respect of the types of crafting they might consider. More data on job crafting activity could also identify types of job crafting that may be most effective in certain environments. For example, the size and types of job crafting that may be most effective in frenetic, low-autonomy roles such as contact centres may differ from roles that have higher autonomy but greater responsibility (for example project managers and change leaders).

Our research question

The purpose of our study was to analyse the specific make-up of job crafting. We wanted to understand whether there are any trends, patterns or themes amongst job crafting examples collected that would provide a stimulus for further research and applied exploration.

Specifically, the following research question was explored:

What is the make-up of job crafting activity in terms of: time investment, motivation and impact on job role?

Our study

In order to explore the research question, the content of a total of 63 different examples of job crafting were analysed. These examples were collected from participants who attended a job crafting workshop. The examples were provided by participants during the workshop itself and in two follow-up questionnaires.

The workshop was offered through internal advertisements to employees in a large Australian university. A total of 104 employees from across the university completed an online baseline assessment, and then attended one of several available sessions offered over the following six-week period.

The job crafting session was delivered within 90 minutes so that participants could attend workshops during an extended lunch hour, or with minimum disruption to their working day, which is in line with other 'bite-sized' training offered across the university.

Examples of job crafting were collected within the workshop itself – participants were asked to discuss when they had job crafted before and share them with the group – and also through post-workshop questionnaires (after week 1 and week 4), where participants were asked to share examples of the different job crafting activities they had undertaken. The job crafting examples were coded for time investment, workload impact, job crafting type and motivation.

There was strong inter-rater agreement (86–94%) amongst the people who analysed the job crafting examples, demonstrating a consistency in how the examples had been coded.

Results

A total of 70 different examples of job crafting were collected that provided insight into the motivations to craft, the time investment, the workload impact and type(s) of job crafting undertaken. Seven examples of job crafting were discounted following screening as they did not provide sufficient detail for analysis. This left a total of 63 examples to be coded.

Core motivations and drivers to job craft

The top three core motivations and drivers for job crafting were developing relationships with others (n=27, 36%), alignment to personal skills, values and interests (n=19, 25%) and meaning making (n=14, 18%) (see Table 1). For a definition of each motivation coded, see Appendix 1.
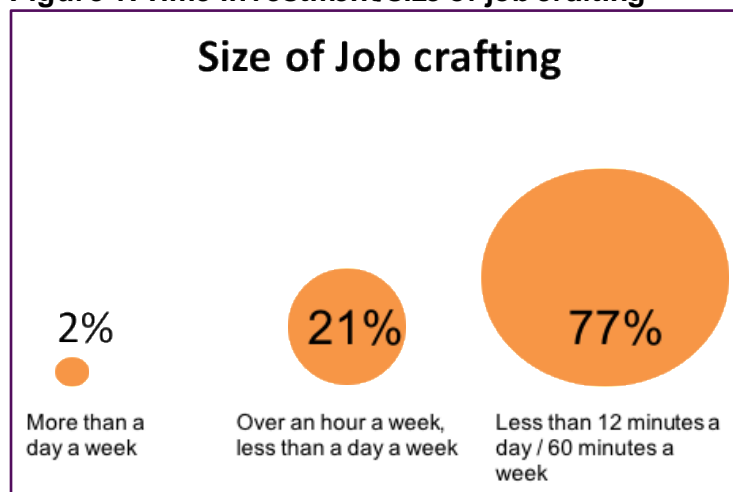
Table 1: Motivations and drivers to job craft

Motivation	Count	Percentage
Developing relationships	27	36%
Alignment to personal skills/values/interests	19	25%
Meaning making	14	18%
Making work more effective / efficient	5	7%
Self-development	4	5%
Encouraging job crafting in others	4	5%
Increasing autonomy support	2	3%
Making work more stimulating/novel	1	1%

Time investment and size of job crafting

In terms of the time investment, out of the 63 examples given, the majority (77%) required a time commitment of less than 12 minutes a day, or 1 hour a week, 21% of examples (n=13) required a medium time commitment (over an hour but less than 7 hours a week), and 2% (n=2) of examples involved a job change equivalent to over a day a week (over 7 hours) (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Time investment/size of job crafting

Size of Job crafting

2% — More than a day a week

21% — Over an hour a week, less than a day a week

77% — Less than 12 minutes a day / 60 minutes a week

Workload impact

Over half (58%, n=37) of the examples were neutral in terms of their workload impact. Thirty-eight job crafting examples appeared to increase workload. Only 4% (n=3) reflected a reduction in total work demands.

Type of job crafting

When considering the types of job crafting, overall cognitive crafting (changes to how people perceived the benefits and purpose of their work) was represented in 42% of the job crafting examples given, relational crafting (changes to how people interacted with others) represented 35%, and task crafting (changes to how tasks and activities were undertaken) represented 42%.

Examples of micro-crafting

To provide some context, listed below are a limited sample of micro-job crafting examples collected:

- noting the best customer experience at the end each day
- volunteering for a new project
- spending five minutes a day learning a new skill – for example learning to use a new presentation tool
- making time for a face-to-face conversation each day that would have previously been dealt with by email
- reclaiming their lunch break and setting up a lunch date with a colleague each week
- spending time tidying up the electronic client notes on a customer management system if they felt that these were not clear
- finding out something new about a different colleague each day
- doing a random act of kindness for colleagues
- sending a note of thanks to a colleague once a day
- investing extra time with a student once a day, where they felt that it mattered
- changing the format of a meeting from a sit-down one to a walking meeting
- shadowing a colleague who was skilled at a specific task
- introducing regular breaks and time away from the desk.

Recognising the growing evidence linking job crafting with a number of positive behavioural outcomes, including well-being, resilience, engagement and performance, there are clear business and – arguably more importantly – human and moral incentives to encourage and enable people to job craft. Deliberately encouraging micro-job crafting could be a conduit to achieving this.

The approach of setting small or micro goals is certainly supported by research into the adoption of new ways of working and behaving. Research on habit forming, behavioural economics, theories of motivation and the work of other consultants and researchers have all shown the power and ultimate benefit of setting micro or tiny goals.[9] Setting small, clear, specific and compelling goals makes them more likely to be achieved, makes it easier for people to summon the energy and motivation to achieve them, and sets people in the direction of potentially larger, more significant changes.

A definition of micro-job crafting

Micro-crafting appears to allow people to achieve the broader benefits of job crafting but with only small time and energy investment; however, this needs to be more rigorously investigated.

To support further research and practice into micro-job crafting we would offer the following preliminary definition to be critiqued and built upon:

Micro job crafting are small, or micro, changes people proactively make to personalise or shape their approach to work through their actions, interactions or perceptions, which typically take less than 12 minutes a day or an hour a week in total.

Limitations

There are obvious and clear limitations to the study from an empirical perspective, primarily in relation to the relatively small sample size of the study. While there was a high level of agreement between those coding the data, it is recognised that this was a subjective exercise, contingent on the evaluation of the researchers involved, rather than the ratings of the participants.

Implications for practice

There are four key areas that we would encourage practitioners to explore and consider further:

1. Critically and curiously test the concept of micro-job crafting with a small group or team to understand the potential benefits and limitations for both individuals, their colleagues, customers and the wider organisation.
2. Collecting and sharing stories of when and how people have job crafted can bring the concept to life; therefore, showcasing and celebrating examples of when and how people have job crafted could be a useful starting point for organisations seeking to encourage job crafting.
3. The role of the manager/leader in enabling job crafting is critical – they can either deliberately or unintentionally quash job crafting. We therefore recommend that those with people leadership responsibilities are clear about the job crafting concept and the ways they can encourage it, before any job crafting intervention is tested.
4. Job crafting does not have to relate to making physical changes to a role – and in fact, creating opportunities to reflect, and get direct feedback on, the value and purpose of the role may be just as, if not more, important.

Implications for research

There are three key implications and recommendations for researchers:

1. Further critical exploration of the make-up of job crafting is warranted, but based on the results from this study, specific investigation of the potential impact of micro-job crafting should be undertaken.

2   It was noted that people tended to add rather than reduce or stop activities when task crafting. This warrants further attention and study to understand whether this is a common phenomenon and, if so, the behavioural and motivational drivers behind this.

3   Job crafting studies should ask people directly for examples of the types of job crafting they have undertaken, and ideally their perceptions of time investment and commitment, together with their motivations to craft. Collecting this directly from participants would reduce the need for researchers to infer this.

Conclusion

A key – albeit preliminary – finding of our research is that even when not given any direction in terms of the size of job crafting to undertake, the majority of people tend to make small or micro changes to their work.

Our data collected regarding the motivations of job crafting activities not only adds to the (modest) existing research in this area, but can also be used by practitioners and future researchers to provide contextual examples when introducing the concept of job crafting to managers and employees.

A noted barrier in implementing job crafting initiatives in organisations is the concern by managers that people will want to change their work in substantial and unsustainable ways, ultimately to the detriment of the efficiency of the organisation.[10] Our results suggest that the positive benefits of job crafting for both employees and the organisation could be achieved through relative small changes. If people are encouraged to set micro-job crafting goals, any changes are unlikely to involve a substantial time investment from the individual employee or increase the total overall size and demands of a role.

We suggest that the introduction of micro-job crafting could be developed as a subset of the existing job crafting research and would be of specific interest and application to organisations looking to encourage and nurture a whole, one, or best-self approach to working, where individual strengths, passions and interests are not only recognised but personified on a daily basis.

Appendix 1: Motivations coded

Absorption	Creating opportunities for more absorption and engagement in the activity
Balance	Creating opportunities for greater work–life balance
Community	Improving relationships amongst teams
Coping strategy	Strategy to improve aspects of the roles (for example boredom/overwork)
Development	Opportunities for personal development
Relationship	Improve a specific relationship with a person
Response to change	Change in response to organisational change
Stopped task	Stopping/removing a task or activity
Customer/client service	To provide a better service to clients
Performance	Increase opportunities to improve individual performance
Personal passion	Changing role to bring in a personal passion
Purpose	Increasing awareness of purpose and contribution of the role

Relationship with manager	Changing relationship with managers
Innovation	A new/fresh activity or new way of doing something
Job change	A change of an entire job
Link to purpose	Linking role to the wider purpose of the organisation
Ordering of tasks	Changing the order in which activities are undertaken (not changing the tasks themselves)

Notes

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