

High performers, those in the middle, and the disgruntled: three characterizations of the performance and well-being outcomes of ambidextrous work

Academic work demands behavioural ambidexterity, the ability to simultaneously demonstrate exploration (creativity in innovative research and/or in teaching and learning practice) and exploitation (compliance with quality assurance processes and procedures). However, little is yet known about the effects of ambidextrous behaviour on the well-being of individual employees, especially men. We explore the experiences of men working in academic roles at Universities in Sweden and the UK. Our focus on men in Sweden and the UK stems from the uneven attention that is afforded to gender-specific research on well-being in general, and work-life balance issues in particular. There is a large body of research concerning women's (especially mothers) struggles to navigate the demands of the contemporary workplace. Our research adds to an emerging body of knowledge on men and how fathers manage their work-related well-being.

We examine the relations between their work design, ambidexterity ability and their perceptions of well-being. We draw on a well-established holistic definition of well-being based on healthcare, philosophy, psychology and sociology literatures, which have converged on three core dimensions of well-being: psychological (happiness), physical (health) and social (relationships).

An interpretative approach based on narrative analysis was adopted, comprising in-depth interviews with seven academics from each country. Despite societal and cultural differences between Sweden and the UK, we found many similarities in our respondents' views on their work and well-being. The academics felt ill-equipped to fulfil the demands of ambidexterity imposed on them, which resulted in negative outcomes for their central academic contributions: creativity and intellectual input. This compromises their ability to deliver high performance work outcomes beyond those demonstrating exploitation. Mixed well-being outcomes indicate concerns with work design and how demands for behavioural ambidexterity are managed.

We develop an understanding of behavioural ambidexterity using a multilevel approach that brings together work design and individual circumstances as key antecedents for behavioural ambidexterity, and highlight the interrelatedness of performance and well-being outcomes. Behavioural ambidexterity is not only relevant in the work context. To achieve behavioural ambidexterity at work, adjustments in exploration/ exploitation are also required outside of work. We also reveal the influence of personal circumstances and the role of agency in work design as two key antecedents for positive well-being outcomes in work contexts with demands for behavioural ambidexterity. Three characterizations are discussed: high performers, a middle group, and the disgruntled, as a basis to develop an in-depth understanding of both theoretical and managerial implications.