

# CONCEPTUALISING BEHAVIOURAL AMBIDEXTERITY AND THE EFFECTS ON INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING

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‘Knowledge work’ in the contemporary business landscape typically demands behavioural ambidexterity: the ability to simultaneously demonstrate creativity and compliance. However, the effects of behavioural ambidexterity on the well-being of individual employees are not well known. We examine the relations between work design, behavioural ambidexterity and perceptions of well-being, conceptually drawing on a review of the three strands of literature. Our focus is on well-being, after a well-established holistic definition 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). We highlight the influence of personal circumstances and the role of agency in work design as two key antecedents of well-being outcomes, and suggest a preliminary framework for further studies of behavioural ambidexterity and well-being in the construction industry.

Keywords: behavioural ambidexterity, well-being, happiness, health, relationships

## INTRODUCTION

Knowledge work is characterised by ambiguous task boundaries, need for expertise and innovation, continuous learning, and quality [and quantity] of the outputs. Knowledge workers are the people in organisations and projects whose main capital is knowledge. In construction work, this includes for example architects, designers, engineers, accountants, quantity surveyors, contracts and project managers, and any other party whose line of work requires them to "think for a living".

Trade-offs, compromises and adjustments are an integral feature of organisational life, management practices and individuals’ experiences of knowledge work. These include negotiations regarding work design and well-being. Contemporary research on work design advocates meaningful work and worker autonomy as key antecedents of wellbeing (Boxall and Macky, 2014). There is evidence for a positive connection between perceptions of the meaningfulness of work and the performance and satisfaction of the worker (Humphrey *et al.*, 2007; Wood and de Menezes, 2011; Wood *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, satisfaction is a key well-being outcome at work (Boxall and Macky, 2014). Knowledge-based professional work is frequently considered

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highly rewarding and self-fulfilling due to its embeddedness in the lives of the workers. Technological advances allow such work to be carried out anywhere and at any time (Gallie *et al.*, 2012; Ford and Collinson, 2011), which can increase flexibility and a sense of autonomy. However, it can also threaten work-life balance and well-being, especially in employees whose work is central to their identity.

For knowledge workers, conflicts between compliance and inspiring creativity may arise when organisations seek to adopt behavioural ambidexterity. Behavioural ambidexterity, from the perspective of the organisation, is that their employees simultaneously demonstrate exploitation and exploration across an entire business unit (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004: 209). At the level of the individual this means that employees must simultaneously comply with organisational norms and procedures, thereby ensuring that the organisation can continue to exploit the formulated business strategy; whilst also exhibiting creativity and thus ensuring that new situations are responded to positively and every opportunity is taken to explore how to develop the business. Although there has been growing interest in the performance outcomes of behavioural ambidexterity (see for example Patel *et al.*, 2013; Ahammad *et al.*, 2015), little is yet known about the effects of organisational demands for ambidextrous behaviour on individual well-being.

Based on a critical review of relevant literature, we develop a conceptual framework for examining the well-being outcomes of behavioural ambidexterity in knowledge workers. We highlight the influence of personal circumstances and the role of agency in work design as two key antecedents for positive well-being outcomes.

## WORK DESIGN-AMBIDEXTERITY-WELL-BEING

Our conceptual model draws together literatures on work design, behavioural ambidexterity and well-being as shown in Figure 1.

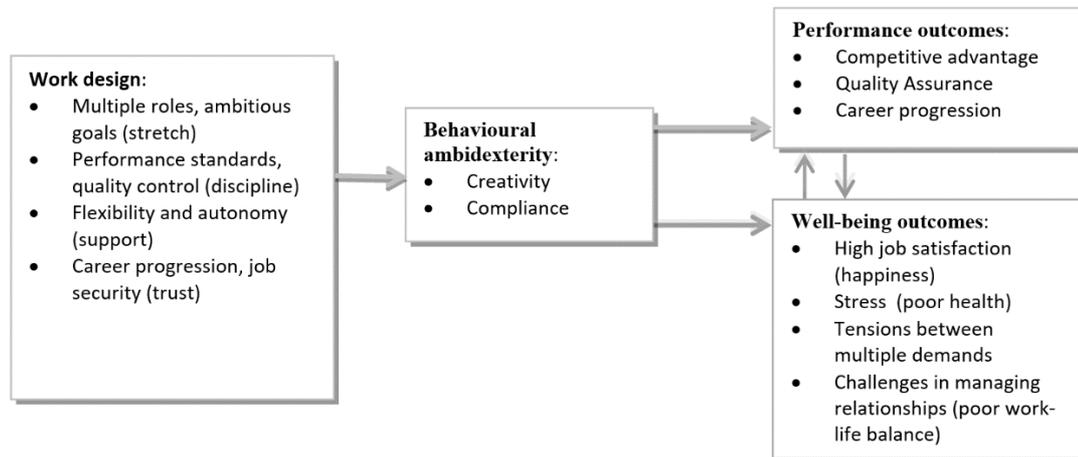


Figure 1: Conceptual framework (after Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004; Simsek, 2009; Van de Voorde *et al.*, 2012; Patel *et al.*, 2013)

The core argument is that behavioural ambidexterity mediates between organisational contextual characteristics (a combination of stretch, discipline, support, and trust) and performance (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004). Here we build on the input-process-output view of ambidexterity (after Simsek, 2009) by examining how work design, as the key contextual influence that seeks to produce behavioural ambidexterity at the level of the individual, is associated with performance and well-being outcomes. We

enhance the understanding of behavioural ambidexterity by adding a consideration of well-being outcomes.

### **Ambidexterity**

In organisational research, ambidexterity refers to an ability and desire of an organisation to simultaneously pursue two different, often conflicting, aims: exploration and exploitation (Simsek, 2009); alignment and adaptability (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004); efficiency and flexibility; or integration and responsiveness (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013). There are three forms of ambidexterity in organisations: temporal ambidexterity, structural ambidexterity and behavioural ambidexterity (the latter is also sometimes called contextual ambidexterity) (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004). In temporal ambidexterity, exploitation and exploration are sequential, i.e. an organization switches from one mode to the other depending on organisational and environmental requirements (Swart *et al.*, 2016). For example, a period of rapid organisational change may be introduced by the actions of a competitor. An organisation that uses structural ambidexterity to manage conflicting demands will have “dual structures” in place where certain business units focus on exploitation while others focus on exploration (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004). So, an organisation may have a separate research and development (R and D) unit that continually explores (adapts) the organisational offering (aiming to meet demand and supply in the future) while the mainstream operations exploit (align) their provision to current market needs.

Behavioural ambidexterity is the capacity to simultaneously demonstrate exploitation and exploration across an entire business unit. It is about the multitude of ways in which organisations manage the tensions involved in doing two different things at the same time (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013).

Behavioural ambidexterity has become a popular concept because it is progressive and versatile (Birkinshaw and Gupta, 2013), as well as closely associated with contemporary notions of employee engagement and high-performance work systems (Patel *et al.*, 2013). Organisations that aspire to behavioural ambidexterity encourage their employees to make their own judgments about how to manage the conflicting demands for exploitation and exploration (Gibson and Birkinshaw, 2004: 210). Although individual employees and their choices are central to behavioural ambidexterity, worryingly, research examining the concept at the level of the individual is sparse (for notable exceptions see for example Audia and Goncalo, 2007; Burgess *et al.*, 2015; Caniëls and Veld, 2016; Brem, 2017).

Burgess *et al.*, (2015) highlight the importance of the role of agency within particular contextual circumstances. Audia and Goncalo (2007) integrate psychological theories of individual creativity (and constraints) with organizational theories of exploration versus exploitation to examine the relationship between past success and creativity over time, predicting that successful people are more likely to generate new ideas, but that these ideas will tend to be less divergent as they favour the exploitation of familiar knowledge at the expense of the exploration of new domains. Caniëls and Veld (2016) in turn examine whether and how innovative work behaviour and/or specialisation is related to explorative and exploitative activities, and find that a high-level balance of innovative behaviour and specialisation is conducive to innovative work. Finally, Brem (2017) develops a framework within which individual level 'opening' and 'closing' behaviours facilitate organisational exploration and exploitation.

This body of research shows that when the employees of an organisation collectively engage in creative, innovative and open behaviours, the organisation benefits from opportunities for exploration. Creativity is a common theme, and thus a useful label for this group of individual level behaviours. Constraint, specialisation and closed behaviours in turn facilitate exploitative activity within organisations. We label this group compliance.

### **Work Design**

In our suggested model, work design depicts the organisational contextual characteristics: a combination of stretch, discipline, support, and trust relevant to knowledge work. Patel *et al.*, (2013: 1422-1423) identify that:

Stretch occurs when employees are given goals that “raise the bar”, encouraging the attainment of more and more ambitious goals

Discipline exists when employees understand what is expected of them, are provided with the skills to meet those expectations, and are held accountable for their actions

Support refers to the resources, care and autonomy provided to employees, and

Trust is influenced by perceptions of equity, organizational leadership and level of involvement offered to employees, and it can be enhanced through career progression opportunities and job security.

These conditions are viewed as enabling for behavioural ambidexterity in that they facilitate the relationship between work design and performance.

### **Performance Outcomes**

The anticipated performance outcomes include measures that achieve high status and individual success (competitive advantage), together with organisational citizenship, the aggregation of which ensure the career progression of individual employees. Achievement of such performance outcomes collectively leads to organisational competitive advantage: for example, successful project outcomes on time, cost and quality; client satisfaction; employee satisfaction, development and retention; sustainable profit margins; esteem and reputation; market share and repeat business; return on investment; and possibly also social value.

### **Well-Being Outcomes**

The well-being outcomes in the model derive from 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) (Grant *et al.*, 2007: 52). In the following, each is described further.

Happiness refers to the psychological well-being of employees. Key issues here are satisfaction with work and with life in general, with focus placed on subjective experiences and functioning at work (*ibid.*). Van de Voorde *et al.*, (2012) also consider commitment as a key aspect of happiness at work, noting that this differentiates between the foci of attention: i.e. satisfaction is related to the job, whereas commitment is targeted at the organisation.

Health refers to the physical and psychological well-being of employees in terms of experiences of strain or work-related stress and outcomes such as cardiovascular disease, hypertension, sleeping problems, mental health issues and workplace accidents (Grant *et al.*, 2007; Van de Voorde *et al.*, 2012; CIPD, 2015).

Relationships are a more contemporary addition to considerations of employee well-being (Grant *et al.*, 2007; Van de Voorde *et al.*, 2012). This category differs from both happiness and health, the two categories above, in that happiness and health both focus on the individual, whereas relationships relate to the interactions and quality of relationships between people, both within the workplace and in their personal life beyond work. Recent models of work design also include social characteristics as an important consideration in the modern workplace (see for example Humphrey *et al.*, 2007; Oldham and Hackman, 2010). A key aspect of relational well-being is work-life balance where work has the potential to enrich or conflict with personal life and enhance or detract from the quality of personal relationships.

The work design literature suggests that well-being outcomes are often varied: for example, enriching jobs may increase stimulation and challenge, and thus increase job satisfaction, but at the same time cause physical strain and/or stress (Grant *et al.*, 2007). Demanding or greedy jobs also often take away time from family and friends, and therefore can cause tensions in the relationships dimension of well-being. Moreover, opportunities to gain support as well as respite from work are reduced when people are physically or psychologically absent from family and friends.

Knowledge workers tend to enjoy high job satisfaction (happiness), but may suffer from stress (poor health) and challenges in managing relationships (poor work-life balance). We have added 'tensions between multiple demands' as a distinct consideration due to its relevance to our discussion about work design and as a causal reason for stress. The demands of knowledge work are open-ended and, as such, have strong potential to engender time-based and strain-based conflict between work and personal life. Knowledge workers are also typically deeply involved in their work and often over-committed to the job role, which can increase the potential for time-based and strain-based work-life conflict and psychological distress. The high level of autonomy may lead to 'enabled intensification' whereby increased flexibility can further threaten work-life balance and recovery processes rather than facilitate them (Kinman and Jones, 2008).

## **THE CONNECTIONS: WORK DESIGN-AMBIDEXTERITY-PERFORMANCE-WELLBEING**

We derive the anticipated relationships between stretch, discipline, support and trust with performance and well-being from the work design literature, which suggests that jobs that combine variety with autonomy and flexibility produce positive behavioural (performance) outcomes, but varied well-being outcomes (see for example Hackman and Oldham, 1980; Dorenbosch *et al.*, 2005; Humphrey *et al.*, 2007; Oldham and Hackman, 2010). Therefore, we argue that it is critical to gain insight into the well-being implications of the work design-ambidexterity connection, just as it is important to understand the relationship between work design and performance outcomes.

This research adds to the well-being literature by providing some insights from knowledge workers operating within an environment characterised by increasing intensity and conflicting demands on the one hand, and whose successful performance, on the other, is highly dependent on both organisational and individual behavioural ambidexterity.

### **Behavioural Ambidexterity in Construction**

Extant research identifies that engaging in ambidexterity tends to vary according to knowledge workers positions within an organisational hierarchy (Swart *et al.*, 2016),

and that most of the time ambidexterity is considered at the organizational level which may not apply at project level (Liu *et al.*, 2012). Drawing on the broader literature on project management, professional roles, and innovation, we develop a projection about ambidexterity in construction work at project level, as follows.

Off site is where we anticipate most creative work to take place. Contracts managers, designers, architects, company directors, and other parties involved at the front end of project planning and strategic level decision-making need to and have the freedom to engage in creative work. It is knowledge work at this level that aims to secure the continuity of the business over the longer-term by making decisions about the kinds of work the organisation wishes to bid for, their strategic approach to resource allocation, vision, mission, and values among others. The decision-makers must consider 'the product' (or service) carefully and position the organisation in the marketplace.

More specifically, Raisbeck and Tang (2009) report on the design of projects highlighting how architects and engineers create designs which integrate the different systems which comprise a project, and that these designs then also need monitoring, co-ordinating and managing as construction proceeds with other professionals, contractors and subcontractors. The design engineer or architect may gather data and information from clients, regulatory authorities, the physical environment, user groups, or other sub-consultants (*ibid.*) and balance the requirements for design solutions (creativity) with constructability, regulations, budget constraints, etc. (creativity and compliance). Ultimately, however, they act as "agents of innovation" (*ibid.*) exhibiting two forms of knowledge-based innovation: innovation in compliance and creative innovation. Creative innovation refers to immediate new project domains, and entails search work, variation, experimentation, and activity to solve project-specific problems; while innovation in compliance concentrates on developing generic organisational infrastructure to refine and improve the efficiency of the firm operations to nurture capability for future activity (Lu and Sexton, 2006).

At the same time, Caven and Raiden (2010) reveal significant concerns over maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance among architects, and Sang *et al.*, (2007) note a high risk of poor health and well-being due to long working hours, job insecurity, poor work-life balance, low professional worth and temporary teams in the profession. Although this group of knowledge workers exhibits most creativity, it seems to be at a cost to their wellbeing.

Project managers make up the middle tier in construction organisations, leading specific projects. Their work is particularly demanding in that the requirements for both compliance and creativity are intense. It is an imperative that they supervise the various parties on the project to deliver the product to precise specification. On a daily basis they are presented with complex social and material problems that necessitate creative and innovative thinking and contextual problem solving (Feghali and Raiden, 2016). They manage the everyday on site and form a connection with the strategic aspects of the organisation. They have autonomy in their job and tend to be self-empowered (Lau and Lew, 2011). This approach to work has been depicted as "muddling through"; and Sandberg *et al.*, (2016) identify that such reactive behaviour is not sustainable. It has been shown to lead to stress and hinders the on-going development of management in construction organisations. In addition, long and inflexible work hours are the most consistent predictor of work-life conflict among project office workers (Lingard *et al.*, 2007).

On site, it is the setting out engineers, craftsmen and foremen, who tend to occupy the lower levels of the organisational hierarchy of knowledge workers, who often use more compliance oriented behaviours. Their tasks and areas of work tend to be more neatly defined. Project-based quantity surveyors may also fit into this category. Work is focused at point of delivery: task completion to given specification and/or supervision of daily work. When task uncertainty is low, the classical 'plan-execute-control' approach works well, and the management focus is typically on fine-tuning and making the most of existing capabilities (Liu *et al.*, 2012). Innovation is focused on incremental improvements and adaptations, rather than on creation of new and different solutions. Bowen *et al.*, (2013) found that workers at this level tend to experience less stress than their colleagues at higher levels of the organisational hierarchy.

In summary, at lower levels of the organisational hierarchy, construction workers tend to use compliant behaviours. The more senior and the more entrepreneurial knowledge workers in construction are, the more they tend to use creativity. This is not surprising; however, what research does not identify is that creativity must build on judgement and experience, as well as resources and support. Rarely is there a harmonic and wholesome balance between creativity and compliance; instead, there is a continuous pull and push, at the level of an individual, between the individual's desires and the institutional demands and within their wellbeing domains. Tensions arise that crave mental and physical energy and intellectual effort to resolve.

## **CLOSING REMARKS AND CALL FOR RESEARCH**

Our discussion implicates conceptualising ambidexterity in construction (and in other professions) in that we build in a consideration of wellbeing outcomes together with performance outcomes.

Indications from extant research in construction suggest that the contextual characteristics of construction work result in wellbeing concerns; we identify a connection between creativity and negative wellbeing outcomes. This could be simply a product of limited research; hence, we call for studies that investigate the relationships between work design, behavioural ambidexterity and the performance and well-being outcomes across all knowledge workers involved with construction projects. Studies are needed to examine the contextual characteristics of construction work as well as to compare and contrast findings with other sectors in order to develop a holistic understanding of behavioural ambidexterity.

Studies should also examine whether management practices needs to focus on enhancing the creative aspects of ambidextrous work design in order to enhance the workers' feelings of empowerment in construction, or whether an overt focus on creativity is likely to continually predict negative well-being outcomes. In many professions, the current and sometimes dramatic moves to formalise, rationalise and standardise processes and procedures, as well as to increase transparency, have resulted in pressures and often contradictory changes in work processes and practices, resulting in an overly keen emphasis on compliance by the knowledge workers. In construction, this may ease knowledge workers pressure to be creative, allowing them to take advantage of their capabilities more effectively.

As Patel *et al.*, (2013), drawing on Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004), warn: behavioural ambidexterity is not created through organisational practices, no matter how well-intentioned, but rather "*through the flexibility of allocating the time and attention of*

*human resources toward exploration and exploitation*". To be effective, behavioural ambidexterity has to function on three levels: the organisation, the project, and the individual.

Finally, we build on Litrico and Lee's (2008) work on balancing creativity (exploration) and compliance (exploitation) in alternative work arrangements, which suggests that there are patterns that allow creativity and compliance to mix or become counterbalancing; they need not always compete (1016). Since this balance is a fragile equilibrium and stressful to manage (ibid.), we argue that behavioural ambidexterity cannot be considered only in the organisational context (in relation to work design and performance outcomes); a consideration of the well-being implications must be included in future work.

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