With a growing interest in employee engagement, managers have turned to strategies for increasing employee autonomy in all levels of the organization. The intuitive appeal of the relationship between employee engagement and autonomy has a rich history in the job enrichment literature beginning with Hackman and Oldham (1976), but autonomy also helps to fulfill a basic human need for control (Adler, 1930; White, 1959). From the perspective of a psychologically healthy workplace, autonomy is key component of employee involvement, and it is often combined with work-life balance to create work flexibility practices, such as flexible scheduling and telecommuting.

However, a lot of theories that view autonomy as a resource in managing work demands assume that simply providing increased autonomy will result in less strain and greater engagement. Unfortunately, this assumption may be unfounded. Though some individuals may certainly use job autonomy to strengthen the way they interface with the work environment, others may use this opportunity to physically, cognitively, and emotionally distance themselves from the work environment even further. In this way, it may be best to conceptualize autonomy as a vehicle for providing employees with the opportunity to shape or craft their work environment based on their personal orientations towards work.

**Job Crafting and Role Identification**

Job crafting is defined as “shaping the task boundaries of the job (either physically or cognitively), the relationship boundaries of the job, or both” (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 179). This can include changing what we do as a part of our job, how we approach our work, or how we interact with others. According to Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001), job crafting allows employees to change the meaning of their work or work identity by modifying characteristics of the job and the social work environment.

This sounds great in theory, but employees may differ in their motivation to craft their job and in their general orientation toward work. The job enrichment perspective argues that job autonomy creates more meaningful work through additional responsibilities and control, but it assumes that people want more control and that they will exercise their autonomy in a way that optimizes their work performance. On the other hand, the job crafting perspective argues that increased autonomy merely creates opportunities for the worker to alter the work environment to fit their preferred orientation toward work. If an employee’s orientation toward work does not include a certain level of identification with the work role, then attempts to increase autonomy may have unexpected results.

For example, research has shown that there are three general ways employees identify with their work roles: job, career, or calling (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). Employees who identify their role as a job focus on financial rewards and necessity. They work as a means to an end, primarily focusing on financial outcomes. The work role provides the instrumental means of fulfilling lower levels needs, such as safety needs, physiological needs, and financial needs. These employees are likely to have little of their self-identity invested in their work role.

### Three Types of Employee Role Identification:

1. **Those with a job orientation focus on opportunities for financial rewards**
2. **Those with a career orientation focus on opportunities for advancement and achievement**
3. **Those with a calling orientation focus on opportunities to create socially-useful work**
Employees who identify their role as a career focus on advancement and achievement. They are motivated to work because of opportunities for individual accomplishment. While safety, physiological, and financial needs are not unimportant for these employees, their primary emphasis is on fulfilling their needs for achievement and accomplishment. Thus, these employees are likely to have much more of their self-identity invested in the work role.

Lastly, employees who identify their role as a calling focus on socially-useful work. Although they certainly may need to fulfill lower level needs (i.e., safety, physiological, and financial needs) and achieve and accomplish needs in the workplace, their primary work motivation is derived from the contribution they make to their community or society as a whole. These employees are likely to have the greatest investment in their work role.

The Effects of Autonomy May Differ with Role Identification

From a conservation of resources (COR) perspective (Hobfoll, 1989), people have a limited amount of energy that they can allocate to their daily life, and therefore have to make choices about where they expend it. Overall, individuals at the “calling” level may be motivated to invest a lot of resources into their work role because of the benefits they believe those resources can provide. On the other hand, individuals at the “job” level, may limit the amount of resources they are willing invest into work because they view work as a means to an end. As employees move up the spectrum from “job” to “career” to “calling,” the organization may receive greater benefits from employee involvement practices that target autonomy because employees are more likely to choose to expend resources in the work domain.

Employees’ role identification can influence the way employees respond to opportunities for increased autonomy, perhaps in some unintended ways. Employees with a “job” orientation may focus more on tasks that provide the most financial rewards (i.e., putting much more effort into tasks that will result in greater financial rewards) while limiting the amount of resources invested into social interactions and work tasks with few perceived financial payoffs. Thus, the mutual employee-organizational benefits are likely to be minimal in this instance because the increased autonomy is viewed as a way to maximize personal pay-offs, without any consideration for “what’s in it” for the organization.

Employees at the “career” level may place more emphasis on tasks with a developmental (or promotional) payoff and may seek to establish relationship networks that will assist them in moving up the organizational hierarchy. So long as individuals remain at the “career” level, they will be motivated to ensure that autonomy produces personal accomplishments, which can also translate into better business results. This provides much more of a mutual benefit for the employee and the organization. However, if developmental opportunities or promotion opportunities are stifled, individuals with a “career” orientation may decrease the amount of energy they are willing to expend at work (possibly causing them to develop a “job” orientation), or these employees may seek opportunities for achievement in other organizations (increasing turnover).

Finally, individuals with a “calling” are more likely to focus on tasks and maintain relationships that maximally serve the mission of the organization and its impact on the community. These employees are are also most likely to interface with their work in such a way that autonomy breeds even more effective performance—which is often the desired effect of workplace practices that promote autonomy. So long as the organization maintains consistency between its values and culture and the values of “calling” employees, providing these employees with more autonomy can provide a long-term benefit for the organization. However, in some helping professions, such as social work, nursing, or counseling, a “calling” work orientation may breed workaholism, which could result in burnout and withdrawal from the work role (resulting in a shift to a job orientation).
Summary and Conclusions

Overall, the interaction between job crafting and employee role identification provides a useful caveat to managers who seek to implement employee involvement practices that promote autonomy in the workplace. The job crafting perspective considers individual differences in the way employees approach their work role, and how this may affect the impact of autonomous work practices on both employee and organizational outcomes. Specifically, employees with a job orientation may be less likely to use increased autonomy as a way to engage their work in a way that promotes organizational effectiveness than those with a career or calling orientation. Therefore, understanding how employees ultimately see their work role can provide helpful insights into how they will subsequently shape their work environment to fit their needs with increased autonomy.

References