

## **Autonomous motivation and well-being: An alternative approach to workplace stress management**

RICHARD SISLEY\*

### **Abstract**

Task or job autonomy has long been recognised as one of the factors that promote eustress in the workplace. However, it can also be associated with increased workload and consequent distress. This article proposes that the much broader construct of autonomous motivation, as understood from a Self-Determination Theory perspective, can provide a comprehensive approach to stress management that avoids these dangers. Strong empirical evidence is presented that the facilitation of autonomous motivation in a variety of ways promotes individual well-being and hence eustress, to the benefit of both employer and employees.

### **Introduction**

The direct causes of workplace stress, in terms of work overload and inadequate organisational and/or personal resources have been well-described (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Colligan and Higgins, 2005). More specifically, the causes of distress and eustress ('negative' and 'positive' stress respectively), have been described, with a central role for individual perception in distinguishing between them (Lefevre, Matheny and Kolt, 2003).

Among other factors, job autonomy has been well established as a means to reduce job distress. For example, Rousseau, Salek, Aube and Morin (2009) found that perceptions of poor procedural justice were less likely to lead to psychological distress in the presence of work autonomy; Van Yperen and Hagedoorn (2003) found in a survey of nurses that job control lessened fatigue, and Kalleberg, Nesheim and Olsen (2009) found job autonomy and participation in decision making reduced stress in a sample of Norwegian workers.

Bakker and Demerouti (2007) note that job characteristics, such as decision latitude, an important variable in Karasek's (1979, 1998) demand-control model of job strain, satisfy the need for autonomy, one of the three basic human needs according to Self-Determination Theory (Gagne and Deci, 2005; Ryan and Deci, 2000a, 2002). The other two fundamental needs – for competence and relatedness – can similarly be satisfied by resources such as constructive feedback on performance, and social support, which “agrees with Hackman and Oldham (1980) job characteristics theory that emphasizes the motivational potential of job resources at the task level, including autonomy, feedback, and task significance” (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007: 312).

However, the concept of autonomy used both in the research on causes of workplace distress and in theoretical models like those of Karasek (1979, 1998) and of Bakker and Demerouti (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli, 2001) invariably refers, perhaps not surprisingly, to *job* or *task* autonomy, i.e. the degree of latitude an employee has in determining how they will perform the tasks that constitute their job.

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\* Senior Lecturer, School of Business, Faculty of Business and Law, Auckland University of Technology

As others have noted, increased task or job autonomy does not always necessarily reduce distress, and can, indeed, increase it (Kashefi, 2009; Parker and Sprigg, 1999; Van Yperen and Hagedoorn, 2003). In some cases, its provision can be seen as a control mechanism (Graham, 1995; Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1990) and exploitative (Godard, 2004; Osterman, 2000). The effects of job or task autonomy are also likely to vary as a function of individual differences, with it having a beneficial effect on those who are autonomously motivated as a trait (see below) but not on those who are more control motivated (less self-determined) (Fernet, Guay and Senecal, 2004).

This article argues that autonomous *motivation*, as understood by Self-Determination Theory (Gagne and Deci, 2005; Ryan and Deci, 2000b, 2002), can act to reduce distress and promote eustress and well-being in a number of ways above and beyond the effects of simple task autonomy – ways that perhaps run less risk of becoming exploitative.

### **Autonomous Motivation, Well-Being and Eustress: definitions**

It seems reasonable to construe distress as low or absent well-being. In other words, what promotes well-being is likely also to promote eustress.

There are several related and overlapping constructs of well-being. For example, the contrast between hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being (Ryan and Deci, 2000a) closely parallels that between Subjective Well-Being and Psychological Well-Being (Keyes, Shmotkin and Ryff, 2002). Similarly, more passive forms of happiness or contentment are distinguished from vitality (Nix, Ryan, Manly and Deci, 1999). However, all these constructs reflect positive states of being and all have been associated more strongly with autonomous as opposed to controlled motivation.

The constructs of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are well-known and may be defined in the work context as follows:

*“intrinsic motivation: the motivation to engage in work primarily for its own sake, because the work itself is interesting, engaging, or in some way satisfying”* and *“extrinsic motivation: the motivation to work primarily in response to something apart from the work itself, such as reward or recognition or the dictates of other people”* (Amabile, Hill, Hennessey and Tighe, 1994:950).

In the framework of Self-Determination Theory (Gagne and Deci, 2005; Ryan and Deci, 2000b, 2002), *autonomous motivation* includes both intrinsic motivation and well-internalised (or “integrated”) extrinsic motivation, and is contrasted with *controlled motivation* consisting of external motivation (traditional extrinsic motivation, external to the organism) and “introjected” motivation, which “involves people taking in an external contingency, demand or regulation, but not accepting it as their own” (Deci and Ryan, 2008:16).<sup>1</sup>

The motivation to perform a particular action may be clearly autonomous or controlled, but also at the trait level, an individual can be described as, generally, more inclined to be autonomously than control motivated, or vice versa, as an individual difference characteristic, and individuals will vary in how strongly they can be thus typified.

In the literature reviewed below, some studies refer to intrinsic motivation and others to autonomous motivation which, as noted, also includes well-internalised forms of extrinsic motivation. In every case, the extrinsic or controlled motivation they are contrasted with is either entirely external or a combination of external and poorly internalised “introjected” motivation, so there is no overlap between the two broad categories of motivation.<sup>2</sup>

### **Autonomous motivation increases well-being**

A tendency toward more intrinsic as opposed to extrinsic motivation is associated with more trusting, empathic and stable relationships (Kasser and Ryan, 2001; Sheldon and Kasser, 1995), whereas a more extrinsic motivational orientation is linked with Machiavellianism (McHoskey, 1999). Striving for a goal for self-determined reasons, or to help bring about intrinsic rather than extrinsic higher level goals, is associated with greater well-being and predicts positive daily mood (Sheldon and Kasser, 1995). Pursuit of autonomous rather than controlled goals increases happiness both in its hedonic form and its eudaemonic (self-realisation) form, but only the latter leads to adaptive coping and a consequent reduction in stress and to improved physical health (Miquelon and Vallerand, 2008).

A closer analysis reveals that both *what* you strive for (intrinsic versus extrinsic goal contents) and *why* you pursue them (autonomous or controlled motives) independently affect well-being (Sheldon, Ryan, Deci and Kasser, 2004). For example, although both are extrinsic, purchases made with the intention of acquiring a life experience make people happier than purchases of material possessions (Van Boven and Gilovich, 2003). Koestner, Lekes, Powers and Chicoine (2002) showed that progress towards goal attainment is associated with positive affect and decreased negative affect, but actual attainment of goals tends only to enhance well-being if the goals are intrinsic, not extrinsic (Koestner, 2008; Sheldon and Kasser, 1998). In a study by Niemiec, Ryan and Deci (2008), the attainment of intrinsic aspirational goals was associated with psychological health and well-being, but attainment of extrinsic goals was related to ill-being.

This contrast is visible both at the trait and the state levels. Experimentally induced states of autonomous motivation enhance subjective vitality (Moller, Deci and Ryan, 2006; Nix et al., 1999; Ryan and Deci, 2008), and people with higher traits of autonomy and competence tend to report greater subjective well-being (Sheldon, Ryan and Reis, 1996). This is likely to translate into more positive behaviour towards other people. For instance, an autonomous orientation in medical students was associated with higher recognition of the importance of empathy, patient-centeredness and sensitivity to patients’ psychological and social needs, and an increase in autonomous learning predicted both an increase in these psychosocial beliefs and in perceived competence (Williams and Deci, 1996).

Intrinsically motivated states, and especially the “flow” experience that can occur during intrinsically motivated engagement in an activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi, Abuhamdeh, and Nakamura, 2005), are pleasurable experiences inducing positive affect. Hence, we can expect that those experiencing such states more often (i.e. those who are strongly intrinsically motivated as a trait) will exhibit improved health. This is likely because positive affect has been shown to have a direct positive influence on physiology, enhancing the immune, cardiovascular and digestive systems (Salovey, Rothman, Detweiler, and Steward, 2000). Similarly positive beliefs such as a sense of meaning, internal locus of control, and optimism, that tend to be associated with autonomous motivation, have physical health benefits (Taylor, Kemeny, Bower, Gruenewald and Reed, 2000), and in the case of internal locus

of control have also been associated with better job performance and greater job satisfaction (Chen and Silverthorne, 2008).

This expectation has been confirmed. Self-determined goal striving and the pursuit of intrinsic rather than extrinsic higher goals have indeed proved to be associated with greater physical health (Sheldon and Kasser, 1995) and fewer physical symptoms (Kasser and Ryan, 1996), and greater personal autonomy is associated with decreased mortality among nursing home residents (Kasser and Ryan, 1999). Exercise frequency and regularity were greater in older adults who were autonomously motivated, interestingly more so than when they were motivated by the need for stress management! (Dacey, Baltzell and Zaichkowsky, 2008).

Thus, there is substantial and growing evidence that autonomous motivation, in both state and trait form, is associated with a number of psychological, emotional, behavioural and physical health benefits in comparison with controlled motivation (Kasser, 2002). In short, it is associated with well-being across a variety of parameters and hence with reduced distress.

### **Autonomous motivation and work performance**

Historically, the evidence for a link between work performance and either intrinsic job satisfaction (Hosie, Sevastos and Cooper, 2007) or intrinsic motivation generally (cf. Kuvaas, 2006 with Hechanova, Alampay and Franco, 2006, and Suh and Shin, 2006) has been weak and inconsistent. However, several recent studies have pointed more strongly to a positive relationship.

Coaches' autonomy support was shown by Gillet, Vallerand, Amoura and Baldes (2010) to improve sporting performance (judo). In a university setting, autonomous motivation was associated with better grades (Black and Deci, 2000) and with depth of processing and test performance (Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon and Deci, 2004). In the non-profit sector, Grant (2008) found the positive connection between the desire to help others (pro-social motivation) and persistence, performance and productivity in doing so was greatly enhanced by the presence of intrinsic motivation. As noted earlier, the highly internal locus of control associated with autonomous motivation leads both to less job stress and to better performance (Chen and Silverthorne, 2008), and Fernet et al., (2004) found autonomous motivation led to better work productivity and reduced burnout. Similarly, Rubino, Luksyte, Perry and Volpone (2009) found loss of intrinsic motivation fully mediated the link between poor perceived job-person fit and the inefficacy aspect of burnout. In a test of the "happy productive worker thesis", Hosie et al., (2007) found self-rated affective well-being and intrinsic job satisfaction predicted managers' performance across a range of dimensions.

Taking these findings as a whole, there is increasingly strong evidence that autonomous motivation not only improves well-being in a variety of ways, which have direct stress-reduction effects, but also improves performance in a number of contexts. Improved performance not only rewards employers but usually also reduces, or at least satisfies, performance pressure (job demands) on employees, providing an additional indirect path to stress reduction.

## **Implications for staff selection and task assignment: the importance of choice**

Task autonomy satisfies the need for autonomy with regard to *how* one does the job. Autonomous motivation, however, can also be a factor in *whether* one chooses to do that particular job, in other words an employee's decision to apply for a particular position.

This clearly has implications for recruitment and selection, and also for assignment of employees to specific tasks. Those working on jobs, or in organisations, for which they feel some value-based identification (i.e. *identified* or *integrated self-regulation* in the SDT schema), will experience autonomous motivation for the work, with the likelihood of the stress-reducing benefits described in the previous sections.

Similarly, where it is possible to assign employees, or have them assign themselves, to tasks they actively enjoy, they will experience intrinsic motivation for the activity with, again, the documented beneficial effects of autonomous motivation on distress.

Autonomous motivation by definition always implies an element of choice at some level. According to some theorists (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven and Tice, 1998), any act of choice comes at the cost of "ego-depletion" and loss of energy. However, this has been demonstrated to apply only to controlled choices (i.e. where there is subtle or not-so subtle external pressure to choose some options over others), but not to genuinely autonomous choices (Moller et al., 2006). A recent meta-analysis of 41 studies showed clearly that "when individuals are allowed to affirm their sense of autonomy through choice they experience enhanced motivation, persistence, performance, and production" (Patall, Cooper and Robinson, 2008: 298), although this effect may be stronger in Western rather than Asian cultures (Iyengar and Lepper, 1999). Thus, employers, in the West at least, who provide their staff with genuine choices regarding their work will benefit, while at the same time improving employees' well-being and eustress.

## **Passion, flow and meaningfulness**

### ***Passion***

If autonomous motivation has all the benefits, both to employees and to their employing organisations, expounded above, should we expect the most intense forms of it to have the most benefit? This raises the construct of *passion* for an activity, in this case work activity. Vallerand's Dualistic Model of Passion (Vallerand, 2007; Vallerand and Houliort, 2003) defines passion as "a strong inclination toward a self-defining activity that one likes (or even loves), finds important, and in which one invests time and energy" (Vallerand, 2007: 1-2). This passion, however, can take either of two forms, labelled "harmonious" and "obsessive"; the former involving a genuinely autonomous and integrative internalisation of the activity into a person's identity, and the latter, a controlling, ego-invested internalisation where the drive to perform the activity comes to control the individual rather than *vice versa*. As might be expected, harmonious passion has been shown to predict psychological adjustment and performance, whereas obsessive passion can lead to damaging over-persistence (e.g. pathological gambling).

Relating this to the work context, Burke and Fiksenbaum (2008) make essentially the same distinction between what they label Passion and Addiction. Their research found that while both types of behaviour result in higher than normal job investment (involvement, hours worked etc); passion is correlated with more work satisfaction, greater psychological well-being, and less

obsessive job behaviours, while addiction has exactly the reverse relationship with all three variables.

Thus, in terms of both stress management and job commitment, passion for the job is to be encouraged and selected for, but care must be taken to distinguish it from its obsessional, addictive counterpart.

### ***Flow***

A state likely to arise more often in the pursuit of a passion is that of Flow or optimal experience, wherein the person is intensely involved in the activity, their skills just match the challenges posed by it, the subjective experience of the passage of time is often altered, and action is perceived as effortless (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1997; Csikszentmihalyi et al., 2005). It has been argued that “flow is a form of eudaimonic well-being...findings suggest that flow may be a critical psychological state that is associated with positive mood, a core component of psychological well-being” (Fullagar and Kelloway, 2009: 610).

Employers cannot create flow states in their employees – nor in fact, can the employees themselves in any direct and reliable fashion – but they can encourage and facilitate employees to engage in those activities for which they are highly intrinsically motivated or have a passion, and which are, hence, more likely to result in flow experiences.

### ***Meaningfulness***

Work that seems meaningful to an employee in terms of their own values will, by definition, be autonomously motivating via integrated self-regulation. If passion can be seen as a very high *level* of autonomous motivation, meaningfulness can be construed as a *deeper* form of it, one that is a powerful driver of work commitment and job satisfaction (Chalofsky and Krishna, 2009). It also has associations with workplace spirituality (Emmons, 2006; Kolodinsky, Bowen and Ferris, 2003). A full discussion of work as a source of meaning is beyond the scope of this paper, but selecting staff who do find a particular job personally meaningful over those with mainly extrinsic motivation would seem a sensible part of a stress management strategy. A word of caution is in order, however. As Lips-Wiersma and Morris (2009) point out, much of the research on meaning at work has focused on the *management* of meaning, which can often prove to be prescriptive and controlling, and hence not at all supportive of autonomous motivation.

## **Implications for stress management interventions**

The foregoing discussion has presented evidence that practices that support autonomous motivation improve well-being and promote eustress. This is not to suggest that there is no role for more traditional primary and secondary stress-management interventions (SMIs).

Despite strong advocacy of primary (organisational level) SMIs (e.g. Cousins, MacKay, Clarke, Kelly, Kelly and McCraig, 2004), secondary (individual level) SMIs are more widely used (LeFevre, Kolt and Matheny, 2006) and, generally, more effective (Van der Klink, Blonk, Shene and Van Dijk, 2001). However, it can be argued (e.g. Gordon, Jauregi and Schnall, 2009) that emphasising secondary at the expense of primary SMIs allows organisations to shirk some of their responsibilities towards employees and their welfare, and amounts to telling the “victims” to “cure” themselves. Conversely, organisations that devote much time and effort to ineffective primary interventions may aspire to wear the halo of a “good employer”, but are often wasting valuable resources for little other gain.

One solution to this dilemma may be to foster autonomous motivation supporting policies as a primary SMI while also making autonomously motivating secondary SMIs available in a manner that allows maximum choice. Secondary SMIs of any kind, provided they are effective, will generally be self-reinforcing, simply because they reduce distress and hence, increase well-being. The great majority are enjoyable to do and, therefore, intrinsically motivating. Those that are not, for example the painful early stages of a vigorous physical exercise programme for someone who is very unfit, will usually be motivated by well-internalised extrinsic motivation (identified or integrated regulation in the SDT schema) since the person sees the benefits of the programme in helping them become the person they want to be, and will, thus, still be autonomously motivated.

In a similar way, some secondary SMIs, especially Eastern meditation and yoga techniques, and some martial arts, also tap into integrated regulation because they are considered to be a means to attain self-development goals. At their highest, these goals link to “the meaning and purpose of life” and hence, the deeper form of autonomous motivation represented by meaningfulness. Since they tend also to be intrinsically motivating such practices are doubly or triply autonomous!

## Conclusion

This article has presented strong evidence that workplace practices that encourage and cater to the autonomous motivation of employees will increase their well-being in an impressively wide variety of ways, including improved emotional and physical health and much reduced distress. In particular, as noted above, when employees are provided with genuinely autonomous choice they experience “enhanced motivation, persistence, performance, and production” (Patall et al., 2008: 298). Hence, overall their work experiences are of eustress rather than distress, and of better performance. When the more developed forms of autonomous motivation and the phenomena associated with it – (non obsessional/addictive) passion for the work, a sense of meaningfulness, and frequent flow experiences – are given the opportunity to flower, the research indicates that not only eustress but improved job satisfaction and organisational commitment result.

With such benefits both for employers and employees from autonomous motivation, it would seem obvious that the traditional “carrot and stick” extrinsic/controlled approach to worker motivation is long overdue for retirement, at least from the majority of jobs in the Western workplace, and replacement with practices that make daily work something to enjoy rather than merely tolerate or even dread. What might such practices look like? Specifics will obviously depend on the job and the context, but the provision of freedom of choice is the essence, whether it be choice of job, of the way best to perform a job or tasks within it, of the order in which to perform tasks or, where feasible, a more general executive freedom to make job-related decisions as circumstances change. Clearly, some jobs lend themselves to such practices much better than others, and there still remain some where the carrot and stick have a place, but it is important to emphasise that with a little ingenuity *every* job has at least some aspects that can be made subject to autonomous choice.

This article has argued that promotion of such practices constitutes a broad approach to stress management at the primary intervention level that, combined with choices from a range of autonomously motivating secondary SMIs, will be empowering rather than controlling. As such, it goes well beyond the simple provision of task or job autonomy and will avoid the potentially stress-increasing effects such policies can sometimes have. Not only should stress levels be significantly reduced, but performance levels and job-satisfaction increased, to the benefit of all concerned.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly the intrinsic-extrinsic distinction has recently received support at the level of brain function, with overlapping but different brain areas becoming active when a person is experiencing intrinsic motivation contrasted with incentive motivation (Lee, Reeve, Xue and Xiong, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Although it is, of course, perfectly possible to be both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated for the same activity at the same time (Amabile et al., 1994).

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