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What is Job Crafting and Why Does It Matter?

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ABSTRACT

Job crafting 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. This briefing introduces the core ideas of job crafting theory for management students by defining it, describing why it is important, summarizing key research findings, and exploring what it means for employees, managers, and organizations.

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I take on as much event planning as I can, even though it wasn't originally part of my job. I do it because I enjoy it, and I'm good at it. I have become the go-to person for event planning, and I like my job much more because of it.

<div align="right">– Marketing Coordinator</div>

When I first came here, we started using the new higher-speed equipment. Then lots of new guys came in. So I started helping them learn the job. Now it's just expected that I train the new guys. I did this in my previous job, so I have experience with it, and I like it because I'm able to help and work with guys from different backgrounds.

<div align="right">– Maintenance Technician</div>

Music is a very important part of my life . . . I often liken teaching to being a musician because when I'm in front of a classroom, I put on my performance face. It's the same way with music. I remember when I was performing with my rock band and the high I got from playing in front of people was very similar to the high I get from performing teaching in front of students.

<div align="right">– University Lecturer</div>

CORE IDEA

Job crafting captures what employees do to redesign their own jobs in ways that can foster job satisfaction, as well as engagement, resilience, and thriving at work.[1] All the examples used throughout this briefing—including the three quotes above—are based on real-life accounts of employees crafting their jobs. A job is a collection of tasks and interpersonal relationships assigned to one person in an organization.[2] Job crafting theory elaborates on classic job design theory that focuses on the top-down process of managers designing jobs for their employees.[3] Within a formally designated job, employees are often motivated to customize their jobs to better fit their motives, strengths, and passions. Job crafting is a means of describing the ways in which employees utilize opportunities to customize their jobs by actively changing their tasks and interactions with others at work. Those who engage in these actions are called job crafters, and research suggests they can employ at least three different forms of job crafting.[1]

First, job crafters can alter the boundaries of their jobs by taking on more or fewer tasks, expanding or diminishing the scope of tasks, or changing how they perform tasks (e.g., an accountant creating a new method of filing taxes to make her job less repetitive). Second, job crafters can change their relationships at work by altering the nature or extent of their interactions with other people (e.g., a computer technician offering help to co-workers as a way to have more social connection and teach new technicians). Third, job crafters can cognitively change their jobs by altering how they perceive tasks (e.g., a hospital cleaner seeing his work as a means to help ill people rather than simply cleaning) or thinking about the tasks involved in their job as a collective whole as opposed to a set of separate tasks (e.g., an insurance agent seeing her job as 'working to get people back on track after a car accident' rather than 'processing car insurance claims').

WHY CARE?

Research suggests that employees in a wide array of organizations and occupations engage in job crafting. Job designs that include a high degree of autonomy and discretion afford greater opportunity to craft,[5] but it seems that even the most rigid or constrained job designs allow for some crafting. For example, a machine operator who works on an assembly line may craft her job by

forging enjoyable social relationships with co-workers or taking on additional tasks in order to use her talents, such as building a shelving system to organize important equipment. Or consider a struggling actor who works as a telephone solicitor to help pay his bills, and just like many employees in this line of work, has to strictly follow a highly structured script. Even in this low-autonomy situation, he could reframe the work as a means to practice acting and recite the script as different characters. In other words, job crafting can happen whether formally sanctioned by managers or not. Accordingly, to have a more comprehensive understanding of how employees actually perform their jobs, managers must attend to the role job crafting plays in their organizations.

Since job crafting influences which tasks get completed, how employees complete them, and the interpersonal dynamics of the workplace, it has the potential to greatly impact individual and ultimately organizational performance. This impact can be beneficial or costly to organizations, depending on how and why employees choose to craft their jobs. So managers are faced with the challenge of fostering positive job crafting while avoiding negative crafting, which will be discussed later in the *Practical Implications* section.

In addition to fostering beneficial job crafting, managers may want to think about their own job crafting. Although many types of employees are able to make a difference for themselves, their organizations, or both through job crafting, managers are in a unique position. Managers usually have a high degree of autonomy and power that affords them considerable room to craft. At the same time, their decisions have the potential to significantly impact numerous employees. So managers often have opportunities to make small changes to their jobs that have relatively large outcomes for their organizations. For example, if a manager at a manufacturing plant expands her job to include fifteen minutes of working on the floor alongside her employees every day, this small change could improve her relationships with many of her employees, enable her to evaluate her employees more accurately, and enhance her own engagement and job satisfaction. Also, her employees may appreciate their manager's positive crafting and feel more compelled to engage in such crafting themselves. Thus, it is important for managers to consider how they can beneficially craft their own jobs as well as attend to their employees' crafting.

Job crafting is a fairly complex phenomenon and understanding the role it could potentially play in a given organization may be a daunting challenge for managers. Fortunately, researchers have revealed numerous functions and outcomes of job crafting that may give managers valuable insight into when and why employees craft their jobs, as well as the ways in which job crafting can be beneficial. These findings are discussed in the next section and demonstrate that job crafting, when enacted in the proper manner and context, can have a positive influence on job crafters and their organizations.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Job crafting is not a one-time event. It is a process that individuals engage in over time. Although researchers' theories of this process differ slightly from one another, most models involve three general stages. First, employees are motivated to craft their jobs by one or more factors. Second, employees identify the crafting opportunities available to them and enact one or more ways of crafting their jobs. Third, these crafting techniques are associated with outcomes for the job crafter. Figure 1 summarizes four different lines of research from the emerging literature on job crafting.

Crafting Techniques

Actively altering . . .

- Number, type, or nature of tasks:[1]
  - o Emphasizing tasks in actual occupation related to one's passion[8]
  - o Taking on additional tasks related to one's passion[8]
  - o Changing tasks to cope with adversity[9]
- Interactions with others:[1]
  - o Building meaningful, helpful, or energizing relationships with others[1]
  - o Expanding roles to make a greater impact on beneficiaries[6]
  - o Tailoring relationships to serve specific beneficiaries[6]
  - o Reprimanding or dismissing unpleasant beneficiaries[6]
  - o Selecting contexts to help valued beneficiaries[6]
  - o Changing relationships to cope with adversity[9]
- Cognitive perception of work:[1]
  - o Reframing the social purpose of work to align with one's passion[8]
  - o Changing thoughts or beliefs about job to cope with adversity[9]

Motivations to Craft

Need and/or desire for . . .

- Control over job and meaning of work; positive self-image; human connection[1]
- Meaningful interactions with the people who benefit from one's work[6]
- Fulfillment of passion for an occupation other than one's own[8]
- Ability to cope with adversity at work[9]

Individual Outcomes

- Changes to the meaning of work and one's work identity:[1]
  - o Alignment with personal expectations[6]
  - o Fulfillment of valued identities[6]
- Positive experiences:
  - o Achievement[6]
  - o Enjoyment[8]
  - o Meaning[8]
- Unintended negative experiences:
  - o Additional stress[8]
  - o Intermittent regret[8]
- Resilience:
  - o Increased competence[9]
  - o Personal growth[9]
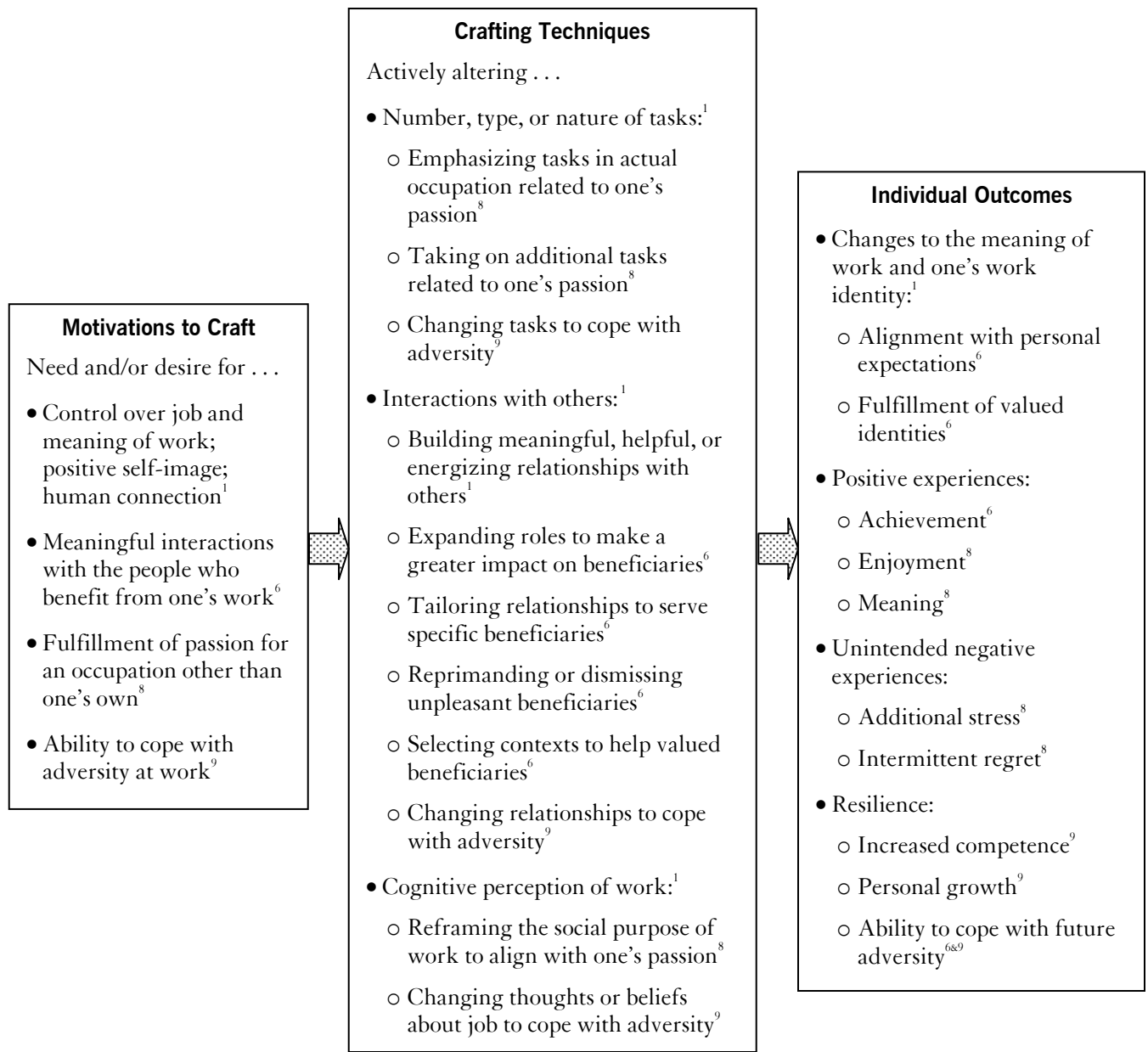 - o Ability to cope with future adversity[6&9]

Figure 1 - Summary of Key Job Crafting Research Findings

The first theory summarized in the figure is from a seminal article by Amy Wrzesniewski and Jane Dutton that established the foundation for job crafting theory.[1] They build on previous research that suggests employees do not always enact the job descriptions that are formally assigned to them, but instead, actively shape and utilize their jobs to fit their needs, values, and preferences.[5] Wrzesniewski and Dutton call attention to the efforts employees make to craft their jobs and the importance of recognizing these actions when considering employees' job designs. They cite several compelling examples of job crafting, including design engineers taking initiative to create beneficial connections between people involved in a project, restaurant cooks viewing their work as an art rather than just preparing food, and nurses taking on the task of communicating a seemingly excessive amount of information to each other in order to improve patient care. Wrzesniewski and Dutton's theory states that employees craft their jobs when they are motivated to change their views of the meaning of their work, their work identities, or both. So according to this theory, the primary outcomes of job crafting are altered perceptions of the meaning of work and one's identity at work.

The second model included in the figure is the product of empirical research on service employees by Adam Grant and his colleagues.[6] Their study of dentists, hairstylists, and personal fitness trainers revealed that employees in a variety of service occupations actively craft their interactions with clients in order to feel like their work is making a greater and more meaningful impact. Grant and his colleagues describe four main techniques that employees use to accomplish this: (1) employees expand their roles beyond the basic functions of their jobs (e.g., a hairstylist seeing himself as an educator because he teaches clients hair care tips); (2) employees tailor their services to fit clients' specific preferences (e.g., a dentist accommodating a patient's severe anxiety by explaining the details of what she is doing during a procedure and forewarning the patient of what is to come); (3) employees reprimand or avoid unpleasant clients (e.g., a hairstylist refusing service to an unappreciative client); and (4) employees select meaningful contexts in which to conduct their work (e.g., a personal fitness trainer teaching classes at a juvenile correctional facility). Other research by Grant demonstrates that employees positively interacting with the people who benefit from their efforts can provide feedback about the impact and value of their jobs, significantly enhancing their motivation and performance.[7] Accordingly, job crafting may be a means of creating and sustaining useful and energizing relationships with clients and other individuals who are connected to the work in some way (e.g., suppliers, colleagues, supervisors, etc.).

The third piece is from a study of educators by Justin Berg, Adam Grant, and Victoria Johnson.[8] They examined how people respond when they have a continued passion for an occupation other than the one they are actually working in. Findings reveal three ways in which individuals craft their actual jobs to create opportunities for fulfilling their passion for a different occupation: (1) giving more attention, time, and energy to tasks related to one's passion (e.g., an HR manager spending more time researching employment laws to fulfill her passion for being an attorney); (2) taking on additional tasks that are related to one's passion (e.g., a doctor volunteering to train more residents to fulfill his passion for teaching); and (3) reframing the social purpose of one's work to align with one's passion (e.g., a customer service representative approaching her clients' problems as if she was a therapist to fulfill her passion for helping people in a therapeutic setting). These techniques are often associated with enjoyable and meaningful experiences but occasionally have the unintended side effects of additional stress and intermittent regret. For example, consider a teacher who volunteers to test new software in her classroom as a means of fulfilling her passion for being a computer technician. She may enjoy using the software and find it meaningful, but learning the new technology in addition to an already full workload could cause her extra stress. Also, experiencing a little taste of her passion may conjure up regretful feelings about "what could have been" had she pursued a career as a computer technician.

The fourth contribution is from a doctoral dissertation by Brianna Barker Caza on how midwives cope with adversity at work.[9] She found that job crafting was an effective coping technique for overcoming difficulties and even helped midwives emerge from their work challenges more resilient than before. For example, one midwife stayed after her shift to calm down a patient who had lost her husband four months earlier and was now undertaking labor without him. The patient's distress was slowing down her labor, and the midwife thought she could help because she too lost a husband while expecting. Even though counseling of this kind was not formally part of her job, the midwife went home that day highly satisfied that she was able to make a difference and motivated to continue assisting patients through difficulty. From this point forward, the midwife considered counseling patients in this way to be an actual part of her job, not just a one-time occurrence.

Taken together, findings from these four lines of research provide several reasons why employees are compelled to job craft, how they actually go about crafting their jobs, and what their crafting ultimately means for them. The process begins when employees are motivated to craft their jobs,
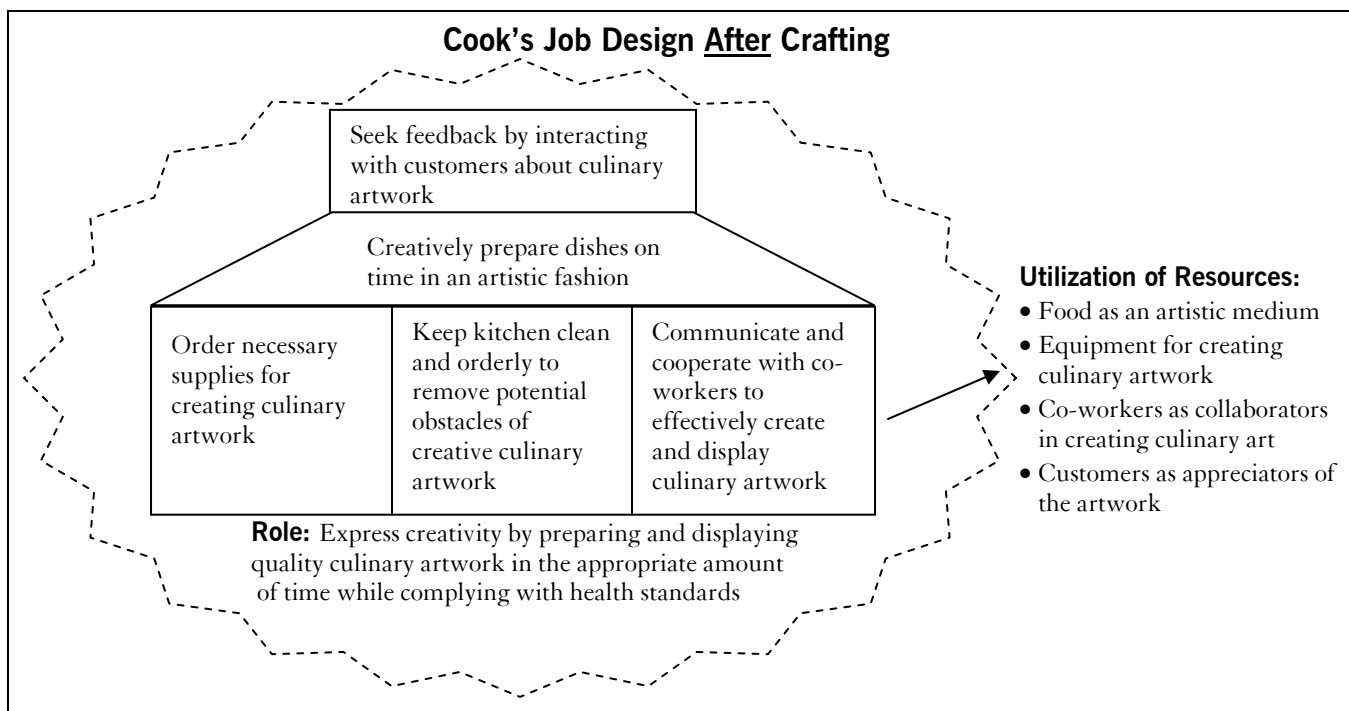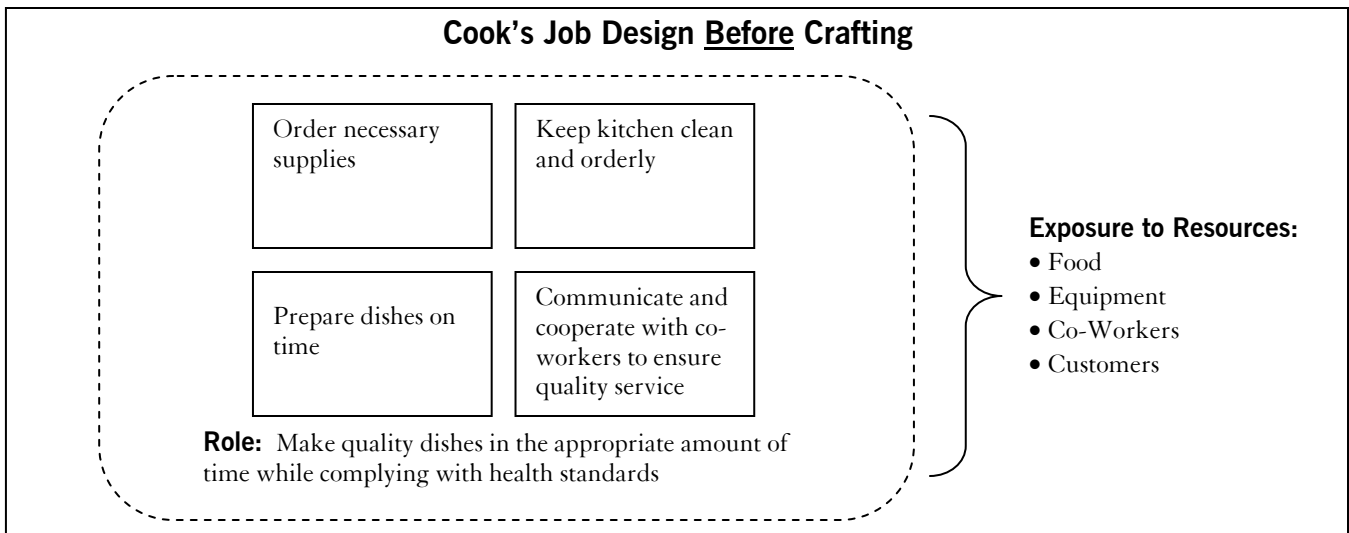
which can happen for a variety of reasons, including a desire for a different meaning of work or work identity, human connection, enhanced interactions with the beneficiaries of one's work, fulfilling passion, or coping with adversity. These motivations then compel employees to actively change their job designs by altering the set of tasks formally assigned to them, their relationships with others, or their thoughts about work. Lastly, these changes are linked with outcomes that can be beneficial or costly to the job crafter, such as altered beliefs about the meaning of work, a different identity at work, meaningful or enjoyable experiences, negative experiences of stress or regret, or increased resilience. The job crafting process may continue to cycle in this fashion as the job crafter and his or her work context evolve over time.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

For Employees in General

If enacted properly, job crafting is a way for employees to improve their lives at work in several important ways, as well as make valuable contributions to the workplace. Everyone is different, and it is difficult for organizations to create optimal job designs for every individual employee. But with room to job craft, job designs are not fixed; they can be adapted over time to accommodate employees' unique and ever-changing backgrounds, motives, and preferences. Job crafting theory does not devalue the importance of job designs assigned by managers; it simply values the opportunities employees have to change them.

Fundamentally, job crafting is about resourcefulness. A job crafting perspective implies that the tasks and interpersonal relationships that make up a job are a flexible set of building blocks that can be reorganized, restructured, and reframed to construct a customized job. These building blocks expose employees to a variety of resources—people, technology, raw materials, etc.—that can be utilized when job crafting. The success of a job crafter may depend largely on his or her ability to take advantage of the resources at hand. For example, consider the aforementioned restaurant cooks who crafted their jobs to treat cooking as an art. They utilized food by making it their artistic medium, kitchen appliances by using them to create artwork, and customers by viewing them as beneficiaries of their artwork. Figure 2 uses the building blocks analogy to depict a hypothetical example of how one of these cooks resourcefully and creatively crafted his job. According to the research discussed above, resourcefully job crafting like these cooks may help employees get more enjoyment and meaning out of work, enhance their work identities, cope with adversity, and perform better.

Cook's Job Design <u>Before</u> Crafting

Order necessary supplies	Keep kitchen clean and orderly
Prepare dishes on time	Communicate and cooperate with co-workers to ensure quality service

Role: Make quality dishes in the appropriate amount of time while complying with health standards

Exposure to Resources:
- Food
- Equipment
- Co-Workers
- Customers

Cook's Job Design <u>After</u> Crafting

Seek feedback by interacting with customers about culinary artwork

Creatively prepare dishes on time in an artistic fashion

Order necessary supplies for creating culinary artwork	Keep kitchen clean and orderly to remove potential obstacles of creative culinary artwork	Communicate and cooperate with co-workers to effectively create and display culinary artwork

Role: Express creativity by preparing and displaying quality culinary artwork in the appropriate amount of time while complying with health standards

Utilization of Resources:
- Food as an artistic medium
- Equipment for creating culinary artwork
- Co-workers as collaborators in creating culinary art
- Customers as appreciators of the artwork

Important Takeaways:

- The tasks included in the *Before* diagram are structured as separate entities, while the *After* diagram groups them together as one collective effort to approach cooking as an art.
- Both the *Before* and *After* job designs expose the cooks to the same resources, but the *After* design is crafted to better utilize available resources.
- The tasks at the bottom of the *After* diagram are placed there because they serve as the foundation that supports and sustains the actual creation of culinary art. Likewise, the new task of 'seeking feedback from customers' is on top because the blocks beneath it create a context in which feedback from customers is more meaningful.
- All three forms of job crafting are illustrated in this example and are all interconnected and mutually reinforcing in a variety of ways. For instance, the cognitive reframing of cooking as an art changes how the actual cooking and cleaning is performed, alters the cook's relationships with co-workers, and provides motivation for seeking feedback from customers. These task and relational crafting techniques create opportunities for reinforcing the original cognitive reframing. In this way, the three forms work together to engender the cook's new view of the social purpose of the job.

Figure 2 - Illustration of Job Crafting Using a Building Blocks Analogy

For Managers

Since job crafting has the capacity to positively influence individual and organizational performance, managers may want to create a context that fosters resourceful job crafting. This starts with designing jobs that leave room for crafting, so employees can tailor their jobs to fit their motives, strengths, and passions, while at the same time meeting relevant organizational goals. A highly restrictive job design may limit employees from positively changing the way they perform tasks, taking on additional tasks, altering their interactions with others, or viewing their jobs in a different way. Cognitive crafting, because it transpires in the mind of the crafter, may be less limited by prescribed job designs than behavioral crafting. However, the different crafting forms are not mutually exclusive and often operate in conjunction with, reinforce, and give rise to one another, as illustrated by the cook example in Figure 2. Another example would be a nurse who gives more attention to personal interactions with patients to fulfill her passion for therapy (task crafting), then perceives these interactions as similar to actually being a therapist (cognitive crafting), which alters the way she interacts with her patients (relational crafting). This resourceful crafting may enhance her job satisfaction and performance, but without the flexibility to devote more time to one-on-one interactions with patients, this nurse would miss out on a fruitful opportunity to craft her job.

Job crafting is not always positive. It has the potential to cause harm if the crafting goes against organizational goals or produces negative side effects. Even when the crafting is beneficial for the individual job crafter, it still may be harmful to the overall organization. For example, a marketing employee may craft her job by spending more time developing new branding ideas because she enjoys being creative, while what her company really needs is to focus on their current strategy. Or an employee could actively avoid communicating with his supervisor by seeming too busy whenever she is around because he dislikes her tedious management style. This may enhance his job satisfaction but harm his organization if the lack of communication becomes detrimental. So in addition to designing jobs that allow for crafting, managers should create and sustain a work context that fosters beneficial job crafting. This means building a shared understanding that job crafting is acceptable and even encouraged as long as it aligns with organizational goals. To help establish such a norm, managers can model positive job crafting like the aforementioned plant manager who expanded her job to include time working on the floor with her employees. However, job crafting can in some instances occur outside of mangers' awareness, which may be especially likely and costly if the crafting is harmful to the organization. Maintaining open lines of communication with employees about how they would like to craft their jobs and whether it would be beneficial for the organization may help managers avoid detrimental crafting and promote favorable crafting.

Since the resourcefulness involved in job crafting is derived from the job crafters themselves rather than given to them by some outside source, trust can play a major role in fostering or restricting job crafting. Employees may be less resourceful job crafters if they do not feel trusted to change the status quo. Conversely, trusting relationships between employees and managers may help unlock and even stimulate positive job crafting, as trust may help employees feel more comfortable taking risks that could potentially lead to beneficial outcomes.

CONCLUSION

A few valuable lessons can be gained from job crafting theory. First, designing jobs is not just a top-down process—employees can and do exercise agency to redesign their own jobs. So job crafting should be considered an influential factor in how employees conduct and experience their work. Second, job crafting can produce positive or negative outcomes for individuals and organizations alike, which presents managers with the challenge of fostering beneficial crafting while avoiding

costly crafting. Lastly, to help tackle this challenge, managers should recognize that effective job crafters are in essence utilizing their jobs as resources to achieve desirable outcomes; so unlocking and encouraging this kind of resourcefulness is the key to reaping the benefits of job crafting.

NOTES

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