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Engage in Job Crafting

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The chances are good that at some point, you have changed an aspect of your job so that it better suited you. Whether you took a different approach to a task you were responsible for, changed an interaction pattern, or refined how you thought about the job in a more general sense, you were engaged in crafting your job. Job crafting is defined as “the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work” and encompasses a vast range of bottom-up moves made by employees to create a more optimal design of their jobs.¹ For example, job crafting occurs when a marketing manager decides to bring her passion for social media into the design of a product launch.² It also occurs when an executive takes responsibility for understanding the life *and* work goals of his team and helping them to reach these goals.³ This chapter explores the benefits of job crafting for employees and their organizations and suggests ways that leaders can support job-crafting efforts.

The Value of Job Crafting

At first blush, job crafting may appear to be an activity that *should* make organizational leaders nervous. The thought of employees taking liberties with the design of their jobs to create changes that better meet employee needs could inspire fear in the hearts of those tasked with managing such employees. However, whether organizational leaders realize it or not, job crafting is widespread; employees from a range of industries and sectors and from the executive leadership of their organizations to the entry level engage in it.⁴

Given the ubiquitous nature of job crafting, it should come as good news to learn that a growing body of research has documented a range of benefits—to employees *and* to organizations—of job crafting. First, job crafting allows employees to change the meaning of their work in ways that suit them, setting the stage for their work to be more meaningful.⁵ Second, job crafting relies on a treasured organizational resource: employee proactivity.⁶ The changes employees make to their jobs allow them to more optimally bridge the demands of their jobs and the resources they have to meet them.⁷ Third, employees who engage in job crafting, whether individually or in collaboration with others on their team, perform significantly better than those who do not.⁸ Fourth, job crafters are more engaged in their work and are less likely to be absent from their jobs.⁹ Fifth, employees who craft their jobs become happier employees in the eyes of their coworkers and managers;¹⁰ they report more positive emotions¹¹ and better mental health and well-being.¹² In all, the evidence supports job crafting as an activity that benefits both the employee and the organization.

How does job crafting lead to these benefits? By customizing the design of their own jobs, employees are able to meet their needs for control over their work, develop a positive self-image on the job, and establish a connection to others in the workplace. Through these pathways, needs are met, and employee well-being results. This improved well-being matters for employee effectiveness at work. Indeed, it is the increased happiness shown by job crafters that leads to the boost in their work performance.¹³ Through taking charge of their own work and altering it in ways that better meet their needs, employees foster well-being, which is good for them and for their organizations.

Strategies for Crafting a Job

How, then, can employees engage in job crafting? Whether your focus is crafting your own job or

supporting those you manage in crafting theirs, there are four strategies that can help spark job crafting and its individual and organizational benefits. Each of these strategies can be undertaken in isolation or in combination, and each is likely to spark a process of bringing proactive change at work that continues over time.

Strategy 1: Optimize the Job You Have

Analyze the job you have as you currently execute it, paying particularly close attention to how you are spending your time in the tasks and interactions that comprise your work. Consider the ways in which this allocation of time and energy may be altered to give you a better chance to engage in the interactions that support needs for control, positive identity, and connection with others. Think about the values you most want to express in your work, the strengths you would enjoy deploying at work, and the passions you want to bring into the work. Employees can be rather creative in their ability to shape the tasks and interactions of their jobs to allow for the expression of more of their values, strengths, and passions at work.¹⁴ Although you continue to meet your responsibilities to the organization for what you are expected to accomplish, you can optimize the design of the job to proactively shape the meaning of the work and who you experience yourself to be on the job. To help you craft your job, see the Job Crafting Exercise, a tool designed by the author and her colleagues, at Jobcrafting.org.

Strategy 2: Re-vision the Relational Landscape of Work

Other people help to give work meaning and shape our experience of what we do each day.^{15, 16} Most jobs involve series of interactions—some repeated, some unique—that organize, punctuate, and create the structure of our work. One powerful way to guide job crafting is to think carefully about the quality of the interactions and connections you are having in the course of your work. Identify sites of interdependence that are life-giving and support the meaning you wish to find in your work as well as those that make your work more difficult. Invest in the former and troubleshoot the latter. Do the same with interactions and relationships that occur outside of the interdependent ties that are necessary to execute your work. By simultaneously moving toward those interactions that support the identity and meaning you seek in the job and working to improve, minimize, or circumvent the others, over time you will create a relational landscape in your job that enables job crafting. Even in jobs that by design do not involve much interaction, it is possible to seek out ways to connect with others through what you are doing on the job—even if these interactions happen off, or outside, the job. Building a set of interactions and relationships that support the meaning and identity you seek in your work also creates resources for altering the tasks that comprise your job. Investing in more difficult sites of interdependence to learn why the tie is less than optimal can be pivotal in transforming it. If such investments of time and energy are unproductive, limiting contact or changing the mode of contact, if possible, may help to blunt the negative impact of the relationship and leave more energy for promising interactions with others. By proactively and thoughtfully building ties with others, you can create opportunities to learn important skills or to receive needed support that will enable you to take on new tasks or to take a different approach to existing ones.¹⁷

Strategy 3: Queue It Up

One of the less radical job-crafting moves you can readily make in your work is to reorder the tasks and interactions that comprise your day. Reflect on the tasks that are sources of engagement, energy, and enjoyment in the work. Do the same for the interactions and relationships you have in your job. Think about what and where your discretion lies in exercising control over when these tasks and interactions occur. For some, this might mean starting the day by “taking your medicine” and getting through the least engaging and meaningful tasks and interactions, so that after this work has been tended, the more engaging and meaningful parts fill the rest of the day. The temporal ordering of work is adjusted to feed a sense of growing momentum, meaning, and enjoyment as the day goes on. The reverse strategy is also effective: by engaging in a task or interaction that is engaging and meaningful, resources are created that can make executing a less desired task or interaction more palatable and less of a drain.¹⁸

Strategy 4: Aspirational Job Crafting

The previous three strategies focus on bringing alignment between the employee and the job so that the task, relational, and cognitive boundaries of work are bent in service of a realization of meaning and expression of identity that is more ideal.¹⁹ However, it is also possible to craft a job toward a future aspirational reality that does not currently exist in the job or organization. Although more ambitious—and potentially riskier—than job crafting that hews more closely to the job as designed, aspirational job crafting can beget more pronounced changes in well-being and effectiveness through the nature and size of the changes it promotes.²⁰ Aspirational job crafters focus their efforts on experiences of meaning in the work or expressions of their identity that do not yet exist in the work and look for ways to move their work in that direction over time. For example, a corporate writer who imagines becoming a key public face of the corporation can begin to create opportunities to manage communications in the media on an ad hoc basis, slowly building trust to manage more frequent written and live presentations of the firm. In doing so, the writer crafts an identity that reflects a broader range and use of communications media and derives meaning from the work that reflects these changes.

Designing Organizations for Job Crafting

The previous section focuses on strategies that employees (and organization leaders) can use to craft their jobs. This section presents a set of moves that organization leaders and managers can make to facilitate employee job crafting and to help align the changes employees make to their jobs with the general strategic direction of the organization. Although job crafting is inherently an individual activity—employees cannot easily be required to craft their jobs—managers and leaders are the “architects of the contexts” in which crafting is enabled, or not. Though job crafting often occurs beneath the radar of managers and leaders, they have at least four key ways in which to encourage and enable job crafting to flourish in their organizations.

Boost Autonomy and Support

Job crafting depends in part on the opportunities employees perceive for taking some liberties with the task, relational, and cognitive boundaries of their jobs. When employees sense that they have autonomy in how they execute their work, they are more likely to engage in job crafting. By emphasizing the ends for which employees are responsible while loosening up the management of the means where possible, managers and leaders increase the likelihood that employees will craft their jobs. This move also communicates a powerful signal that employees can be trusted to reach the desired end points, which itself constitutes a form of support for job crafting. Managers and leaders can offer more active forms of support as well, such as facilitating the removal of barriers to job crafting for employees where appropriate.

Build Job Crafting into Developmental Plans

Effective, supportive leaders understand that employees are working to develop themselves while they work to achieve the aims of the organization. Through job crafting, employees take control of shaping key parts of the meaning and identity that they experience in their work, changing the boundaries of their jobs in ways that allow for personal growth and well-being.²¹ In developmental meetings in which employees chart their goals for the next quarter or year, managers can ask about the changes employees might wish to make to the design of their jobs, supporting them in making these changes where possible and appropriate. Such a practice sends a strong signal of support to employees, endowing them with a sense that proactivity and initiative are accepted and celebrated by their employer. An even more supportive step would involve managers and leaders offering opportunities for additional training and education in order to pursue job-crafting goals. Recent research has suggested that crafting a job in this way can lead to promotions and moves to other roles—both developmental outcomes that managers and leaders could benefit from as employees grow their careers within the organization.

Communicate Strategic Goals

Employees' job-crafting efforts could be powerfully affected by having a deep understanding of the strategic goals and direction of the organization. For example, in a classic case, when former CEO Paul Allaire of Xerox articulated that return on assets would be a primary focus going forward, a newly hired John Clendenin began to craft his job to focus his tasks on logistic supply-chain improvements that would allow him to have the impact that he desired while meeting important strategic goals.²² When employees have a strong sense of what the organization and its leadership are trying to achieve and why, they are in a better position to potentially align their job-crafting efforts with where the organization is heading.

Hold Job-Crafting Swap Meets

Research has shown that collaborative job crafting yields positive outcomes for employees and organizations.²³ One natural opportunity that arises from job crafting occurs when an employee wishes to scale back on a certain task or relationship to free up time and space to cultivate or invest in another. For interdependent work, or even when the task in question is a nonnegotiable one that must be executed, it may be possible to swap a task with a coworker. At a group level, it could be productive for employees on the same team to engage in the Job Crafting Exercise to map their ideal job-crafting moves, sharing their plans and discovering opportunities for task and relationship exchanges that leave each employee closer to crafting a more ideal job. At Google, efforts to identify group-level job-crafting opportunities have helped focus work teams on where such swaps would be possible and optimally productive and satisfying for Googlers.

Putting It All Together

Job crafting, or the practice of changing the task, relational, and/or cognitive boundaries of a job, represents a powerful practice that employees engage in to shape the meaning of their work and their identities on the job. Employees stand to gain a more positive experience of their work and increased well-being while organizations benefit from employees' gains in performance and decreased absenteeism.²⁴ Through employing strategies ranging from the simple queuing of work tasks and interactions to the more sweeping possibilities captured by aspirational job crafting, employees can take concrete steps to craft their jobs. Occupying the middle ground are strategies that help employees to optimize the jobs they have and to re-vision the relational landscape of their work. Though any of these strategies are likely to help employees in their job-crafting efforts, the context that managers and leaders can build to support job crafting at the organizational level can multiply the power of these individual-level moves. Whether by supporting individual employee efforts to job craft or building contexts in which teams of employees can engage in job crafting at the group level, managers and leaders occupy a unique position from which to support employees as they develop themselves through their work and, in the process, their organizations.

CREATING SPACE AND SUPPORT FOR JOB CRAFTING AT BURT'S BEES

Founded in a one-room schoolhouse in 1984 by Roxanne Quimby and Burt Shavitz, Burt's Bees has grown to become a national force in environmentally friendly personal products. In their compelling case study of job crafting at Burt's Bees, Jane E. Dutton and Justin M. Berg describe the job-crafting practices of four employees in jobs that range greatly in their complexity and discretion.²⁵

One key theme across employees highlighted in the case is the support offered by management for the job-crafting efforts of Burt's Bees' employees. For example, Andy, a maintenance technician with a deep passion for the process improvements that would normally be the province of company engineers, saw an opportunity to collect data on ways in which certain manufacturing processes could be improved and made more efficient. He approached management to win their support as he conducted experiments to determine which processes were most efficient. Though not formally part of his maintenance technician job, with the support of management, the experiments were conducted and the results had an impact on processes at Burt's Bees.

Similarly, Mindy, a customer care representative, regularly involves her manager in her efforts to seek out new challenges and tasks that need to be done for the good of the organization. Mindy uses job

crafting to break up the monotony in her work, involving herself where needed by her manager and learning new skills in the process. For both Andy and Mindy, the support of management in their efforts to transcend the boundaries of their prescribed jobs is key in their ability to successfully craft their jobs and remain maximally engaged in and excited about their work.

A third example described in the casework involves Jake, a compounding department employee responsible for mixing ingredients to create products for Burt's Bees. Jake's passion for understanding new machines and how they are assembled led him to reach out and engage in relational job crafting with the assembly group by getting involved with and learning about what they do. In Jake's description, this group was initially suspicious of his curiosity about their work, and it was managers who facilitated the tie between Jake and this other group of employees.

By helping an employee overcome relational barriers to job crafting, management at Burt's Bees directly supports the relational job-crafting efforts of their members. The openness to and support of job crafting among employees from a wide range of departments and levels helps to ensure that employees feel supported and empowered to move beyond the boundaries of their jobs for their own—and the organization's—benefit.

TWEETS

Craft your job: making small changes boosts happiness and effectiveness.

Optimizing the job you have can be as simple as interacting with the people who boost the meaning of your work.

The job you have is just a starting point: change the design and the flow of your tasks and interactions to discover deeper meaning at work.

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