



Strengths use and thriving at work: The role of job crafting and job embeddedness

Zhong Li¹, Xia Wang¹, Xixi Chu^{2,*} and Run Guo²

¹School of Public Administration, Guizhou University, Guiyang, 550025, China

²School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology, Beijing, 102617, China

*Correspondence: Xixi Chu, xixichu88@163.com

Received: 04 August 2024; Accepted: 11 January 2025; Published: 30 June 2025

Abstract: This study explored the role of job crafting and job embeddedness in the relationship between employee strengths use and thriving at work. Participants were 260 nurses from Beijing, China (99.2% female, 54.6% aged 26–35 years, and 62% with a bachelor's degree or above). Data were collected at two different time points, with a two-week interval between them. Regression analysis and path analysis were applied to test the hypotheses. Results showed that strengths use was associated with thriving at work. Job crafting partially mediated this relationship for higher thriving at work. Job embeddedness weakened the relationship between strengths use and job crafting, and also lowered job crafting effects on work thriving. These findings provide insights into the mechanisms by which strengths use influences thriving at work, highlighting the significance of job crafting and job embeddedness.

Keywords: strengths use; job embeddedness; job crafting; thriving at work

Introduction

People thrive when they act to their strengths (Niemic, 2020). In work settings, thriving is when employees experience both vitality and learning in their work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Thriving at work enhances employees' positive job attitudes and performance, as well as their health and well-being (Kleine et al., 2019; Liang et al., 2024). Given this, how to foster thriving at work is important to employee productivity. While previous studies have focused primarily on the organizational contextual factors, such as leadership, organizational support, job characteristics, and workplace relationship (Goh et al., 2022; Liu et al., 2019), fewer studies have explored the role of individual work behaviors. Recent empirical research has shown a relationship between employees' strengths use and thriving (Moore et al., 2022), however, the underlying mechanisms remain insufficiently understood.

In theory, employees who utilize their work strengths would thrive in their work roles, as they may be better able to craft their jobs for higher productivity (Tims & Bakker, 2010). However, much would depend on the work design contexts, in which the level of job embeddedness would explain the prospects for employees to design their jobs to their strengths for higher work thriving (Kiazad et al., 2015). Based on this theoretical framework, this study aims to examine whether strengths use functions as an antecedent variable in promoting employees' sense of thriving, and to explore the role of job crafting and job embeddedness within this process.

Strengths use and thriving at work

Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) suggests that employees are driven to leverage available resources in the workplace to enhance overall resource efficiency. When employees identify and utilize their strengths, it allows them to better cope with obstacles and challenges, while simultaneously increasing their sense of vitality (Van Woerkom et al., 2016). Also, employees who utilize

their strengths at work can consolidate knowledge related to those strengths, thereby fostering a sense of learning (Harzer, 2020). Given that vitality and learning are fundamental psychological components of thriving at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005), we can reasonably hypothesize that employees who actively use their strengths may experience a stronger sense of thriving.

The mediating effect of job crafting

Job crafting involves alterations employees make to the task or relational boundaries of their work, which can impact both their work identities and the meanings they derive from their work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Employees who use their strengths are inclined to modify their work boundaries to enhance person-job fit, thus engaging in higher levels of job crafting (Tims et al., 2016). According to theoretical models of job crafting (Rudolph et al., 2017; Tims & Bakker, 2010), job crafting involves positive changes made by employees, and can thus be seen as a form of proactive behavior, which serves as a direct precursor to work thriving (Guan & Frenkel, 2020; Spreitzer et al., 2005). Therefore, it can be inferred that job crafting may mediate the relation between strengths use and thriving at work.

The moderating effect of job embeddedness

Strengths use is influenced by the amount of resources that employees can access from their organization (Botha & Mostert, 2014), making job embeddedness—the extent of an employee's “stuckness” within an organization or community—a potential contextual moderator (William Lee et al., 2014). Specifically, employees with high job embeddedness often develop close and complex social networks within the organization (Kiazad et al., 2015) and have access to a range of organizational resources (Li et al., 2017). These resources can be leveraged to address job demands and job-person misfit (Tims & Bakker, 2010), which may, in turn, reduce their motivation to use their



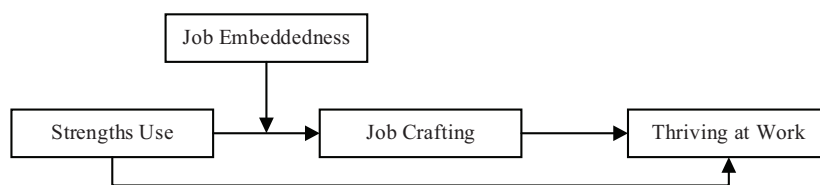


Figure 1. The path model

personal strengths to craft their job. In contrast, employees with low job embeddedness are more likely to convert their strengths into personal resources for job crafting, due to their limited opportunities to access additional resources from the organization (Liu et al., 2017).

Goal of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine role of job crafting and job embeddedness in the relationship between employee strengths use and thriving at work. From the analysis above, we formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Strengths use is associated with thriving at work.

Hypothesis 2: Job crafting mediates the relation between strengths use and thriving at work to be stronger.

Hypothesis 3: Job embeddedness moderates the strengths use and job crafting relationship to be weaker.

Hypothesis 4: Job embeddedness moderates the mediating effect of job crafting on the relation between strengths use and thriving at work for lower thriving at work.

The path model is presented in Figure 1.

Method

Participants setting

Participants in this study were 260 nurses from Beijing, China. Of these participants, 99.2% were female. By professional title, 22.4% were junior nurses, 49.3% were senior nurses, and 28.2% were supervisor nurses. The age distribution was as follows: 16.5% were under 25 years old, 54.6% were aged 26–35 years, 16.9% were aged 36–45 years, and 11.9% were aged 46–55 years. Additionally, 69.6% of participants were married, and 62% held a bachelor's degree or above.

Measures

Participants completed a set of measures with back translation from English to Chinese. Items were on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Strengths use

Strengths use was measured with a 5-item scale developed by Van Woerkom et al. (2016) and revised by Ding and Lin (2020). A sample item from this scale is “In my job, I make the most of my strong points”. The Cronbach's α for the strength use scores was 0.83.

Job crafting

Job crafting was measured with a 15-item scale developed by Slemp and Vella-Brodrick (2013). The scale consists of three dimensions: task crafting (5 items, e.g., “I introduce

new approaches to improve my work”); cognitive crafting (5 items, e.g., “I give preference to work tasks that suit my skills or interests”); and relational crafting (5 items, e.g., “I make an effort to get to know people well at work”). The Cronbach's α for the job crafting scores was 0.85.

Job embeddedness

Job embeddedness was assessed using a 7-item scale developed by Crossley et al. (2011). A sample item is “I feel attached to this organization”. The Cronbach's α for the job embeddedness scores was 0.88.

Thriving at work

Thriving at work was assessed using a scale with ten items developed by Porath et al. (2012), which consists of two dimensions: learning (5 item, e.g., “At work, I find myself learning often”) and vitality (5 items, e.g., “At work, I feel alive and vital”). The Cronbach's α for the thriving at work scores was 0.87.

Control variables

Consistent with prior research (Ding & Chu, 2020), we primarily controlled for the demographic variables of gender, age, and education.

Procedure

The Research Ethics Committee of the Guizhou University approved the study. The medical facility administrators granted study permission. The participants individually consented to the study with assurances of voluntary participation.

Data analysis

We used SPSS 22.0 for data analysis. The analysis proceeded in several stages: first, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the fit of the measurement model and apply Harman's single-factor test to estimate the degree of common method variance (CMV). Then, we calculated means, standard deviations, and correlations among the focal variables. Finally, we employed regression analysis and path analysis to test our hypotheses.

Confirmatory factor analysis

Based on the results in Table 1, the fit indices for the four-factor model ($\chi^2 = 1371.074$, $df = 623$, $\chi^2/df = 2.201$, $RMSEA = 0.068$, $CFI = 0.923$, $TLI = 0.912$) indicated a good fit to the data and were significantly superior to those of alternative models.

Table 1. Results of confirmatory factor analysis

| Variables | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|------------------|-------|-------|----------|----------|----------|---|
| Strengths use | 3.775 | 0.593 | 1 | | | |
| Job embeddedness | 3.496 | 0.660 | 0.148** | 1 | | |
| Job crafting | 3.846 | 0.494 | 0.624*** | 0.295*** | 1 | |
| Thriving at work | 3.638 | 0.583 | 0.408*** | 0.475*** | 0.518*** | 1 |

Note. *** $p < 0.001$.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients

| Models | χ^2 | df | χ^2/df | RMSEA | CFI | TLI |
|--------------------|----------|-----|-------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Four-factor model | 1371.074 | 623 | 2.201 | 0.068 | 0.923 | 0.912 |
| Three-factor model | 1552.800 | 626 | 2.481 | 0.075 | 0.870 | 0.859 |
| Two-factor model | 2005.942 | 628 | 3.194 | 0.092 | 0.693 | 0.675 |
| One-factor model | 2677.723 | 629 | 4.257 | 0.112 | 0.544 | 0.517 |

Note. Four-factor model: Strengths use, Job embeddedness, Job crafting, Thriving at work. Three-factor model: Job embeddedness, Thriving at work, Strengths use + Job crafting; Two-factor model: Strengths use + Job crafting, Job embeddedness + Thriving at work; One-factor model: Strengths use + Job embeddedness + Job crafting + Thriving at work.

Table 3. Results of regression analysis

| | Thriving at work | | | Job crafting | |
|-----------------------------------------|------------------|----------|----------|--------------|----------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
| Age | −0.062 | −0.042 | 0.012 | −0.107* | −0.127* |
| Sex | −0.427 | −0.209 | 0.073 | −0.563* | −0.585* |
| Education | 0.011 | 0.076 | 0.084 | −0.015 | −0.021 |
| Strengths use | | 0.415*** | 0.158* | 0.514*** | 0.485*** |
| Job crafting | | | 0.500*** | | |
| Job embeddedness | | | | | 0.180*** |
| Strengths use \times Job embeddedness | | | | | −0.136** |
| R ² | 0.017 | 0.189 | 0.273 | 0.422 | 0.487 |

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Common method variance

All 37 items loaded onto a single factor, with the first factor explaining 29.75% of the total variance, which was below the 50% threshold. Additionally, the fit indices for the one-factor model were unacceptable ($\chi^2 = 2677.723$, $df = 629$, $\chi^2/df = 4.257$, $RMSEA = 0.112$, $CFI = 0.544$, $TLI = 0.517$), indicating that CMV was not a significant concern in this study.

Results

Descriptive analysis

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and correlations of the study variables. As expected, there were significant correlations among strengths use, job embeddedness, job crafting, and thriving at work, which preliminary supports our hypotheses.

Strengths use and thriving at work

Model 2 in Table 3 revealed that the regression coefficient for the impact of employee strengths use on thriving at work is 0.415 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a significant positive

effect of strengths use on thriving at work. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported.

The mediating role of job crafting

Combining Model 3 and Model 4, we can see that strengths use had a positive impact on job crafting ($\beta = 0.514$, $p < 0.001$), while job crafting can further influence thriving at work ($\beta = 0.500$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, the relation between strengths use and thriving at work became weaker while remaining significant ($\beta = 0.158$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that job crafting partially mediates the relationship. To further examine the mediating effect, we applied Hayes' PROCESS (Model 4). The results showed that the 95% confidence interval for the mediating effect of job crafting ranged from [0.174, 0.363], which did not include zero. This finding confirmed a significant mediating role of job crafting, thereby supporting Hypothesis 2.

The moderating role of job embeddedness

According to Model 5 in Table 3, the interaction between strengths use and job embeddedness had a significantly negative effect on job crafting ($\beta = -0.136$, $p < 0.001$),

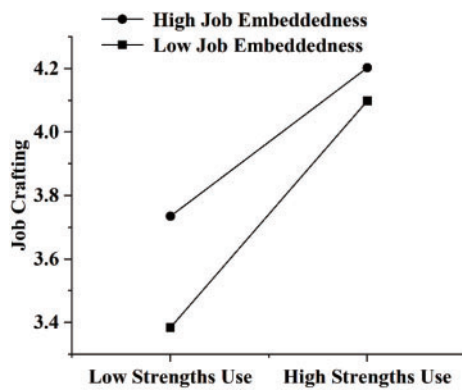


Figure 2. Moderating effect of job embeddedness

indicating that job embeddedness negatively moderated the relation between strengths use and job crafting. To further investigate this moderating effect, we performed a simple slope analysis. Figure 2 illustrates that the positive effect of strengths use on job crafting was weaker for employees with high job embeddedness ($M + SD$) compared to those with low job embeddedness ($M - SD$). These findings provide support for Hypothesis 3.

The moderated mediation effect

To test Hypothesis 4, we employed a moderated-mediation path analysis using PROCESS (Model 7). The results revealed a significant difference in the mediation effect of job crafting between employees with high and low levels of job embeddedness ($\beta = -0.098$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI = $[-0.168, -0.019]$). Specifically, for employees with high job embeddedness, the mediation effect of job crafting was 0.203, 95% CI = $[0.119, 0.296]$; whereas for those with low job embeddedness, the effect was 0.301, 95% CI = $[0.197, 0.405]$. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was supported.

Discussion

Our findings reveal that employee strengths use positively affects thriving at work, consistent with previous studies (Ding & Chu, 2020; Moore et al., 2022), indicating that strengths use functions as a crucial individual resource similar to organizational resources, positively influencing employees' sense of thriving (Bakker & Van Woerkom, 2018). This also deepens the understanding of the Social Embeddedness Model of Thriving at Work (Spreitzer et al., 2005), by highlighting the importance of identifying facilitators of thriving from the perspective of resource production.

Furthermore, we found that job crafting significantly mediated the relation between strengths use and thriving at work. This underscores the key mechanism by which strengths use fosters thriving at work, empirically supporting the research of Berg et al. (2013), Berg et al. (2010) on job crafting. Berg et al. (2013) suggested that strengths, alongside motives and passions, are fundamental for cultivating meaningfulness in job crafting. Besides, the results provide empirical support for the proposition in the job crafting model by Tims and Bakker (2010), which posits that job crafting can lead to thriving.

Finally, this study integrates job embeddedness into the study of strengths use, providing a theoretical explanation

that the impact of strengths use on positive outcomes through job crafting depends on employees' level of job embeddedness. Specifically, at high levels of job embeddedness, employees may better leverage organizational resources to address job demands and job-person misfit (Tims & Bakker, 2010), thereby reducing their motivation to use their personal strengths for job crafting. This finding not only enhances the understanding of job embeddedness as a contextual moderator from the perspective of resource access (Karatepe, 2012), but also supports the notion that job embeddedness is not always beneficial (Marasi et al., 2016; Peltokorpi, 2022).

Practical implications

This study offers several suggestions for enhancing employee thriving at work. Firstly, organizations can enhance employees' sense of thriving through management practices that facilitate the utilization of their strengths. Secondly, when encouraging and promoting strengths use among employees, managers should assist them in achieving a better fit between their strengths and the job they craft (Berg et al., 2013; Tian & Liu, 2017). Thirdly, organizational management should fully consider the duality of job embeddedness, and strive to maintain an appropriate level of job embeddedness throughout the dynamic management process.

Limitations of the study and future directions

Despite the aforementioned implications, this study is subject to certain limitations, some of which may inspire future research. First, while employing two-stage data collection and managing CMV reasonably, future studies could enhance the validity of measuring strengths use by incorporating methods such as leader evaluations. Second, thriving at work may also stimulate more agentic work behaviors, a dimension not explored in this study. Agentic work behaviors driven by work thriving should be explored by future studies. Third, this study exclusively focused on hospital employees, future research can broaden its scope by including samples from diverse organizational contexts.

Conclusion

This study observed strengths use to be associated with thriving at work. Furthermore, job crafting was identified as playing a significant partial mediating role in this relationship, strengthening the relationship. Notably, the study job crafting was stronger for employees with low job embeddedness and weaker for those with high job embeddedness. These findings provide new insights into enhancing employee thriving at work by encouraging them to utilize their strengths.

Acknowledgement: Not applicable.

Funding Statement: This study received funding from the Youth Project of Humanities and Social Sciences Research at Guizhou University (No. GDQN2022010); the Zhiyuan Science Foundation at Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology (No. BIPTCSF-2023012); and the URT Program for Undergraduate Research and Training at Beijing Institute of Petrochemical Technology (No. 2024J00263).

Author Contributions: The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: Zhong Li; data collection: Xia Wang, Xixi Chu and Run Guo; analysis and interpretation of results: Zhong Li and Xia Wang; draft manuscript preparation: Xixi Chu and Run Guo. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Availability of Data and Materials: The data supporting the conclusions of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Ethics Approval: In accordance with the principles stated in the Declaration of Helsinki, all participants volunteered to involve in this study. The study was approved and supervised by Ethics Committee of Guizhou University (No. SS2024019).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

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