

The dynamics of multiple goal management : diary studies at work

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SUMMARY

Although research on work motivation has a long history and an ample amount of studies have been conducted, little has as yet been said about the fact that people at work are constantly required to work on many goals, simultaneously adhering to multiple demands, preferences and desires. Nowadays work has to be delivered fast with frequent switches between goals. Employees are asked to demonstrate a high degree of flexibility due to unplanned tasks or interruptions at work. More and more people realize that the handling of multiple goals at work is a true challenge. It comes as no surprise that there is an increasing amount of trainings and self-help books offered that address issues such as time management. While the work environment has changed, the research on work motivation has hardly taken the concept of multiple goals into account. Moreover, work motivation has been approached from a rather static point of view – conceptually and empirically. However, work motivation clearly is a highly dynamic phenomenon that reveals changes over time. Goal setting and goal striving as the main processes in work motivation are both highly dynamic.

The dissertation aims to fill these gaps in the literature by exploring the way in which people deal with multiple goals and by taking the notion of time theoretically and empirically into account. After a general and short introduction to the field of work motivation, a structured literature review is presented. This review confirms that there is little we know about the effect of multiple goals on work motivation and related process models. Our focus is on empirical studies that either addressed the phenomenon of multiple goals theoretically and/or empirically. Furthermore, we examine if the studies have taken a temporal perspective on multiple goals. Results show that there is no coherent definition of the concept of goals across studies. Even though there is an increase in the number of studies looking into the

effect of multiple goals by means of temporal designs little is still known about the basic processes taking place in a multiple goal work environment.

In chapter three we present a theoretical but dynamic model of multiple goal management at work. We introduce the notion of ‘goal portfolio’ acknowledging the fact that although everyone has a certain amount of goals accepted people cannot work on all our goals simultaneously. Instead they frequently activate and deactivate their goals by switching between our goals back and forth. To describe the processes taking place we introduce the concepts of lower- and higher ordered self-regulation. While the lower ordered self-regulation describes the individual goal process (setting, filtering, accepting and striving) the higher-order self-regulation describes the mechanisms involved in managing multiple goals. Thus, our model explains the interdependence of individual goal processes and the goal management strategies (including goal shielding or goal abandoning) that people apply to reach satisfactory results when confronted with multiple goals. Furthermore, we present a research agenda to address multiple goal management.

Since no study looked into the actual pursuit of multiple goals in a work environment we conducted an exploratory study. Our aim was to empirically investigate how people work on their goals over time. By means of a diary study we tracked the pursuit of five individually indicated and actual work goals of 52 employees over a period of three weeks. We graphically examined the goal striving of people on these five goals, which allowed us to explore between-persons as well as within-persons differences. Although we can establish meaningful attributes that describe the goal pursuit of each person, there appear to be substantial changes over time with regard to how people work on their goals. The goal pursuit patters are not only

contingent on the chosen time window but also on external factors such as work demands, interruptions, and unplanned tasks. Furthermore, we explore possible determinants of certain multiple goal management patterns such as personality characteristics and personal preferences such as polychronicity. With the exception of conscientiousness almost none of the explored determinants appears to show a significant relationship.

Next, we conducted an empirical study of multitasking in a work environment. One aim of the study was to examine the effect of multitasking on performance and affective well-being. In a diary study with 93 employees answered two daily questionnaires (before and after work) over a one-week period. We applied hierarchical linear modeling for the analysis. We explicitly differentiated between the preference ‘polychronicity’ and the actual behavior of multitasking using the observations made in the exploratory study. We note that polychronicity has little predictive power with regard to actual behavior displayed. As in the previous study we find evidence for the need to study multiple goal or task performance applying temporal designs. There is substantial within-person variation in the extent to which people engage in multitasking behavior. It appears impossible to classify people as multitaskers or monotasks, since this the pattern of multitasking depends on the time frame, external demands, and the opportunities to engage in this behavior. Generally, there appears to be a negative effect of multitasking on affective well-being and task performance. However, we find a moderating effect of polychronicity lessening the negative effect of multitasking on the outcome variables. In other words, people with high polychronicity are less affected by multitasking compared to more monochronic people.

In the final chapter we discuss the results of all studies and give recommendations regarding for further research and practice. A main conclusion and advice for future research

is the clear need to apply a temporal approach and focus on intra-individual differences when studying multiple goals pursuit. Noting the need for more research, we give some recommendations for practice that add to insights from the literature on time management.