Well-being in times of task restructuring: The buffering potential of workplace learning

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In this paper, we focus on task restructuring as one of the most frequently occurring types of change in our contemporary knowledge society. In spite of its evident prevalence, research on task restructuring and employee well-being has been scarce until now. Based on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory and the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, we argue that task restructuring is negatively related with employee well-being (in terms of emotional exhaustion and vigour). Furthermore, we advance that opportunities for learning through reflection and experimentation, as well as recently acquired KSAOs can serve as buffers in the relationship between task restructuring and well-being. Hierarchical regression analyses and simple slope analyses were conducted in order to test the research hypotheses on a large sample of the Dutch working population (N = 1711). Task restructuring had a positive association with emotional exhaustion and a negative one with vigour. Furthermore, recently acquired KSAOs, as well as opportunities for reflection and experimentation, buffered the relationship between task restructuring and emotional exhaustion. Opportunities for reflection and experimentation moderated the relationship between task restructuring and vigour as well. This study suggests that workplace learning can mitigate the negative relationship between task restructuring and well-being.

Keywords: task restructuring; KSAOs; opportunities for reflection; opportunities for experimentation; well-being

Introduction

Nowadays, organizations are continuously being challenged to adapt quickly and effectively to dynamic market conditions. The fast changes in the organizational environment driven by global competition and technological advances require companies to be flexible and to adopt change-oriented management approaches and practices in their daily life (Oreg, Vakola, & Armenakis, 2011). A prominent response within organizations

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to the innovation-driven change is to regularly engage in updating work processes and restructuring work tasks in order to optimize the performance of employees. From a practical point of view, the process of task restructuring is often conducted simultaneously with general structural changes in the organization, such as downsizing. A body of research has already acknowledged the importance of the effects of quantitative organizational change such as downsizing on employee well-being (Ferrie, 1997; Kalimo, Taris, & Schaufeli, 2003), yet relatively little is known about the effects of the equally prevalent task restructuring-related change on well-being.

Later in this study, we focus on management-initiated task restructuring, because this type of change is not always voluntary for the employees and as such may be experienced as a threat. Changes in daily tasks can be initiated by the employees themselves as well (e.g. job crafting). Self-initiated task changes are by default voluntarily, and thus would not constitute a threat (Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2013). In the current study, however, we are primarily interested in changes at work that are not initiated by the employees and may have the potential to deplete well-being. Thus, we define task restructuring as management-initiated changes with regard to the content of the tasks of one’s job, and/or the work methods used in carrying out the tasks at hand. Even though task restructuring has been commonly viewed as enhancing productivity and ensuring a company’s competitive advantage, opinions regarding its effects on employee well-being seem to be polarized. Some research has provided evidence that task restructuring has the capacity to stimulate efficiency and productivity, and at the same time to promote optimal working conditions, which can contribute to employees’ psychological well-being (Hacker, 1993; Rau, 2006), while others have claimed that although task restructuring may be beneficial for organizations, it does not necessarily promote employee well-being (Kelly, 1992; Wilkinson & Willmott, 1996). Moreover, research has posited that task restructuring-related change can be associated with a significant and unavoidable human cost (Campion & McClelland, 1993; Connor, 1997). Even though the debate about the positive versus the negative impact of task restructuring on well-being has attracted research attention, the argumentations offered so far have been mainly theoretical, providing little empirical evidence for the effects of this kind of change on well-being.

The relationship between task restructuring and well-being is complex. A plethora of different factors (e.g. characteristics of change process and content, job characteristics, attitudes towards change) may account for the effects (in the long term) of task restructuring on well-being, hindering the possibility to draw unambiguous general conclusions. Depending on the purpose and the way the restructuring is being conducted, the effects may vary. In some instances, task restructuring may be aimed at enhancing both job and personal resources (e.g. talent management, job enrichment and job re-design interventions), and hence can contribute to employee well-being. In other instances, task restructuring-related changes can be targeted at increasing efficiency and productivity and may involve a decrease in job resources and increase in job demands, and thus can endanger employee well-being. In both instances, however, at the onset of the change process, task restructuring will be experienced as a change in the status quo, and as such will be perceived as a situation of uncertainty and ambiguity. The very idea of change implies novelty or uncertainty regarding the outcomes and as such can be perceived as a threat (Fugate, Kinicki, & Prussia, 2008; Rafferty & Griffin, 2006). In their study on the impact of enhanced resources on anticipatory stress and adjustment to new information technology, Chen, Westman, and Eden (2009) posited that even when a certain change (e.g. an IT-based one) exhibits a strong potential for resource gain, at the
beginning of the change process it might be experienced as a threat and can cause a resource loss for individuals. Following this line of reasoning, the aim of the current paper is to investigate the theorized negative association between task restructuring and well-being.

Task restructuring requires competent and capable employees, who can carry out the modified work processes and function efficiently in the changed work environment. From a theoretical point of view, the dynamic and complex work environment has been recognized as a factor, stimulating employees’ professional development (Maurer & Lippstreu, 2008). Also, companies have acknowledged that a very valuable asset for dealing with change lies with the professional knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs) of their employees (Gardiner, Leat, & Sadler-Smith, 2001). Task restructuring stimulates employees to engage in problem-solving behaviour, which requires new relevant KSAOs, and thus encourages them to actively pursue opportunities for extension of their KSAOs (Bauer & Gruber, 2007). That is why companies need to provide their workers at the organizational level with opportunities for on-the-job reflection and experimentation (van Woerkom, 2008, 2010).

In the current study newly acquired KSAOs refers to the work-specific knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics acquired by the employee in the past months by means of workplace learning (formal and informal), which allow him/her to perform successfully his/her work tasks. Additionally, we define opportunities for reflection as on-the-job opportunities provided by the organization for the employees to reflect on the job content and working methods they use in their work. Similarly, we define opportunities for experimentation as on-the-job opportunities provided by the organization that enable employees via trial-and-error process to experiment with the working methods and generate new insights into a problem (Lee, Edmondson, Thomke, & Worline, 2004). Furthermore, in this paper, job insecurity refers to “the subjectively perceived and undesired possibility to lose the present job in the future, as well as the fear or worries related to this possibility of job loss” (Vander Elst, De Witte, & De Cuyper, 2014, p. 365). The present study contributes to the growing body of literature on organizational change and well-being by providing much needed empirical evidence for the negative association between task restructuring and well-being, as well as for the buffering power of newly acquired KSAOs, opportunities for reflection, and opportunities for experimentation in the relationship between task restructuring and well-being.

**Task restructuring and psychological well-being**

In a broad sense, one of the main characteristics of restructuring is that it involves changes in the ways people conduct their jobs (Anderson-Connolly, Grunberg, Greenberg, & Moore, 2002). Anderson-Connolly et al. (2002) emphasized that employees are more than ever expected to successfully incorporate new work practices, ways, tools and technologies into their jobs. These management-initiated changes are usually aimed at the optimization of work processes and overall quality and quantity of performance (Anderson-Connolly et al., 2002; Harrison, 1997). Generally, changes in organizations are conducted with particular attention to the efficiency of work, but often with little regard for employee well-being (Connor, 1997). Even though it seems evident that employee well-being is an essential prerequisite for performance (Robertson, Birch, & Cooper, 2012; Wright & Cropanzano, 2000), the relationship between task restructuring-related change and well-being
has not attracted much empirical research (Alam & Rizvi, 2012; Rau, 2006; Robertson et al., 2012).

With regard to employee well-being, we focus on two concepts commonly used in research as indicators of well-being: vigour (a positive valence indicator) and emotional exhaustion (a negative valence indicator) (de Lange, 2005; Schaufeli, Taris, & Van Rhenen, 2008). Emotional exhaustion is a concept derived from theories about stress and burnout, which refers to feelings of being overextended and exhausted by the job demands of one’s work (Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996). Vigour is a core dimension of the concept of engagement, which refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, as well as willingness to invest effort in one’s work and persistence in the face of difficulty (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002). Emotional exhaustion and vigour are assumed to represent the two ends of the activation continuum reflected in the concepts burnout and engagement (Schaufeli et al., 2002). A second continuum representative for the burnout and engagement concepts is identification (including cynicism and dedication). In this study, we focus on the activation dimension because studies (see, for instance, meta-analysis of Pfennig & Häusch, 1994, and the meta-analysis of Lee & Ashforth, 1996) showed that this continuum is more relevant (i.e. explains most variance) in measuring the impact of job demands on well-being. Even though Schaufeli et al. (2002) theorize that emotional exhaustion and vigour belong to the same continuum, they clarify that the absence of burnout-related symptoms does not imply the presence of work engagement. Furthermore, research has provided evidence that exhaustion and vigour are only weakly to moderately correlated and therefore represent two independent constructs (Demerouti, Mostert, & Bakker, 2010; Mäkikangas, Feldt, Kinnunen, & Tolvanen, 2012). Hence, we expect that exhaustion will exhibit an incremental value over vigour, when investigating employee well-being.

In order to support our reasoning regarding the hypothesized negative association between change and well-being, we draw on the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004b). According to the JD-R, high job demands have energy-depleting properties and may elicit emotional exhaustion and ill health (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005). In the light of the JD-R, it seems plausible that, at the onset, task restructuring will be perceived as a job demand which may inhibit employee well-being. At the beginning of the change process, when the old routines have become redundant and new routines are not yet established, employees are likely to experience distress. The very idea of change in work routines implies uncertainty regarding work outcomes. This uncertainty entails a state of anticipation of resource loss or of inability to gain new resources. The negative appraisal of the expected change, resulting from the state of anticipation of loss, accounts for employees’ experienced work stress (Verhaeghe, Vlerick, De Backer, Van Maele, & Gemmel, 2008).

When theorizing about the relationship between task restructuring and well-being, it is essential to note that, in reality, task restructuring might be accompanied by changes that can lead to a reduction in the workforce and thus can induce feelings of job insecurity among the employees (Wiezer et al., 2011). In studies, it has been shown that downsizing taxes employee well-being through job insecurity (De Witte, 1999; Hellgren, Sverke, & Isaksson, 1999; Østhus, 2007). In one study, Schweiger and Denisi (1991) demonstrated that a merger was associated with an increase in job insecurity and stress. Thus, change in this context has been viewed as a strong predictor of negative outcomes such as job insecurity and associated withdrawal behaviours (increased absenteeism, and decreased
commitment). Extending further on the detrimental impact of change on employee well-being, De Witte (2005) advances that “job insecurity is the result of radical economic changes” and cautions the reader that “employees will be confronted with job insecurity and its consequences for a long time to come” (p. 5). Recognizing the powerful impact of job insecurity on employees’ well-being in times of change – see also the meta-analyses on the negative effects of job insecurity of Cheng and Chan (2008) and Sverke, Hellgren, and Näswall (2002) – we included it as a control variable in our study. Taking into consideration that we are predominantly interested in the clear and unbiased effects of task restructuring on well-being, it seems important for the purposes of the current study to filter the insecurity aspects out of the effects of task restructuring on well-being. Subsequently, when conducting the analyses we controlled for the effects of job insecurity.

**Hypothesis 1** (main effects)
1 (a). Task restructuring will be positively associated with employees’ emotional exhaustion after controlling for job insecurity.
1 (b). Task restructuring will be negatively associated with employees’ vigour after controlling for job insecurity.

**Newly acquired KSAOs as a buffer in the relationship between task restructuring and well-being**

Employees are continuously challenged to adapt as fast and as efficiently as possible to the ever-changing demands of their work environment (Bezuijen, Dam, Berg, & Thierry, 2010; Heilmann, 2007). This poses an ongoing pressure on employees to meet the changing job requirements by updating their capacities so that they can maintain speed of productivity and quality of performance (Obschonka, Silbereisen, & Wasilewski, 2012). In this paper, we argue that the successful acquisition of new KSAOs, relevant for job performance, serves as a valuable personal resource that can safeguard employee well-being in settings of change. Personal resources as posited by the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003) are aspects of the self, which have protective properties, allowing the individual to influence his/her environment and to be resilient to demanding occurrences. COR emphasizes that generating resources results in “resource caravans”, which have the capacity to protect the individuals from negative outcomes (such as burnout) and promote more positive ones. The theory posits that, in all, individuals who possess certain amounts of personal resources are more capable of generating more resources and are less likely to suffer a resource loss. Thus, COR suggests a buffering effect of personal resources in the relationship between a stressor (e.g. task restructuring) and negative outcomes (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007).

**Hypothesis 2** (moderation effects)
2 (a). The positive association between task restructuring and emotional exhaustion will be weaker under the condition of high (vs. low) newly acquired KSAOs after controlling for job insecurity.
2 (b). The negative association between task restructuring and vigour will be weaker under the condition of high (vs. low) newly acquired KSAOs after controlling for job insecurity.
Opportunities for reflection and experimentation as buffers in the relationship between task restructuring and well-being

In the literature on organizational learning, the importance of reflection and experimentation for overall workplace learning has been well established (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Marsick, 1988; van Woerkom & Croon, 2008). In his experiential learning theory, Kolb (1984) introduced a four-stage model of learning in which he theorized that combinations of perceiving (related to reflection) and processing (related to experimentation) lead to learning. Reflective observation and active experimentation are central in Kolb’s learning cycle model. He hypothesizes that a particular experience during the implementation of a certain task can stimulate the individual’s reflective observation, which in turn can be transformed into abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Similarly, Wielenga-Meijer, Taris, Kompier, and Wigboldus (2010) distinguished between different processes in the workplace learning cycle, namely a cognitive process, which includes reflection, and a behavioural process, which refers to exploration and experimentation. In line with Kolb (1984) and Wielenga-Meijer et al. (2010), we distinguish between reflection as a cognitive process and experimentation as a behavioural process, which are strongly related and inherent to workplace learning.

Through reflection, employees are able to make inferences from work-related observations (Schön, 1983) and can further engage in systematic experimentation, which can lead to effective problem solving. Reflection is essential for making assumptions and formulating hypotheses as well as for evaluating previous experiences, and therefore, it is an indispensable part of the workplace learning process. Opportunities for reflection and experimentation provided by the company are an invaluable job resource for employees’ learning and adaptation in change settings when new ideas and original or tailor-made solutions are required (Lee et al., 2004). By being given the opportunity to reflect and experiment, employees can engage in active problem solving and reduce the feeling of uncertainty regarding the outcomes.

From the perspective of the JD-R, job resources are physical, social or organizational aspects of the job, which help employees in achieving work-related goals, reduce job demands and the physiological and psychological costs associated with them, and stimulate personal growth and development (Demerouti et al., 2001). Also, it has been established that job resources that have been established buffer the relationship between job demands and negative outcomes (Bakker et al., 2005). Similarly to COR theory, the JD-R states that high demands can be successfully combatted when employees possess high levels of resources, which can mitigate the negative effect of job demands on well-being (Bakker et al., 2005). This implies that employees with a high level of job resources experience less exhaustion when job demands are high. Thus, we expect that job resources such as opportunities for reflection and experimentation will have the capacity to moderate the relationship between job demands (i.e. task restructuring) and negative outcomes (i.e. exhaustion).

Hypothesis 3 (moderation effects)
3 (a). The positive association between task restructuring and emotional exhaustion will be weaker under the condition of high (vs. low) opportunities for reflection after controlling for job insecurity.
3 (b). The negative association between task restructuring and vigour will be weaker under the condition of high (vs. low) opportunities for reflection after controlling for job insecurity.
Hypothesis 4 (moderation effects)

4 (a). The positive association between task restructuring and emotional exhaustion will be weaker under the condition of high (vs. low) opportunities for experimentation after controlling for job insecurity.

4 (b). The negative association between task restructuring and vigour will be weaker under the condition of high (vs. low) opportunities for experimentation after controlling for job insecurity.

Method

Data collection and respondents

Cross-sectional data were obtained from a representative heterogeneous sample of 1711 Dutch wage earners. Data were collected by a professional ISO (International Organization for Standardization) certified market research company conducting internet research in the Netherlands. The total sample of the Dutch working population had been stratified by gender, age and education. A comparison was conducted between the group obtained in our study and data on the total working Dutch population (gender, age, education and location) provided by the Central Office for Statistics of the Netherlands. This showed that the respondents in our sample were representative of the Dutch working population. Approximately 3500 employees were invited via the internet to take part in this study. The survey was sent in the last week of March 2012 and was available to the respondents for one week. After three days, a reminder was sent in order to ensure an optimal response. Respondents’ age ranged between 18 and 64 years (M = 43.3 years; SD = 11.0 years). The majority of the respondents (87%) had a permanent contract and 13% were employed temporarily.

Measures

Job insecurity was measured with four items developed by De Witte (2000) and validated by Vander Elst et al. (2014). A sample item is “I feel unsure about the future of my job”. Answers were given on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Cronbach’s alpha was .90.

Task restructuring was measured with three items developed by the authors of this study. The expression “in the past six months” was used as introduction to the questions of this scale. In this way, we ensured that the participants referred to recent changes. A sample item is “The content of my work has changed”. The scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree) to 5 = strongly agree. Cronbach’s alpha was .89.

Newly acquired KSAOs were assessed with four items developed by Taverniers (2011) to measure “active learning”. The expression “in the past six months” was used as an introduction to the questions of this scale in order to ensure that participants’ responses referred to recently obtained KSAOs. A sample item is “In the past six months, I have obtained new competences, which help me to function better at my work”. The scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree) to 5 = strongly agree. Cronbach’s alpha was .95.

Opportunities for reflection were measured with three items developed by Taverniers (2011). A sample item is “In my work I have time and opportunities to think about better working methods”. The scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Cronbach’s alpha was .80.
Opportunities for experimentation were measured with four items developed by the authors of this study and inspired by the scale of Taverniers (2011). A sample item is “In my job I am offered sufficient time to find out how to conduct tasks more efficiently”. The scale ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Cronbach’s alpha was .92.

Well-being was tapped with two scales: emotional exhaustion and vigour. Emotional exhaustion was measured with five items derived from a Dutch version of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI; Schaufeli et al., 1996). A sample item is “At the end of the working day I feel empty”. The scale ranged from 1 = never to 6 = always. Cronbach’s alpha was .93.

Vigour is one of the three dimensions of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale. We measured vigour with three items developed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004a). A sample item is “When I work I feel fit and strong”. The scale ranged from 1 = never to 5 = always. Cronbach’s alpha was .82.

Analyses

Surveys were administered in Dutch. In order to reduce the chance for common method bias, the items in the questionnaire were randomized and where possible a randomization of the response options was applied (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2011).

In the current paper, gender (0 = male; 1 = female), age and job insecurity were controlled for, because they can play a confounding role when investigating relationships in occupational contexts. In the past, these variables have been identified as important control variables in task restructuring- and well-being-related research (Burke & Greenglass, 2001; Vander Elst, Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2010). In addition to that, preliminarily analyses indicated that gender, age and job insecurity correlated significantly with vigour and emotional exhaustion. In our analyses we did not control for tenure, because it is strongly associated with age ($r = .51, p < .001$). The variables job insecurity (control variable), task restructuring (independent variable) and the moderating variables (newly acquired KSAOs, opportunities to reflect or opportunities to experiment) were standardized and the product terms were calculated using the standardized scores. In this way, multicollinearity between a specific product term and its constituents is reduced (Aiken & West, 1991).

Further, hierarchical regression analyses were used in order to test the research hypotheses. The variables were introduced in two steps. First, the covariates gender, age and job insecurity were included in the analyses in order to control for relationships with the predictor and outcome variables. At the second step, task restructuring, one of the moderating variables and the interaction terms between task restructuring and each of the moderators were included in the regression respectively. This step allows us to establish the main effects of the moderator variables on the outcome variables as well as the hypothesized effects of the cross-product term on the outcome variables. In order to test Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4 we conducted simple slope analyses (calculated for 1 SD above and 1 SD under the mean). This way, we investigated the direction and the significance of the interaction term. We followed the procedure recommended by Aiken and West (1991) by standardizing the relevant variables before computing the interaction term.
Results

Table 1 presents the correlations, means and standard deviations obtained in this study. The hierarchical regression analyses (Table 2) showed that both control variables age and gender were positively and significantly related to vigour, and negatively and significantly related to exhaustion, which indicates that older employees and women were experiencing a higher level of well-being than younger employees and men. These findings are in line with previous research showing that females and older employees have better general well-being (Vander Elst, Bosman, De Cuyper, Stouten, & De Witte, 2013; Vander Elst et al., 2010). As expected, job insecurity was positively and significantly associated with emotional exhaustion, and negatively and significantly related to vigour.

In line with Hypotheses 1a and 1b, the predictor variable task restructuring was positively and significantly associated with the outcome variable emotional exhaustion and negatively and significantly associated with vigour. The interaction term between task restructuring and newly acquired KSAOs showed a significant negative association with the outcome variable emotional exhaustion, but did not relate significantly to vigour. Hence, Hypothesis 2 was supported for emotional exhaustion, but was rejected for vigour. Furthermore, the interaction term between task restructuring and opportunities for reflection was negatively and significantly associated with emotional exhaustion and positively and significantly related to vigour. These results supported Hypotheses 3a and 3b. Finally, the interaction term between task restructuring and opportunities for experimentation was negatively and significantly associated with emotional exhaustion and positively and significantly related to vigour, supporting Hypotheses 4a and 4b.

In addition to the regression analyses, simple slope analyses were performed (see Figures 1–3). The interaction effects for opportunities for reflection and opportunities for experimentation exhibited very similar patterns (see Figures 2 and 3). The analyses revealed that when the level of newly acquired KSAOs was low, the relationship between task restructuring and emotional exhaustion was strong and positive ($B = 0.27$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 7.38$, $p = .001$). For high levels of newly acquired KSAOs, the relationship between task restructuring and exhaustion was also positive but less strong ($B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 3.75$, $p = .001$). Furthermore, at a low level of opportunities for reflection, the relationship between task restructuring and emotional exhaustion was positive and significant ($B = 0.28$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 8.00$, $p = .001$). At high levels of opportunities for reflection, the relationship between task restructuring and exhaustion was also positive and significant but less strong ($B = 0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 2.73$, $p = .006$). For low levels of opportunities for reflection, the relationship between task restructuring and exhaustion was negative and significant ($B = -0.07$, $SE = 0.02$, $t = -3.67$, $p = .001$), but at a high level of opportunities for reflection, the relationship between task restructuring and vigour was not significant ($B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.02$, $t = 0.57$, $p = n.s.$).

With regard to opportunities for experimentation, at low levels of this moderator the relationship between task restructuring and emotional exhaustion was positive and significant ($B = 0.28$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 7.94$, $p = .001$). For high levels of opportunities for experimentation, we found a less strong positive and significant relationship between task restructuring and exhaustion ($B = 0.10$, $SE = 0.04$, $t = 2.87$, $p = .004$). At a low level of opportunities for experimentation, the relationship between task restructuring and vigour was negative and significant ($B = -0.08$, $SE = 0.02$, $t = 3.76$, $p = .001$), but at a high level
Table 1. Means ($M$), standard deviations ($SD$) and correlations of the study variables ($N = 1711$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Age</td>
<td>43.31</td>
<td>11.04</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Gender</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>–.16</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Job insecurity</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>(90)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Task restructuring</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>(89)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. New KSAOs</td>
<td>2.84</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.15</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>(95)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Reflection</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>(80)</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Experimentation</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.20</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>(92)</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Exhaustion</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>-.29</td>
<td>(93)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Vigour</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>-.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: KSAO = Knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics.

$r = .06$ to $.07$, $p < .05$. When $r \geq .08$, $p < .001$.  

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Table 2. Summary of hierarchical regression analyses; standardized regression coefficients ($N = 1711$).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Exhaustion</th>
<th>Vigour</th>
<th>Exhaustion</th>
<th>Vigour</th>
<th>Exhaustion</th>
<th>Vigour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moderator: new KSAOs</td>
<td></td>
<td>Moderator: reflection</td>
<td></td>
<td>Moderator: experimentation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.07**</td>
<td>-0.07**</td>
<td>0.14***</td>
<td>0.14***</td>
<td>-0.05*</td>
<td>-0.05*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-0.07**</td>
<td>-0.07**</td>
<td>0.12***</td>
<td>0.11***</td>
<td>-0.08***</td>
<td>-0.08***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job insecurity</td>
<td>0.23***</td>
<td>0.23***</td>
<td>-0.17***</td>
<td>-0.17***</td>
<td>0.20***</td>
<td>0.19***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task restructuring</td>
<td>0.18***</td>
<td>0.18***</td>
<td>-0.09***</td>
<td>-0.09***</td>
<td>0.17***</td>
<td>0.16***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderator</td>
<td>-0.15***</td>
<td>-0.15***</td>
<td>-0.28***</td>
<td>-0.29***</td>
<td>-0.25***</td>
<td>-0.26***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction term</td>
<td>-0.06**</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.08***</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.08***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>0.114</td>
<td>0.004</td>
<td>0.122</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>0.151</td>
<td>0.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$\Delta F$</td>
<td>44.052</td>
<td>7.182</td>
<td>47.602</td>
<td>3.148</td>
<td>60.859</td>
<td>13.897</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: KSAOs = Knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics.
Significances of standardized regression coefficients: *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$. Significances for $\Delta F > 7 = p < .01$; $\Delta F > 11 = p < .001$. 

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of opportunities for experimentation, the relationship between task restructuring and vigour was not significant ($B = 0.02, SE = 0.02, t = .86, p = n.s.$).

**Discussion**

The purpose of this paper has been to shed more light on the relationship between task restructuring and well-being, as well as on the potential of learning (acquiring new KSAOs, opportunities for reflection and opportunities for experimentation) to moderate this relationship. In line with evidence from previous research (Bakker et al., 2005; Van Ruysseveldt, Verboon, & Smulders, 2011), we established that task restructuring as a
demanding situation was strongly and negatively associated with employee well-being, manifested by increased emotional exhaustion and decreased employee vigour. This finding suggests that task restructuring can be a powerful predictor of employee well-being beyond job insecurity, as we systematically controlled for the effects of job insecurity in our analyses.

A number of factors may account for the negative association between task restructuring and well-being. For instance, the discrepancy between the needed and the available KSAOs, which arises at the beginning of the change process, and the general resource-depleting nature of task restructuring as a job demand, may explain the adverse influence of task restructuring on well-being. When discussing the relationship between task restructuring and well-being, it is important to note that in this study we investigated only associations (i.e. our statements and findings hold only for the “here” and “now” at the moment of the measurement). Future studies should comprehensively examine whether and how task restructuring influences well-being over time. It would be particularly valuable for future research to investigate patterns of coping behaviours, as well as to measure the behavioural consequences (e.g. turnover, absenteeism and counterproductive behaviours) of the reduced well-being that may be associated with task restructuring.

Furthermore, we aimed to gain a better understanding of the buffering potential of workplace learning in terms of newly acquired KSAOs, opportunities for reflection and opportunities for experimentation. From the perspective of COR, we expected that newly acquired KSAOs would serve as personal resources, which can buffer the negative relationship between task restructuring as a demanding situation and well-being (in terms of emotional exhaustion and vigour; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). This expectation was only partly met. The results from simple slope analyses showed that among individuals with a high level of newly acquired KSAOs, task restructuring was associated with less emotional exhaustion than in individuals with a low level of newly acquired KSAOs. Thus, a moderating role of newly acquired KSAOs was established for the relationship between task restructuring and emotional exhaustion. However, no significant interaction
was found between task restructuring and newly acquired KSAOs on vigour. These findings indicate that under the condition of task restructuring, newly acquired KSAOs can prevent employees from becoming emotionally exhausted, but it cannot contribute to the sustainment of, or the increase in, the level of experienced vigour. The acquisition of a high level of new KSAOs is considered to contribute to employees perception of being well equipped to cope with the learning demands associated with task restructuring (Loon & Casimir, 2008; Obschonka et al., 2012). Active strategies for coping with change, such as obtaining new KSAOs, facilitate or even constitute adaptation and promote employee well-being (Van Dam, 2011). Additionally, the acquisition of new KSAOs can account for improved well-being, because that is likely to reduce employees performance anxieties associated with organizational change (Holman & Wall, 2002).

With regard to the two job resources included in this study – opportunities for reflection and for experimentation – our results showed that both opportunities act as buffers in the adverse relationship between task restructuring and well-being. In line with the JD-R, when job demands are high, e.g. in times of task restructuring, job resources become particularly salient in buffering their strain-inducing impact (Bakker et al., 2005).

The results from the simple slope analyses indicated similar patterns for both opportunities for reflection and opportunities for experimentation. More specifically, we found that for employees who perceived low levels of opportunities for reflection or experimentation, the positive relationship between task restructuring and emotional exhaustion was stronger, compared to workers who experienced high levels of opportunities for reflection or experimentation. Alternatively, for employees who experienced low levels of opportunities for reflection or experimentation, the relationship between task restructuring and vigour was negative and significant; for employees who experienced high levels of opportunities for reflection or experimentation, the relationship between task restructuring and vigour was not significant, indicating that high levels of opportunities for reflection and experimentation were not associated with maintained or increased vigour among employees.

**Theoretical implications**

The present study has important theoretical implications. First, the results obtained in this research are clearly in line with the earlier formulated expectations derived from COR and JD-R theories. Thus, the underlying assumptions that task restructuring plays the role of a demand or threat, and that newly acquired KSAOs and opportunities for reflection and experimentation serve as personal and job resources respectively, were confirmed in this study. Second, up until now studies have often failed to establish moderation effects of resources in the relationship between demands and stress-related outcomes (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). The current research, on the other hand, provides clear evidence for the capacity of both personal and job resources to moderate the relationship between job demands and well-being. Third, studies so far have focused on examining moderation effects of traditional job resources such as autonomy, social support and feedback in the relationship between job demands and well-being (Bakker et al., 2005). However, very few studies have researched workplace learning as a phenomenon, relevant to the work and stress context. By establishing that workplace learning can mitigate the detrimental relationship between demands and well-being, the present study contributes to the growing research on workplace learning and well-being (Van Ruysseveldt et al., 2011).
Limitations

This study has a number of shortcomings. First, the cross-sectional design hampers causal interpretations. For instance, research has posited that restructuring has the propensity to predict well-being (Wood, Van Veldhoven, Croon, & de Menezes, 2012). Notwithstanding, it seems evident that employees who are healthy and not strained will be the best assets of an organization that undergoes restructuring. Furthermore, our findings that resources (both job and personal) can buffer the relationship between job demands and exhaustion have been empirically substantiated (Bakker et al., 2005; Van Ruysseveldt et al., 2011; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). However, this evidence builds on analyses conducted on cross-sectional data. Therefore, it will be valuable for future theory-building to test the buffering effects of moderators, such as newly acquired KSAOs and opportunities for reflection and experimentation, longitudinally.

The second limitation of the present study is related to the use of self-developed scales, which have not been validated. Although a validation study has not taken place yet, in the current study we conducted some analyses that indicated that our scales have good psychometric properties. For instance, the Cronbach’s alphas of the two self-developed scales were well above .70.

The third limitation is inherent to the method of data collection. All the data for the current study were self-reported and were collected via surveys, allowing for common method variance to occur and the magnitude of the effects to be inflated (Podsakoff et al., 2011). However, it should be noted that common method variance cannot account for interaction effects (including squared effects, which refer to independent variables interacting with themselves; Evans, 1985). In fact, interaction effects are suppressed in regression analyses and field data, making such effects difficult to detect (McClelland & Judd, 1993). Furthermore, self-reported data allows for social desirability and positive and negative affectivity-related common method bias to influence the participants’ responses. This holds true especially for variables such as job insecurity, acquiring new KSAOs and well-being, where personality characteristics such as self-efficacy may strongly affect the direction and magnitude of the response (Podsakoff et al., 2011). Future research may consider including interviews, evaluations from external parties, and observations into the data collection procedure. This would not only help to avoid common method bias, but would provide a more complex view on the studied phenomena. Furthermore, researchers in future may find it useful to study well-being using both subjective self-report methods and objective methods. In this study, we chose to measure well-being through the concepts of emotional exhaustion and vigour. Considering that emotional exhaustion and vigour are highly subjective, we felt that the most appropriate way of measuring these constructs was by using self-reported data.

Concluding remarks

Two beliefs have served as inspiration for the present research: namely, that more attention is needed regarding the influences of change driven by task restructuring on employee well-being, and that workplace learning (newly acquired KSAOs as well as opportunities for reflection and experimentation) can counteract the harmful influences of task restructuring on employee well-being. Specifically, the main contribution of the current study lies in examining these relations and providing much needed empirical evidence for the adverse association between task restructuring and well-being. In this
respect, it is important to note that not only was our hypothesis that change reduces well-being confirmed, but our hypotheses that newly acquired KSAOs, opportunities for reflection and opportunities for experimentation can mitigate the harmful influence of restructuring on well-being were also supported.

This study has two important practical implications. First, it demonstrates that in times of task restructuring, organizational policies and practices, which traditionally are predominantly occupied with the optimization of work processes and performance, should also be aimed at supporting employee well-being. Second, in line with previous findings (Van Ruysseveldt et al., 2011), this study indicates how important it is for employees to acquire new KSAOs and for organizations to facilitate this process by providing the necessary opportunities for learning (e.g. for reflection and experimentation). Ultimately, the acquisition of KSAOs by employees serves a double function: it is an asset to the organization, enabling employees to perform more efficiently, and at the same time plays the role of a protective mechanism that counteracts emotional exhaustion.

References


