

JOB CONTROL AS A PREDICTOR OF WORK-RELATED BEHAVIOURS AND FEELINGS AMONG MANAGERS – RESEARCH STUDY

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Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between job control and aggressive, passive-avoidant and proactive behaviours among executive managers as a professional group.

Design/methodology/approach: A total of 212 executive managers participated in the study. The study used three questionnaires: a self-designed scale to measure workplace control; a scale to identify three types of work-related behaviour (WORAB), namely aggressive, passive-avoidant and proactive behaviours; and an abbreviated version of a scale that measures feelings of work-related happiness (WORAF).

Findings: All the three hypotheses formulated in the study were fully confirmed. Job control was found to be a moderate predictor of all the behaviours studied, and a relatively strong predictor of work-related feelings. The study also confirmed that positive feelings have a mediating effect in the relationship between control and the studied behaviours.

Research limitations/implications: The self-reporting method adopted in this study is not an objective method, as it is based on the subjective feelings of respondents. In addition, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow firm conclusions to be drawn about the cause-and-effect relationship. Furthermore, since the respondents were recruited from a group of students at a single university, it cannot be said that they constitute a representative sample of managers.

Practical implications: The results of the study indicate that extending the scope of control at work is a way to reduce undesirable behaviour on the part of executive managers on the one hand and away to strengthen their proactivity on the other.

Originality/value: The relationship between job control and work-related feelings and behaviours has not been widely studied to date, especially among managers.

Keywords: job control, work-related behaviours, work-related feelings of happiness, executive managers.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

Job control at work seems to be one of the most frequently studied variables in the field of occupational and management psychology. Numerous studies indicate the positive role that control at work plays for both the employee and the organisation.

In psychology, a sense of control is equated with a sense of a person's influence over their environment and themselves, particularly in terms of their ability to regulate their emotions (Averill, 1973; Kobasa, Maddi, Kahn, 1982). Control can also be considered more as a cognitive construct, which is exemplified by the popular concept of internal vs. external locus of control, developed by Rotter (1966). Control at work, also in psychological terms, concerns the freedom of a person to perform their duties and is considered within the framework of working conditions. The former captures control as a disposition, the latter as an external, situational factor.

The importance and significant role of control in the field of work are reflected in numerous theories and concepts of which control is an essential component. One of the first models to consider control at work is the Hackman and Oldham Job Characteristics model (1976). In this model, control is conceptualised as an employee's autonomy in the organisation and involves experiencing responsibility for their job performance. It is associated with motivation, the quality of performance, job satisfaction, low absenteeism, and employee turnover. Another quite popular model is Karasek's (1979) Job Demand Control Model, which explains organisational stress. The author's large-scale study showed that a high degree of control in the hands of employees was positively correlated with their physical and mental health. At the same time, Karasek put forward the assumption that a high level of control with a high workload promotes employee motivation and development. Control was also included in a model by Maslach and Leiter (1997), which explains the development of the burnout syndrome as a consequence of organisational stress. Although the authors conclude that absolute control at work is not possible, due to, *inter alia*, a number of unpredictable circumstances, the total lack of control leads to exhaustion, cynicism, and a decrease in employee engagement and effectiveness (p. 66). The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001) also incorporates control. As in the case of the Hackman and Oldham Job Characteristics model, Demerouti et al understand control as a sense of autonomy, which, along with other resources (supervisor's support, feedback, rewards, participation, and job security), increases employee motivation, which translates into employee performance.

The above concepts have, in relation to control itself, largely been positively validated by numerous studies sometimes conducted in as meta-analyses, many of which included samples of thousands of subjects. One of the first such studies, by Spector (1986), showed a positive correlation of control at work with high levels of satisfaction, engagement and motivation, as well as low levels of physical symptoms, absenteeism and employee turnover. In contrast,

a study by Park et al showed that control reduces depersonalisation and enhances feelings of personal achievement (Park et al., 2014), which are among the dimensions of occupational burnout. Aronsson et al (2017) showed a positive role of control in reducing emotional exhaustion. The freedom to act also correlated with job satisfaction, which was confirmed by a meta-analysis conducted by Asif et al. (2018).

Despite a number of studies that confirm the positive effects of control at work on the employee, it is the author's knowledge that few analyses have been conducted to investigate the relationship between control and work-related behaviours as ways of coping with difficult situations. One such analysis is a study by Sonnentag and Spychal (2012), which found that control at work directly and positively correlates with proactive behaviours. However, academics are far less interested in studying behaviours, such as aggressive or passive-avoidant behaviours, which can be considered counterproductive, particularly in relation to executive managers. And yet representatives of this profession, due to the complexity of the tasks they perform and the significance of their responsibilities on their shoulders, constitute the most important part of human capital in an organization. It is therefore important to study the psychological aspects of their functioning in order to further develop their competencies, as well as to introduce changes to organisational environments with a view to making the best possible use of the potential of executive managers. This study, therefore, aims to address the gap in research into the relationship between control at work and work-related behaviours and work-related feelings of happiness among executive managers as a professional group.

Behaviours can be an important element of an operating style, which, in the case of executive managers, can be considered as management style or a leadership style. Among the many classifications and categories of management styles, one can distinguish between passive leadership, which is close to the laissez-faire style, and aggressive leadership, both referred to as bad or destructive leadership styles (Einarsen et al., 2007; Kelloway et al., 2005). Proactive actions, on the other hand, will be a determinant of desirable behaviours within the organisation and an element of leadership that leads to positive consequences at both the employee level and the organization-wide level. In this study, therefore, the focus is on three types of work-related behaviours: proactive, aggressive and passive-avoidant work-related behaviours. In addition, feelings of work-related happiness as a mediator of the control-behaviour relationship are included in the verified models. The author's analysis of the tested correlations is shown in Figure 1.

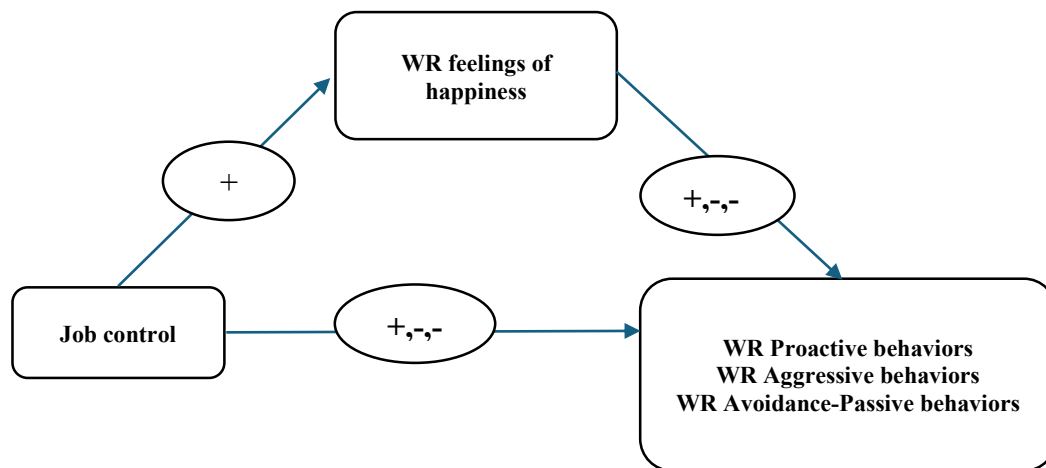


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

Source: own elaboration.

The following three hypotheses were formulated in this study:

H1: Proactive behaviour positively correlate with work-related feelings of happiness.

H2: Aggressive and passive-avoidant behaviours negative correlate with control at work.

H3: Work-related feelings of happiness have a mediating effect between control at work and employee behaviours.

2. Methods

2.1. The survey

The survey in the study was questionnaire-based and was conducted online using the MS Forms platform. It involved working students studying for a second-cycle degree in management on an extramural basis. Each respondent was assured of the anonymous nature of the survey. It was explained that any of them was free to withdraw from the study at any time.

2.2. Description of the sample

The analysis of the results included 212 respondents claiming to hold managerial positions, of which about 59% were men. Almost half of the respondents (48.1%) were aged between 31 and 40 years, 22.2% (41 to 50), approx. 19.3% (20 to 30), 6.1% (51 to 60), and 4.2% were aged over 60 years. The largest number of respondents, 31.6%, had been worked in their current positions for 3 to 5 years, 25.5% between 1 and 2 years, 19.8% from 6 to 10 years, 7.1% from 11 to 15 years, 5.7% (not more than six months), 5.2% from 7 to 11 months, and 10% for more than 16 years. The average number of years in a managerial position for the entire sample was 16.08 years (SD = 9.81).

2.3. Research methods and the research procedure

The following three scales were used in the study:

- Work-Related Behaviour Scale, developed by Jaworek, Karwowski and Marek (2021), which is divided into three independent subscales for measuring passive-avoidant, aggressive and proactive behaviours. The analysis of the results used abbreviated, 3-item versions of the WORAB subscales, for which items were selected based on the highest factor loadings (cf. Jaworek, Karwowski, Marek, 2021). The response scale ranges from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always). Examples of items include: *I pretend to be busy with something in order not to take on other tasks* (passive-avoidant behaviour); *I shout at my subordinates and colleagues* (aggressive behaviour); *When I am solving some issues, I act efficiently and quickly* (proactive behaviour).
- An abbreviated scale that measures work-related happiness, based on the Work-Related Feelings Scale (Jaworek, Marek and Karwowski, 2020), which comprises three items. The response scale ranges from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always). An example of an item is: *I get a lot of fun from what I do at work*.
- The *Control-at-Work Scale*, designed by the author, comprising three items. The response scale ranges from 1 (definitely not) to 5 (definitely yes). An example of an item is: *I can control the way I do my work*.

All the statistical analyses were conducted using the PS Imago Pro 10 statistical data analysis package and the Amos 29 module.

3. Results

In order to verify the relationship between control at work and the three types of behaviour: proactive, aggressive and passive-avoidant, three equations were designed using the structural equation modelling (SEM) method. Feelings of work-related happiness were included in each model as a mediator of the control-behaviour relationship. Descriptive statistics were also calculated for each scale measuring the variables under analysis, along with the correlations between them (see Table 1 for details).

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics and correlations for study variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Job control	3.69	.82	-				
2. WR feelings of happiness	2.81	.77	.336**	-			
3. WR Avoidance-Passive Behaviors	1.35	.49	-.237**	-.331**	-		
4. WR Proactive Behaviors	3.28	.53	.337**	.356**	-.387**	-	
5. WR Aggressive Behaviors	1.41	.58	-.288**	-.362**	.498**	-.197*	-

Note: * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$.

Source: own elaboration.

Very good goodness-of-fit measures were obtained for all the models (Table 2), meeting the recommended criteria (Hooper et al., 2008). Details are provided in Table 2.

Table 2.
SEM model fit

Model	Chi ² /df	NFI	RFI	IFI	TLI	CFI	RMSEA
Model 1	1,380 (p=.102)	.953	.913	.987	.974	.986	.042
Model 2	1,385 (p=.099)	.955	.915	.987	.975	.987	.043
Model 3	1,047 (p=.399)	.968	.939	.998	.997	.998	.015

Model 1 (WR Avoidance-Passive Behaviors), Model 2 (WR Proactive Behaviors), Model 3 (WR Aggressive Behaviors).

Source: own elaboration.

The analyses showed that control at work is, as was expected, a significant predictor of all the work-related behaviours under analysis. More specifically, control at work lowers the level of aggressive behaviours ($\beta = -.26$) and, slightly, the level of passive-avoidant behaviours ($\beta = -.15$), while it increases the level of proactive actions ($\beta = .20$). Control also proved to be a relatively strong predictor of work-related feelings of happiness ($\beta = .40$). A mediating effect of work-related happiness between control and behaviours was observed. Positive feelings turned out to be an even stronger predictor of the behaviours than control alone. The regression coefficients (β) were the same for passive-avoidant and aggressive behaviours ($-.33$), and $.39$ for proactive behaviours. Details are provided in Table 3.

Table 3.
Direct effects results

	Standardized beta coefficient (β)		R ²
	Job control	WR Happiness	
Model 1			
WR Happiness	.42**		.17*
WR Avoidance-Passive Behaviors	-.15*	-.33**	.17*
Model 2			
WR Happiness	.42**		.17*
WR Proactive Behaviors	.20*	.39**	.26**
Model 3			
WR Happiness	.40**		.17*
WR Aggressive Behaviors	-.26*	-.33**	.25**

Note: * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$.

Source: own elaboration.

4. Discussion of the results

Executive managers are the backbone of any organisation, which is why it is so important to study them in terms of the psychological mechanisms that determine their performance. A number of studies indicate that one of the factors with a positive impact on employees is job

control, which is usually defined as the freedom to act. This study, too, confirmed this relationship. All three the hypotheses were confirmed. A sense of control counteracts aggressive and passive-avoidant behaviour and increases the level of proactive behaviour among the executive managers included in the study. It is also associated with positive work-related feelings of happiness.

The present results are quite relevant to statistics on experiencing aggression in the workplace. According to a report by the Gallup Institute and the Lloyd's Register Foundation, 23% of employees have experienced workplace aggression at least once, including 18% who experienced psychological violence and harassment (Crabtree, 2022). Some researchers point to the key role of supervisors in their subordinates experiencing feelings of anger (Leslie et al., 2021), which is associated with aggression. Aggression at work can lead to a decrease in job satisfaction, the development of symptoms of burnout, and overall health deterioration (Merecz, Drabek, Moscicka, 2009). On the other hand, work-related passive-avoidant behaviours involve employees reducing their activity and not undertaking activities that are customarily their work responsibilities. In consequence, such behaviours will lead to a decrease in the employee's productivity and efficiency, which, in the case of executive managers, can have a negative impact on the organisation. Few studies that deal with the consequences of passive leadership indicate the dysfunctional nature of such leadership (Frischer, Larsson, 2000).

It follows from the results that work-related feelings of happiness also play an important role in the control-behaviour relationship, being a predictor of all the behaviours under analysis. Job control is one of the factors that positive affect the employee's well-being, although it is not the only one. Employee satisfaction can also be increased by, for example, developing appropriate skills, assigning tasks which the employee can identify with and which are relevant to the employee, or providing feedback on the employee's job performance (see Hackman, Oldham, 1976). An individual's well-being will promote desirable performance-related behaviours and dampen the tendency to respond in dysfunctional ways, such as aggression or escape.

In summary, the results of the study indicate that extending the scope of control at work is a way to reduce undesirable behaviour on the part of executive managers on the one hand and away to strengthen their proactivity on the other. The freedom in act, autonomy and the related sense of effectiveness positively affect the broadly-defined well-being of the individual, increasing their motivation to act and giving meaning to the activities they engage in. The positive impact of control at work on the employee is in line with the job crafting model (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, 2001). It involves making changes to the work environment so that work is tailored to the needs, preferences and abilities of the individual, with the goal of increasing the meaning of work, satisfaction, as well as the productivity and efficiency of the employee.

Increasing control at work in terms of greater employee freedom and autonomy, however, can be a difficult and sometimes even risky step. It requires managers to demonstrate courage and confidence in dealing with their subordinates and, above all, a good assessment of their capabilities. However, the risks taken may result not only in increased efficiency and productivity of the employee, but also in solutions that could be implemented across the organisation as way to improve its operation.

It should be mentioned that this study has some limitations. The self-reporting method adopted in this study is not an objective method, as it is based on the subjective feelings of respondents and narrows the analysis of the reality to their perspective of respondents. In addition, the cross-sectional nature of the study does not allow firm conclusions to be drawn about the cause-and-effect relationship. Furthermore, since the respondents were recruited from a group of students at a single university, it cannot be said that they constitute a representative sample of executive managers. Therefore, further research is recommended with the aim of determining the relationship between control and psychological aspects of how executive managers function within organisations. This should make use of measures and tools than questionnaire-based ones and a more reliable sampling method in a longitudinal study rather than a cross-sectional one.

5. Summary

The results of the study, which included a group of executive managers and which deals with the relationship between job control and aggressive, passive-avoidant and proactive behaviour, confirmed all the three hypotheses. Greater control at work counteracts undesirable behaviours and enhances task-oriented activity attitudes. The analyses also showed a mediating effect of work-related feelings of happiness in the control-behaviour relationship. The results encourage further research into the impact of job control on the functioning of executive managers functioning, although such further research should be conducted with greater methodological rigour.

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