

Strengths Use in Organizations: A Positive Approach of Occupational Health

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In this article, we review theory and research on strengths use in an organizational context. We identify important antecedents of strengths use, including personal initiative, organizational support for strengths use, autonomy, and opportunities for development. In addition, we position strengths use in Job Demands–Resources theory as one of the possible proactive behaviors that may foster the acquisition of personal and job resources, and indirectly promote work engagement and performance. Since strengths use has important ramifications for employee functioning, strengths use interventions seem an important next step in strengths use research. We outline important questions for future research, and discuss practical implications of our theoretical analysis. We conclude that organizations should encourage employees to use their strengths, because when employees capitalize on their strong points, they can be authentic, feel energized, and flourish.

Keywords: JD-R theory, job performance, positive psychology, strengths use, work engagement

Occupational health is a complex phenomenon that can be explored from either a pathogenic perspective focusing on risk factors and diseases or a salutogenic perspective focusing on resources for the positive promotion of health (Bringsén, Andersson, Ejlertsson, & Troein, 2012). Although studies of occupational health have traditionally taken a pathogenic approach, the salutogenic approach is gaining popularity because trying to prevent dysfunction and disease is not sufficient to ensure a flourishing and engaged workforce. Positive occupational health psychology refers to the study and application of the conditions and processes that contribute to optimal functioning in the workplace (Bakker & Derks, 2010). It promotes occupational health and flourishing, and examines how positive experiences (contexts, strengths and virtues, personal resources) can be used to protect against occupational risks.

In the present article, we take a positive approach to occupational health by focusing on employee strengths. What are strengths and how do employees use their strengths at work? Are those who use their strengths better able to cope with organizational demands and stay engaged? We argue that organizations should encourage employees to use their strengths, because when employees do so they are energized and may flourish. After a short review of the theories behind individual strengths and strengths use, we briefly describe how strengths and strengths use can be

measured. Thereafter, we discuss possible antecedents and consequences of strengths use. We position the concept of strengths use in job demands–resources theory (JD-R), and outline relevant questions for future research. The article closes with practical implications of this theoretical analysis, and discusses how strengths use can be encouraged in organizations.

Theoretical Background

Whereas the strength-based approach is still emerging in an organizational context, it has been applied and investigated for several decades in the context of social work and mental health care. The first edition of the handbook *The Strength Model* appeared 20 years ago (Rapp & Goscha, 1997), and described a recovery-focused approach to mental health problems. Within this approach, strengths-based practices (SBP) were based on the belief that clients are most successful at achieving their goals when they identify and utilize their strengths, abilities, and assets. For this reason, it was argued that clients need to be assisted in recognizing and utilizing the strengths they may not recognize within themselves, thereby regaining power over their lives (Greene, Lee, & Hoffpauir, 2005).

The formalization of SBP emerged as an alternative to the pathology-laden treatments for psychiatric disorders (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989), which focused on diagnosis, deficits, labelling, and problem solving (Saleebey, 2000, 2001). Correlational, quasi-experimental, and experimental research in the context of social work and mental health care has shown that SBP have a favorable influence on a variety of outcomes, including social skills, stress tolerance, psychiatric symptomatology, physical health, quality of life, and education (Fukui et al., 2012; Macias, Farley, Jackson, & Kinney, 1997; Macias, Kinney, Farley, Jackson, & Vos, 1994; Modrcin, Rapp, & Poertner, 1988; Stanard, 1999). Moreover, a strengths-based treatment of families and children with mental disabilities led to significant improvements in

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parental competency, child behaviors, and the level of cohesion and adaptability in these families at the 6-month follow-up (Lee et al., 2009).

A broader attention for strengths emerged from the positive psychology approach, after the inaugural speech of Martin Seligman as president of the American Psychological Association in 1998, and the publication of a frequently cited article by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000). In this article, the authors defined positive psychology as a “science of positive subjective experience, positive individual traits, and positive institutions” (p. 5). Based on positive psychology theory, several strengths models emerged. Positive psychologists who aimed to explore moral goodness or good character proposed the character strengths model (Peterson & Park, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Peterson and his colleagues argued that good character consists of a set of “positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviours” (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004, p. 603), referred to as character strengths. In total, 24 character strengths (e.g., curiosity, bravery, kindness, leadership, self-regulation, gratitude) were identified (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Each character strength can be assigned to one of six higher-order virtues, namely (1) wisdom and knowledge, (2) courage, (3) humanity, (4) justice, (5) temperance, and (6) transcendence. Since Peterson and Seligman (2004) proposed a rather complex factor structure of character strengths, it is not surprising that the hypothesized structure was only partially supported in empirical research (e.g., Khumalo, Wissing, & Temane, 2008; Park & Peterson, 2006; Ruch et al., 2010).

The alternative Gallup model is even more complex. This model identifies no fewer than 34 talents which refer to a person’s natural and persisting patterns in thinking, feeling, and behaving, and can be developed into strengths by adding knowledge and skills to these innate talents (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). In this model, strength refers to “the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity” (Clifton & Harter, 2003, p. 111). Using impressive sample sizes, Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, and Harter (2007) showed that the internal consistency or reliability of several of the dimensions is dubious, and that the dimensions show considerable overlap. This means that the discriminant validity of the separate strengths is questionable, and that more work is needed to ensure the validity of the Gallup approach.

Yet another definition of strengths is based in classic personality psychology (e.g., Allport, 1966), and refers to personality strengths as characteristics that promote adjustment to the environment (King & Trent, 2013; Sheldon, Jose, Kashdan, & Jarden, 2015). As adjustment is conditional on the environment, so are strengths: “whether a characteristic is a strength depends on its match to the person’s context, suggesting that a strength in one situation may be a weakness in another” (King & Trent, 2013, p. 199). Drawing on this idea of situation dependence, the Big Five personality traits, narrower personality traits, self-regulatory capacities, capacities for resilience, and various goal system characteristics that are generally conceptualized as nonvalue laden can, depending on the situation, be considered personality strengths (Sheldon et al., 2015).

A final strengths model defines personal strengths more broadly as “the characteristics of a person that allow them to perform well or at their personal best” (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011, p. 15). Wood and his colleagues argued that this encompassing definition captures the various, more narrowly de-

finied strengths definitions introduced by other scholars. Rather than promoting a restrictive list of predefined strengths, this definition gives individuals the freedom to interpret any characteristic that helps them to perform well as a personal strength (Wood et al., 2011).

This brief overview shows that strengths researchers still diverge in how broadly (e.g., Wood et al., 2011) or narrowly (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004) they outline strengths. Also, there are several instruments to assess strengths, but their psychometric properties are far from perfect. Furthermore, whereas some scholars argue that certain strengths are more beneficial for well-being and performance than others (Harzer & Ruch, 2014; Park et al., 2004), other scholars argue that using one’s best characteristics—no matter whether they are physical, intellectual, emotional, and so forth—invariably leads to increased well-being and performance (Wood et al., 2011).

Strengths Use Theory

Although strengths are traitlike, how strengths are used is dependent upon context, values, and interests (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011). For example, when employees have conflicts at work, sense of humor may help to alleviate the tension. In a similar vein, when confronted with unexpected and complex work problems, employees may use their creativity to solve them. We will later see that strengths use may also depend on personality and job resources. Oerlemans and Bakker (2014) have argued that the impact of personality traits such as extraversion on personal functioning is dependent on the “enactment” of the traits in a certain situation. If extraverts do not behave socially when needed, this trait will not help them to reach their goals. In a similar way, strengths such as sense of humor, creativity, and social intelligence become important when they are actually used.

Although there still is not one comprehensive theoretical framework explaining the underlying mechanisms of strengths use, several theories may explain how strengths use has an impact on employee functioning. Employees who use their strengths can act in accordance with their authentic selves (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and theories on authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006) and self-concordance (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999) predict that employees who use their strengths are therefore less likely to suffer from depression and job stress.

Furthermore, strengths use leads to mastery experiences. Self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) predicts that strengths use will therefore lead to improved performance. For example, a police officer who is high on social intelligence is more likely than her counterparts to ease down an agitated citizen because she knows how to regulate her own and the citizen’s emotions. Such mastery experiences foster employees’ personal resources and give them the feeling that they have control over the external environment.

Bakker, Peeters, and Oerlemans (2016) used Rogers’ (1980) theory of the self to explain the psychological impact of strengths use. They argued that people have the tendency to strive for self-enhancement and self-fulfillment. To achieve self-enhancement, people continuously weight, select, and reject parts of their surroundings. If a situation or experience supports self-enhancement through strengths use, it is selected and valued positively. However, if the experience does not support self-enhancement, it is disliked and rejected. Thus, the tendency to self-actualize fosters an ongoing pro-

cess of weighting, selecting, and rejecting stimuli (i.e., organismic valuing). Using a weekly diary study in a heterogeneous sample of employees, Bakker and his colleagues predicted and found that weekly strengths use led to weekly work engagement, because strengths use fostered organismic valuing and authentic pride (i.e., being proud of an achievement that costs considerable effort).

Strengths use is also likely to lead to higher levels of job performance because it brings about positive states such as feeling competent and invigorated (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). According to the “happy-productive worker thesis,” happy workers perform better than their less happy colleagues (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001) because they set higher goals, invest more effort in these goals, and are better at mobilizing social resources that may help them to achieve these goals. Moreover, the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998, 2001) proposes that positive states that result from strengths use fuel exploration and approach behavior, potentially motivating employees to be creative and engage in innovative work behaviors.

Finally, Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) argued that people have natural needs for a positive self-image, to connect with others, and to perceive work as meaningful. This is the reason why employees proactively change their work tasks and their relationships with others. This behavior is called job crafting: “the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work” (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 179). By modifying their work tasks and resources, employees may optimize the fit between what the organization wants and their own preferences, abilities, and passions (Tims, Derks, & Bakker, 2016). Berg, Dutton, and Wrzesniewski (2013) have argued that job crafting enables employees to leverage their strengths, or areas of talent that can be productively applied at work. By proactively starting new projects, seeking for important job resources (e.g., performance feedback, social support, autonomy), and teaming up with the right people, employees can choose to do what they are naturally capable of doing well. Indeed, in a recent unpublished study among Chilean consultants, we found that job crafting was positively related to strengths use, and indirectly contributed to work engagement and financial results. By actively constructing their work tasks and environment, employees can use their strengths to the fullest and be enthusiastically engaged in their work.

Measurement of Strengths Use

Although several instruments have been developed for the identification of specific strengths (e.g., the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths [VIA-IS]; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), it is the use of strengths that leads to valuable outcomes, such as work engagement and well-being (Harzer & Ruch, 2013; Keenan & Mostert, 2013). Harzer and Ruch (2013) developed an instrument for strengths application at work that assesses the application of each of the 24 character strengths identified in the VIA-IS. For each of the character strengths, short paragraphs are provided describing character strengths-relevant behavior based on the definitions by Peterson and Seligman (2004; e.g., kindness: being nice, helpful, kind, and caring without expecting any reward). These behaviors are rated on a five-point frequency scale for (a) normative demands of a situation, (b) appropriateness of the behavior, (c) perceived presence of factors that may facilitate or impede the

behavior, and (d) intrinsic motivation to show it. In their validation study, Harzer and Ruch (2013) found that employees who more often used their top-ranked strengths were most satisfied and engaged in their work.

Govindji and Linley (2007) developed a general scale for individual strengths use that was validated among college students, while Wood et al. (2011) developed a scale that applies to adults in general, but does not refer to the working context specifically. Moreover, the latter scale combines items related to individual strengths use behavior with items that refer to opportunities regarding strengths use. Finally, van Woerkom, Mostert, et al. (2016) developed and validated a scale for the assessment of strengths use behavior in the work context. The scale also assesses deficit correction behavior, as well as organizational support for strengths use, and support for deficit correction. The authors showed that strengths use behavior was positively related to manager ratings of job performance, whereas deficit correction was not.

Antecedents of Strengths Use

Strengths knowledge seems to be an important individual-level antecedent of strengths use. In other words, people who are aware of their strengths and know when they are at their best are more likely to use their strengths (Govindji & Linley, 2007). But even though everyone has specific strengths, humans are preprogrammed to pay attention to their weaknesses instead of their positive qualities (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Strengths often come so naturally to a person that they are used unconsciously; therefore, many people have trouble identifying their strong points (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). The development of strengths knowledge can be encouraged by filling in a strength inventory (e.g., the Values-in-Action, the Strengths Finder 2.0), doing reflected best-self exercises (Roberts et al., 2005), or by using “feed-forward interviews” (Kluger & Nir, 2010).

Besides strengths knowledge, some studies have suggested that stable personality traits are also associated with strength use. For example, in their validation study among researchers, clinical scientists, engineers, and support staff, van Woerkom, Mostert, et al. (2016) found that those with a dispositional tendency to engage in proactive behavior in a variety of situations (Bateman & Crant, 1993) are more likely to use their strong points at work. Proactive individuals identify opportunities and take action so that they can use their strengths, for example, by volunteering for new projects at work, by changing tasks, or by modifying their work environment through job crafting (Berg et al., 2013). In their daily-diary study of naval cadets on a sailing ship, Bakker, Hetland, Kjellefold-Olsen, and Espevik (2017) found that cadets with stable and extraverted personalities benefited more by using their strengths in terms of their work engagement and positive affect compared to cadets who had more neurotic and introverted personalities. These findings support the multilevel approach of employee well-being (Bakker, 2015). Daily strengths use fosters positive experiences at work, but stable personality characteristics determine the extent to which employees manage to translate daily strengths use into positive daily experiences—including daily work engagement.

Irrespective of these individual level antecedents, it can be expected that organizations can actively encourage their employees in applying their unique strengths at work. Organizational support for strengths use may take the form of helping workers in identifying their strengths, enabling them to engage in tasks in line with their strengths, or allowing colleagues with complementary strengths join forces, so that they may complement each other's strengths (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015).

Although strengths use support may seem very similar to simply empowering employees or providing them with autonomy, there are important differences. As pointed out above, workers who feel empowered may still not be aware of their strengths and, therefore, not able to think about new ways to apply their strengths in their job. Instead of using their autonomy to align their job with their strengths, they may alternatively use autonomy to decide about their working hours, or to invest in the remediation of their weaknesses. In their study among Dutch engineers, van Woerkom, Oerlemans, and Bakker (2016) showed that organizations are indeed able to stimulate the strengths use of their employees, thereby enhancing employee work engagement. Botha and Mostert (2014) found that South African employees from various occupational sectors with more job resources (e.g., autonomy, information, participation in decision making, and support for strengths use) were more likely to use their strengths, and were more engaged at work. In their study among South African sport coaches at schools, Stander and Mostert (2013) found that opportunities for learning and autonomy were important job resources that were positively related to strengths use.

However, studies that link more specific organizational practices—such as task allocation, complementary partnering, strengths-based performance appraisals, and specific leadership styles—to employee strengths use are still lacking. What is also missing is knowledge about the extent to which strengths use is possible in all types of jobs. As mentioned before, some jobs may offer more opportunities for strengths use than others, for instance, because these jobs provide higher levels of job autonomy. However, even though workers who hold routine jobs may not be able to change their tasks, they may be able to change how they go about their tasks. For instance, a call center agent may decide to use her sense of humor in her contact with clients, or a maintenance person at a school may decide to do the gardening, which she dislikes, together with the pupils from her school, thereby playing to her strengths of relationship building.

Consequences of Strengths Use

Correlational studies have indicated that strengths use is positively related to employee work engagement and well-being (Botha & Mostert, 2014; Harzer & Ruch, 2012, 2013; Keenan & Mostert, 2013; Stander & Mostert, 2013; Stander, Mostert, & de Beer, 2014), self-esteem (Wood et al., 2011), and self-efficacy (van Woerkom, Oerlemans, & Bakker, 2016), and negatively related to stress (Wood et al., 2011). In addition, strengths use is positively related to self- and other-ratings of job performance (Dubreuil, Forest, & Courcy, 2014; Stander et al., 2014; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015; van Woerkom, Mostert, et al., 2016; van Woerkom, Oerlemans, & Bakker, 2016), and negatively related to company-registered sickness absenteeism (van Woerkom, Bakker, & Nishii, 2016). However, because of the correlational

character of these studies, it is still unclear to what extent strengths use is a predictor or outcome of these variables. For example, self-efficacy may be an outcome but also a predictor of strengths use because highly self-efficacious individuals are more aware of their strengths. Additionally, it is conceivable that employees who perform well start to rely more heavily on their strengths, because of the positive feedback they receive from others and self-confirming reactions. We come back to this issue when we discuss the position of strengths use in JD-R theory (see below).

Thus far, only a few strengths use studies with a quasi-experimental, pretest–posttest design have been conducted in work organizations, thereby allowing for causal interpretations. Most of these studies investigate the effectiveness of different versions of Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson's (2005) intervention to “use signature strengths in a new way.” This type of intervention first identifies one's strengths using the VIA-IS, and then asks the participants to use their top five strengths in a new and different way each day for 1 week. The intervention has been shown to have favorable effects on happiness and depression (e.g., Seligman et al., 2005). Using a sample of German employees in various organizations and jobs, Harzer and Ruch (2015) showed that such a strengths use intervention led to an increase in the perception of one's job as a calling as well as an increase in life satisfaction. Forest et al. (2012) showed that a comparable strengths intervention increased participants' use of their signature strengths and sense of harmonious passion for work, which in turn led to higher levels of well-being.

Meyers and van Woerkom (2016) concluded that participating in a strengths use intervention creates short-term increases in employee positive affect and short- and long-term increases in psychological capital. van Woerkom and Meyers (2017) found that a strengths intervention led to higher levels of general self-efficacy and, in turn, to higher levels of personal growth initiative—the intervention was particularly effective for employees with low to medium initial levels of general self-efficacy. Finally, Kooij, van Woerkom, Wilkenloh, Dorenbosch, and Denissen (2017) found that participating in a job-crafting intervention aimed at adjusting the job to personal strengths led to higher levels of strengths crafting and person–job fit, but only for older employees. As employees grow older, they may be better able and more motivated to create environments that fit their identity.

Position of Strengths Use in JD-R Theory

According to JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2016; Demerouti et al., 2001), employee well-being and job performance is a function of two main categories of job characteristics, namely job demands and job resources. Whereas job demands (e.g., workload, emotional demands) are the most important causes of job stress and indirectly undermine job performance, job resources (e.g., feedback, skill variety) are the most important causes of motivation and indirectly facilitate job performance. In addition, JD-R theory proposes that (a) job (and personal) resources can be used to prevent the conversion of job demands into job strain, and (b) job (and personal) resources are most important for motivation and performance when job demands are high. Whereas the classic JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001) focused particularly on the impact of the work environment on employee well-being and

behaviors, recent versions of JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014, 2016) propose that employees also influence the work environment through job crafting (i.e., proactively optimizing the work environment) and self-undermining (i.e., creating problems, conflicts, and stress).

We propose that strengths use (e.g., the use of humor, zest, leadership) may take a similar position in JD-R theory as job crafting. This means that strengths use is not only an antecedent, but also a consequence of high levels of work engagement. Specifically, strengths use contributes positively to personal (and job) resources, and indirectly to work engagement and performance, and those who are engaged are more likely to use their strengths. Thus, we argue that strengths use is a crucial behavioral mechanism in the gain cycle proposed by JD-R theory. Since people who are engaged in their work are motivated to stay engaged, they not only craft their jobs, but also use their strengths in order to increase their own levels of self-efficacy, optimism, and self-esteem (i.e., their personal resources). Stander and Mostert's (2013) study among South African sports coaches indeed showed that strengths use was positively related to personal resources (self-efficacy and self-esteem). These resources fuel other resources, like job resources, because those who have more personal resources are more likely to acquire autonomy, positive feedback, and opportunities to develop themselves (e.g., Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). Personal resources also contribute to work engagement and performance, because resourceful employees are better able to deal with high job demands and get the work done (Bakker & Sanz-Vergel, 2013).

Organizational support for strengths use may act as an organizational-level resource that helps workers to achieve their work goals and engage in activities that foster their personal development (van Woerkom, Bakker, & Nishii, 2016). When workers are facilitated to engage in tasks that play to their strengths, they are potentially more successful in achieving their goals. In addition, these goals or the way in which these goals are achieved are likely to be more consistent with their interests and core values (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), making employees invest persistent effort, thereby leading to goal attainment (Koestner, Lekes, Powers, & Chicoine, 2002). Strengths use support may motivate development because furthering strengths comes more easily to persons than developing deficits (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). van Woerkom, Bakker, and Nishii (2016) showed that strengths use support reduced the negative association between accumulated job demands (high workload combined with high emotional demands) and absenteeism. When workers are supported to use their strengths, they will feel valued for their unique qualities, which gives a boost to their self-esteem, thereby counteracting threats to self-esteem that may result from high job demands. Also, workers who perceive strengths use support can act more in agreement with their authentic selves (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), thereby reducing their levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993) and enhancing their levels of energy, well-being, and coping skills (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), making it less likely that the stress induced by their job demands will lead to negative outcomes.

Future Research on Strengths Use

Although promoting strengths use in organizations seems a promising way to foster health and well-being at work, research on strengths use in an organizational context is still in its early stages and several research questions are still unanswered. We briefly discuss eight important topics of research. First, there is a need for achieving closure on the definition of strengths. Although strengths researchers share the essential idea that strengths become manifest in episodes of personal excellence, looking within one person, rather than in episodes of comparative excellence, looking across persons, they still diverge in how broadly (e.g., Wood et al., 2011) or narrowly (e.g., Peterson & Seligman, 2004) they outline strengths. Moreover, there is a need for an overarching theoretical framework that explains how strengths use is linked to its proposed outcomes. Currently, a diversity of theories is used to explain the mechanisms by which strengths use operates. For example, both cognitive (e.g., based on self-efficacy theory; Bandura, 1997) and affective mechanisms (e.g., based on broaden-and-build theory; Fredrickson, 2001) have been identified as explaining mechanisms, but it is unclear for whom and in what situations which mechanism prevails. Moreover, future studies on strengths use and strengths use support may contribute to JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2014, 2016; Demerouti et al., 2001) by investigating how strengths use fits in the theory, and to investigate "support for strengths use" as a new type of job resource that might be better suited for diminishing the negative relationship between job demands and employee well-being than job resources that focus on correcting employees' deficits (e.g., performance feedback, training).

Second, although correlational studies indicate that strengths use is positively related to self-efficacy and work engagement (Harzer & Ruch, 2012) and that employees who perceive a strengths-based climate in their organization perform better (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015), thus far, relatively few field experiments have been conducted with strengths interventions in an organizational context that allow for causal explanations and that provide insight into the practices that can help increase strengths use. Therefore, it is still unclear to what extent strengths use is indeed a predictor of these outcomes or whether the reverse is true. Although many practitioners are involved in the development of more individualized approaches to identifying and applying employees' unique talents, research lags considerably behind in promoting evidence-based practice in this domain.

Third, the common "identify and use" approach regarding strengths (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011) has caused critics to dismiss the strengths-based approach, arguing that it bears the risk that strengths will be "overused" and turn into weaknesses when used excessively or inappropriately (Kaiser & Overfield, 2011). For instance, when used excessively, or in a group of highly introverted individuals, extraversion may impede instead of facilitate the communication with others. Another point of critique is that participants of "identify-and-use" strengths interventions might be overtaken by lethargy as they will be satisfied with the qualities that have been identified, while not seeing any use in working on them (Schneider, 2011). Therefore, future research needs to compare this identify-and-use approach to approaches that emphasize the need to develop strengths, implying that individuals can learn to dose their strengths to avoid overuse, to judge whether a situation is appropriate for strengths use, and to utilize their strengths in combination with leverage competencies, which can help

to use strengths in an even more efficient way (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011).

Fourth, there is a need to better understand the effectiveness of strengths use across diverse groups of individuals, such as older workers and employees with disabilities. For instance, socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 2006) would predict that strengths use is particularly beneficial for older workers. This theory posits that older workers have a more limited future time perspective and will therefore prioritize short-term emotionally meaningful goals such as feeling authentic and intrinsically motivated. Capitalizing on their unique qualities might be a way to play to their need for authenticity and intrinsic motivation. Regarding employees with disabilities, labelling theory (Link & Phelan, 2001) might explain why focusing on employees' unique qualities could be a powerful instrument to counteract the stereotyping of disabled workers (Shier, Graham, & Jones, 2009). Labelling theory explains how the self-identity and behavior of individuals may be influenced by the terms used to classify them. When individuals are labelled by their positive qualities instead of their disabilities, this might have a positive impact on their feelings of self-worth and related behaviors.

Fifth, although few people utilize their strengths in isolation and the team context influences whether individuals' strengths can be noticed, used, and appreciated by others (Quinlan, Swain, & Vella-Brodrick, 2012), all studies on strengths use so far have focused at the individual level. Future research should therefore study strengths use as a team-level phenomenon. For instance, in line with the results of research on transactive memory systems (Peltokorpi, 2008) it can be expected that a transactive strengths system may improve team performance because it allows group members to specialize in the area of their own strengths, while being able to draw upon the strengths of other team members. This approach reduces overlap between team members' strengths and potentially fosters innovation when individual team members' strengths are combined.

Sixth, it is interesting and important to link leadership theory to strengths use theory. According to transformational leadership theory (Bass, 1985), transformational leaders are inspiring and show individual consideration, because they realize that each employee has unique qualities and preferences. Through consistent transformational leadership behavior, leaders may stimulate followers to use their strengths, which will help to deal with job demands, and have a positive impact on personal resources and work engagement (cf. JD-R theory; Bakker & Demerouti, 2014, 2016). Transformational leadership aimed at fostering strengths use may be particularly important when job demands are high, and when the work tasks are complex. Future research should also reveal the boundary conditions of the link between transformational leadership and strengths use.

Seventh, it seems interesting to examine how strengths can be used to deal with deficits, or to examine how specific strengths may possibly function as a lever for other strengths. For example, it is conceivable that sense of humor and social intelligence do not only help in dealing with job stress (Robert, 2017), but may also be used to buffer the unfavorable impact of a lack of creativity on work outcomes. Since humor facilitates group cohesion, employees who have a talent for using jokes may be better able than others to mobilize social support. This support from colleagues can be used to achieve work-related goals even when the focal employee lacks the talent to deal adequately with the task at hand. Similarly,

social intelligence may be used to strengthen the persuasive power of a sales pitch. By being aware of the audience's emotional states, a salesperson may use his mental intelligence and knowledge of all possible features of a product more effectively and be more successful. Indeed, Verbeke, Belschak, Bakker, and Dietz (2008) found that salespeople who were higher in general mental ability sold more products, particularly when they were simultaneously high in social intelligence. Apparently, salespeople's social intelligence functioned as a lever, and helped them to use their mental ability to persuade customers to buy their product.

Finally, research has shown that individual strengths such as leadership, creativity, and kindness are positively related to employee well-being and job performance. However, Oerlemans and Bakker (2014) have argued that it is not general traits such as extraversion that determine whether one can deal well with emotionally demanding situations, but rather the enactment of extraversion, that is, extraverted behavior, such as starting a conversation, speaking in front of a group, and so forth. Similarly, leadership, creativity, and kindness may be relatively stable strengths that have properties similar to personality traits, but it is the enactment of these strengths (i.e., concrete behaviors) like individual consideration and inspiration, the generation and implementation of creative ideas, as well as sympathetic deeds that influence whether these strengths play out and have impact on the sender and the receiver. This means that it is important to investigate the predictors of weekly and daily use of strengths. To what extent can people choose (not) to enact their strengths and what are predictors of fluctuations in strengths enactment?

Practical Implications

Since the application of employee strengths may be essential for organizations that need to boost the well-being, performance, and inclusion of their employees, strengths interventions that help employees to identify, use, and develop their strengths (Quinlan et al., 2012) could be a valuable tool to promote the leverage of employees' unique qualities. This could be especially so because many employees have trouble identifying their own strong points (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001), and because both individuals and organizations tend to pay more attention to weaknesses than to strengths (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Organizations may use several activities that may help in the identification of worker strengths, for example, by filling in a strength inventory (e.g., Values-In-Action, Strengths Finder 2.0), or engage in a reflected best-self exercise (Roberts et al., 2005). To encourage the use and development of strengths, workers may be challenged to design a small experiment, for example, by using one of their strengths as a tool for coping with a difficult or demanding task, or by expanding the application of a specific strength in their daily work.

Alternatively, employees could ask others for feedback on their "best self," thereby composing their reflected best self-portrait (Roberts et al., 2005). Because feedback on one's best self will stimulate people to act in accordance with their best self-concept, composing a best self-portrait might also stimulate people to use their strengths more often. Conducting feed-forward interviews (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011) may be another option to stimulate strengths use. In these interviews, workers are encouraged to tell about an experience at work during which they felt energized

even before knowing how successful their actions were. By analyzing the conditions for this peak moment and by comparing this with conditions at work, the signposts for flourishing at work may become more visible. However, future research is needed to investigate the effectiveness of these instruments for enhancing strengths use.

It is important to note that the implementation of strengths use interventions can only be seen as a first step for organizations that want to make the transition to a strengths-based organization. For sustaining employee strengths use and development, organizational decision makers need to adopt the human resources philosophy that organizations can only flourish when employees are able to play to their strengths. In line with the human resources management process model (Wright & Nishii, 2007), this philosophy will influence the implementation of relevant human resources practices, which will in turn influence how employees perceive these practices, the attributions they make about its purpose, and their strengths use. In this way, human resources practices may ultimately influence employee outcomes such as well-being and job performance.

Conclusion

Organizations should encourage employees to use their strengths, because when employees use their strong points, they can be authentic and they are energized and flourish. In this article, we reviewed theory and research on strengths use in an organizational context. We identified important antecedents of strengths use, including personal initiative, organizational support for strengths use, autonomy, and opportunities for development. Since strengths use has important ramifications for employee well-being and job performance, strengths use interventions seem an important next step in organizational theory regarding strengths use. We positioned strengths use as one of the possible proactive behaviors in JD-R theory that may foster the acquisition of personal and job resources and indirectly contribute to work engagement and performance. In addition, we outlined important questions for future research, and discussed practical implications of this theoretical analysis. We hope that this article will inspire researchers around the world to investigate how strengths use can be encouraged in organizations.

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous passons en revue la théorie et la recherche concernant l'utilisation des forces dans un contexte organisationnel. Nous identifions d'importants antécédents ayant trait à l'utilisation des forces, y compris des initiatives personnelles, du soutien organisationnel, de l'autonomie et des occasions de développement. De plus, nous positionnons l'utilisation des forces dans le modèle demandes-ressources au travail comme l'un des comportements proactifs susceptibles de favoriser l'acquisition de ressources personnelles et professionnelles et indirectement, l'engagement et le rendement au travail. Étant donné que l'utilisation des forces a d'importantes ramifications sur le fonctionnement de l'employé, des interventions sur l'utilisation des forces semble être une prochaine étape importante de la recherche dans ce domaine. Nous soulevons quelques questions importantes concernant les recherches futures et discutons des implications pratiques de notre analyse théorique. Nous concluons en affirmant que les organisations devraient encourager

leurs employés à miser sur leurs points forts afin que ces derniers puissent agir de manière fidèle à eux-mêmes, se sentir dynamisés et ainsi prospérer.

Mots-clés : modèle demandes-ressources au travail, psychologie positive, utilisation des forces, engagement au travail.

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