

The
Incubator

Crafting scholarly life: Strategies for creating meaning in academic careers

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Summary

Job crafting, which occurs when individuals proactively make changes to their jobs, can be a useful tool for academics seeking more meaningful careers. We suggest changes to the cognitive, task, and relational aspects of academic jobs that can infuse scholarly work with more personal meaning. Copyright © 2010 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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Introduction

A series of recent articles has reignited a spirited discussion about the meaning of a career in organization studies. These pieces have questioned whether our efforts to date have succeeded in advancing knowledge (Hambrick, 2007), improving the world of practice (Ghoshal, 2005), or helping young scholars advance their careers (Glick, Miller, & Cardinal, 2007). The widespread attention these articles have garnered suggests that many organizational scholars are interested in making their careers more personally meaningful.

In this Incubator, we use job crafting theory to frame a discussion of how organizational scholars can increase the meaning of their work by changing the way they work. Our foundational assumption is that increasing the personal meaning of academic jobs is valuable and desirable.

Individuals job craft when they make proactive changes to the content and boundaries of their jobs (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Job crafters may engage in three types of crafting: *Cognitive crafting*, which involves changing task-related boundaries and mindsets; *task crafting*, which involves changing the content of work—the number, scope and type of job responsibilities; and *relational crafting*, which involves changing the quality and amount of interaction with others while working. When individuals craft their jobs in these ways, the jobs become more meaningful to them. Although all workers job craft on some level, the recent concerns regarding the meaning of a career in organization studies suggest scholars in our field could benefit from increasing the personal meaningfulness of their work experiences. Therefore, in the remainder of this Incubator we will suggest new ideas of each form of crafting to inspire scholars to build more positive personal meaning into their work lives.

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Cognitive Crafting

Cognitive crafting involves changing task-related boundaries and cognitions. We propose two forms of cognitive crafting that can help organizational scholars derive more meaning from their work: (1) enlarging one's perspective and (2) leveraging more of one's best self. Enlarging one's perspective involves appreciating all of the ways scholarly work can make an impact on others, which in turn infuses the work with more personal meaning. Boyer (1990) suggests scholarship encompasses four separate yet overlapping functions: The scholarship of *discovery*, which involves the advancement of knowledge through original research and theorizing; the scholarship of *integration*, which involves making connections across disciplines and paradigms; the scholarship of *application*, which involves applying knowledge to consequential problems via consulting and service; and the scholarship of *teaching*, which involves transmitting, transforming, and extending knowledge to students.

We submit that while conducting and publishing research is an important activity in the function of discovery, the other three functions of scholarship can also generate personal meaning. For example, one of our colleagues fulfilled his teaching responsibilities in an experiential learning course by developing a challenging assignment that required students to raise money for the Make-a-Wish foundation. The assignment helped the students learn about teamwork and leadership, and the students also raised over \$35 000 for the charity in just two days. By enlarging the cognitive boundaries of his job to include the scholarship of teaching and application, our colleague increased the personal meaningfulness of his work. In doing so, he also created an assignment that was deeply meaningful to his students and received a perfect rating on student evaluations. Our colleague's experience suggests that by enlarging our perspective we can create work that is more meaningful to both ourselves and others.

We suggest that scholars also engage in a second form of cognitive crafting by leveraging more of their best selves. The Reflected Best-Self is an exercise developed to identify a person's special strengths and talents (Roberts, Dutton, Spreitzer, Heaphy, & Quinn, 2005). In this exercise, individuals use stories from friends, family and colleagues to identify times when they have made a positive contribution to the lives of others. From analyzing these stories, individuals are able to empirically identify their personal strengths. Often people are surprised to learn of the myriad ways they make a difference to others. We believe that academics can benefit from undertaking the Reflected Best-Self exercise. They can also engage in a modified version of the exercise by reflecting on the informal everyday feedback they have received from others regarding what they do well and how they make a positive difference. Scholars can also identify their best selves by considering patterns of peak experiences in their work lives—times when they felt particularly vibrant and impactful at work. For example, some may be particularly gifted facilitators who can uncover the unspoken issues that keep a group from being a team, while others might be strategic thinkers who can envision the next big idea. By understanding their best selves, scholars can find ways to draw on their special strengths and competencies in their everyday work life to make work more enjoyable and meaningful.

Task Crafting

Task crafting involves changing the content of the work we do. We suggest two forms of task crafting: (1) Focusing on the questions we ask and (2) challenging ourselves to thrive. First, we should ensure that our research is driven by questions that are meaningful personally, practically, and theoretically. For example, several years ago, a number of scholars started to focus on topics related to Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS, Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). They began studying positive deviance and the generative forces that enable thriving in organizational contexts. Shifting the focus of their research questions allowed this group of

scholars to craft more personal meaning into their work by participating in research projects they perceived as generative and life-giving.

Scholars can also create meaning by crafting more challenge into the content of their jobs. Engaging challenges can create a sense of accomplishment from a job well done. Challenges also energize us and help us learn more from our work. Crafting more challenge into our jobs might involve developing a new teaching module that draws on one's core research findings. For example, one of our colleagues embraced the challenge of developing a computer-based teaching simulation called the Reciprocity Ring which drew directly from his research findings on reciprocity in networks. The simulation also became a mechanism for collecting data from his students and from companies to further fuel his research. In addition, the Reciprocity Ring encouraged students to engage in altruistic actions toward their classmates, which created an altruistic culture in the class that was positively received by the students. Another colleague embraced the challenge of moving into the Dean's office at her business school and creating a new leadership initiative. Rather than simply continuing on her successful trajectory as a researcher, she took the risk of adding a new dimension of administration and leadership into her career path. By embracing challenge, we can increase the quality, meaning, and impact of our work in all of the four functions of scholarship.

Relational Crafting

Relational crafting involves changing the quality and amount of interaction with others encountered at work. We propose two forms of relational crafting that can increase the meaning of scholarly work: (1) Fostering high quality connections and (2) increasing contact with beneficiaries. High quality connections are relationships characterized by shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect. When individuals are involved in high quality connections, they experience feelings of vitality and aliveness, as well as heightened positive regard for the other party in the connection (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). While the most obvious source of high quality connections is one's colleagues (we can choose collaborators that we enjoy spending time with), we can also develop and foster high quality connections with others we come in contact with. Some scholars make a concerted effort to get to know their students—whether sharing a meal with them or organizing travel-study programs which involve extended contact. Wright and Wright (1999, 2002) suggest that the participants in our research studies can also be a source of meaning at work (they call this committed to participant research, or CPR). For example, by informing at-risk participants in burnout research about the possible consequences of emotional exhaustion and spending time to discuss coping strategies with them, Wright was able to make an important difference to participants in his research, which in turn made his work more personally meaningful. In fact, by using the CPR approach to fully connect with the participants in his research Wright came to experience his work as a calling, rather than just a job or career (Wrzesniewski, 2003).

Additionally, we should craft our working relationships to put us in more frequent contact with the beneficiaries of our work. When individuals have contact with beneficiaries, they better understand the true meaning of what they do (Grant, 2007). Too often though, scholars have limited contact with beneficiaries. To remedy this, we should make a conscious effort to seek out more interaction with beneficiaries. One powerful way of increasing contact with beneficiaries is by adopting a CPR approach—in which every participant in a research study becomes a potential beneficiary of the researcher's efforts. CPR research involves going beyond a “do no harm” philosophy with the participants in our research. Instead, we can actively think of how we can make a positive difference to our research subjects. Wright, for example, counseled an at-risk participant in his burnout studies to consider a different job that would be less stressful—the participant later reported what a positive effect the change had on her health and marriage (Wright & Wright, 2002).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this Incubator, we suggested ways that scholars can engage in cognitive, task, and relational job crafting to increase the personal meaning of their work. A scholarly job crafting approach to meaningful work presents a number of exciting possibilities, but also some challenges. First, prior research has suggested that jobs present obstacles to aspiring crafters, and that these obstacles may differ by career stage (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010). In academic careers, doctoral students and junior scholars may feel less autonomy to job craft—especially if that crafting does not emphasize the scholarship of discovery. Future research can assess how scholars at different stages effectively craft their work. Second, although career outcomes outside of personal meaning are likely important to many scholars, our discussion of scholarly job crafting focuses primarily on meaning. Third, scholars who enact our suggestions must remain conscious of the impact their job crafting has on others to ensure that in creating more positive meaning for themselves they do not negatively impact others' experiences. Finally, although we have assumed that increasing the personal meaning of academic work is unilaterally positive and desirable, this may not always be true. Employees whose work is overly meaningful may become consumed by their work, at the expense of their outside activities, their relationships with others, and their mental and physical health (e.g., Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). Thus, we should be attentive to warning signs that our work is becoming too meaningful and consuming, and regulate our job crafting accordingly.

In closing, we invite you to think about new ways you might craft your job as an organizational scholar, and then to put those ideas into practice. Start with something small to create some momentum. Job crafting does not have to involve a large commitment like redesigning a course or taking on administrative responsibilities; something as simple as stopping to talk with a former student can significantly increase the feeling that one's job is meaningful and important. As academics we have an unparalleled degree of autonomy in our jobs, and hence unique opportunities to job craft. We challenge you to take advantage of these opportunities and, using this Incubator as scaffolding, construct a career that overflows with positive personal meaning.

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