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Job crafting as effective career coaching or counselling tool for HSPs

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Introduction

Effective career coaching or counselling is a major concern both in the field of psychology and in the labour market. Mismatches between an individual's psychological profile and the work they do can be a source of tremendous internal conflict, impaired performance, and impaired subjective well-being. Both organisations and individuals therefore seek to reduce the gaps or discrepancies between the two.

The Positive Psychology website (PositivePsychology.com - Helping You Help Others) offers a science-based, seven-part, step-by-step guide, coaching manual, and workbook for Job Crafting[®] Positive Psychology, a solution that aims to personalise work and "improve the fit between employees' work and their individual preferences". This tool describes the concept of job crafting, how to identify an individual's values, strengths, and interests, what task crafting, relational crafting, cognitive crafting means and implies, and how a job crafting action plan and a job crafting reflection should be carried out.

Our aim was to assess whether using this tool for one month would reduce the level of internal conflict in HSPs and increase their level of performance and subjective well-being. In order to test this, we measured these indicators using the Life Satisfaction Scale, the Workplace Internal Conflict Questionnaire, the Maslach Burnout Inventory and the Job Satisfaction Survey on a 42-year-old woman - Highly Sensitive Person - employed in a job with an IT

profile in the justice sector. After an initial completion of these scales and questionnaires, the subject was familiarised with the Job Crafting process and asked to complete the Job Crafting workbook in one week and then to apply its concepts in the workplace for one month. After this period, the subject was reassessed using the same scales and questionnaires to quantify the variation in the indicators. Direct feedback from the subject was also collected.

Our results showed that the application of Job Crafting methods and techniques was particularly effective for our highly sensitive subject in reducing internal conflict and increasing performance and well-being, to an extent that will be detailed. These results are promising, and this intensive study could support others using a larger number of participants with the aim of generalising our conclusion.

The need to promote specific interventions for HSP, including in the workplace

Defined as a temperamental trait and characterised by the acronym DOES, which comes from depth of processing, overstimulation, emotional reactivity & empathy and subtle stimuli, high sensitivity (HS) or in scientific terms sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) (E. Aron, 1996) is found in 15-30% of the population according to some studies (Lionetti et al., 2018; Tillmann et al., 2018).

It is important to stress that SPS is not a disease (E. Aron, 1996), but studies show that Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) tend to be somewhat less resilient to stress under unfavourable conditions, and in turn cope better than others under favourable conditions (Aron & Aron, 1997; Bas et al, 2021; Belsky & Pluess, 2009; Booth et al., 2015; Boyce & Ellis, 2005; Greven et al., 2019; Lionetti et al., 2018; Pluess, 2015; Pluess & Boniwell, 2015; Slagt et al., 2019, Veleanovici et. al., 2023).

Even though the scientific literature on high sensitivity has experienced a steady development, the part that approaches HSPs in the field of work is rather scarce.

Evers et al. (2008) examined the construct validity of the HSP scale and introduced sensory processing sensitivity (SPS) into the field of work stress by relating this concept to other concepts that have been successfully used in the field - sense of coherence, self-efficacy, engagement/alienation and negative affectivity, and also examined the relationship between SPS and four

facets of work stress - work load, emotional load, work displeasure, need for recovery - as well as with negative affectivity. They tested five hypotheses and the results showed that SPS was negatively correlated with sense of coherence, comprehensibility, manageability, meaningfulness and with self-efficacy; and that SPS was positively correlated with alienation, negative affectivity, work stress, workload, emotional strain, work displeasure and need for recovery. However, these results only apply to the subscales EOE (Ease of Excitation) and LST (Low Sensory Threshold), whereas the subscale AES (Aesthetic Sensitivity) showed a quite different pattern of correlations, namely in the opposite direction to the other subscales or not significant (Evers et al., 2008).

The results of the above-mentioned study are not encouraging for the psychological well-being of HSPs, but rather emphasise the need for support for these people.

In the 2020 edition of "The Highly Sensitive Person", Elaine Aron presents a summary of three significant studies on Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) in the workplace. The first study, conducted by Bhavini Shrivastava in an Indian IT company, found that HSPs experienced higher levels of stress in their work environment than non-HSPs, yet were paradoxically perceived as more productive by their managers. A subsequent study by Maike Andresen focused on the impact of high sensitivity on employee turnover intentions in international settings. This research identified a trend in which HSPs, despite being frequently selected for important overseas assignments, showed increased turnover intentions, primarily due to stress. The study suggested that better preparation and support for HSPs could potentially mitigate this trend. Finally, John Hughes, an interim CIO, and executive practices expert, discusses the unique leadership qualities of HSPs. He highlights their keen powers of observation, a preference for thoughtful processing over immediate action, and a capacity for 'resonant leadership' characterised by an empathetic and understanding approach. These attributes, according to Hughes, position HSPs as exceptional leaders in organisational contexts (E. Aron, 2020).

Because of the specific characteristics and behaviours of HSPs, and the potential threats to their psychological health and well-being, there was a natural need to define special and specific interventions for these individuals in the context of work. Targeted approaches for HSPs at work have been proposed by Aron (1996; 2010) and Jaeger (2008).

In making the distinction between work and vocation, Aron (1996) points to the desirable solution where the path led by our greatest happiness intersects with the path led by the world's greatest need - an intersection that allows the HSP to earn money for doing what he/she loves. Following this path

means that a HSP is aware of his/her calling or is able to discover it. Three difficulties that a HSP may encounter along the way relate to issues of intuition (which inner voice to follow), not being well informed about the facts, and low self-confidence.

In her 2008 book, Jaeger describes the three different "work states" that Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) experience in the workplace: Drudgery, Craft and Calling, ranked from least to most favourable. He also outlines strategies for individuals to engage with their 'calling', emphasising the role of his book as a tool for identifying job compatibility. In addition, Jaeger highlights the dual nature of sensitivities in the workplace, noting that they can exacerbate or enhance one's work experience, depending on how they are applied.

Aron (2010) provides a set of recommendations tailored for Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) in the workplace. These suggestions, drawn from her extensive clinical experience and interactions with HSPs, include a number of strategies. These include pursuing a liberal arts education, seeking career counselling, undergoing vocational testing, and obtaining the highest level of training possible. Aron (2010) advises HSPs to work in their own unique style, including increasing their presence, particularly in leadership roles, to ensure that their needs and perspectives are recognised and to counteract any perception of weakness or lack of intelligence. She also suggests that HSPs should adapt autonomously in situations where organisational change is not possible, while maintaining engagement with others. In addition, Aron emphasises the importance of recognising and avoiding boundary issues, particularly using work relationships to satisfy unmet early needs or failing to set boundaries when attending to the needs of others. Finally, she emphasises the value of making genuine and attentive connections in all interactions (Aron, 2010).

Despite the many negative issues associated with the trait, HSPs can be extremely resourceful and well adapted in the workplace, especially if the environment recognises their needs and is supportive.

Job Crafting and wellbeing at work: a case study

Given the unique characteristics and behaviours of Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs), particularly in the workplace, we conducted a case study to evaluate the effects of a Job Crafting tool© from PositivePsychology.com when used by HSPs.

Our aim was to determine whether this tool had a positive impact on their internal conflicts, job performance and overall wellbeing at work. The aim is to identify evidence-based methods suitable for intervening with HSPs in professional settings.

Job crafting captures the active changes that employees make to their own job design in ways that can lead to multiple positive outcomes, including engagement, job satisfaction, resilience and thriving (Berg et al., 2008). The Job Crafting Manual and Workbook[©] are designed for the general population with the aim of improving the fit between employees' work and their individual preferences. According to the Work Crafting Manual[©], the benefits of Job Crafting are creates a more enjoyable work environment, increases work engagement, increases job satisfaction, provides a sense of control and autonomy, increases employability, improves performance, increases likelihood of career progression, strengthens resilience, promotes well-being, creates the conditions for flourishing and thriving at work, increases meaningfulness of work, provides a sense of mastery, improves resourcefulness, increases motivation, reduces absenteeism, contributes to more confident decision making, promotes a revitalised and engaged workforce.

Our first step was to identify a Highly Sensitive Person (HSP) who was willing to participate in both pre- and post-intervention assessments. Once we had her informed consent, we assessed her level of sensitivity using a dual approach: direct interviews and psychometric tools.

The interview was designed according to Elaine Aron's (1997) DOES acronym criteria (i.e. depth of processing, overstimulation, emotional responsivity/empathy, and sensitive to subtleties). In addition, we administered the High Sensitivity Scale - Brief Version (HSP-12) for a comprehensive assessment. The Highly Sensitive Person Scale - Brief Version (HSP-12) is a 12-item self-report measure of environmental sensitivity in adults; each of the 12 items is rated on a 7-point Likert scale; Findings from four separate studies (total N = 1,140) suggest that individual differences in environmental sensitivity can be reliably and easily assessed with a brief self-report measure (HSP-12), which has been confirmed and validated by empirical studies that show the scale predicts heightened reactivity to both negative and positive experiences (Pluess, 2020).

The responses to the High Sensitivity Scale - Brief Version - HSP-12 indicated a high level of sensitivity, as our subject registered a level of 6 on a scale of 1 to 7, where the interval 1-3 indicates absent or low sensitivity, 3-5 a moderate level of sensitivity, and 5-7 a high level of sensitivity.

Having assessed the sensitivity of our subject, our next step was to assess key indicators. We conducted an initial assessment using several tools: the Life Satisfaction Scale, the Workplace Conflict Questionnaire, the Maslach

Burnout Inventory and the Job Satisfaction Survey. In addition, we established a protocol to control for confounding variables that could affect the results.

To further ensure the accuracy of our results, we included control variables. One significant factor we identified was self-esteem, which is known to influence internal conflict, performance and subjective well-being. To measure this, we used the Self Esteem Three-Dimensional Scale (SETS), which gives us a comprehensive view of the subject's self-esteem.

The Self Esteem Three-Dimensional Scale (SETS) is an instrument developed by the psychologist Petruța Coman that measures self-esteem taking into account three components of the construct, namely: self-love, self-image and self-confidence. It contains 24 items rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, 8 items for each dimension of the construct, some of which are reverse coded. The scoring sheet provides independent scores for the dimensions and an overall score for the self-esteem construct. Three levels of importance are assigned to the scores: low, medium, and high.

In our study, the subject's overall self-esteem, as measured by the Self Esteem Three-Dimensional Scale (SETS), remained consistent across the two assessments, with a total score of 80 on each occasion, indicating a moderate level of self-esteem. However, there were slight variations in the subscale scores. Initially, she scored 27 on both self-love and self-image, and 26 on self-confidence. At the second assessment, the scores were 26 for self-love and 27 for both self-image and self-confidence. These subscale scores also reflect an intermediate level of self-esteem. Given the minimal variation in these scores, we concluded that changes in self-esteem did not significantly affect the overall results of our study.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale - SWLS is a short questionnaire that measures global life satisfaction. The structure of subjective well-being has been conceptualised as consisting of two major components: the emotional or affective component and the judgmental or cognitive component (Diener, 1984). Specifically, the SWLS is a 5-item scale designed to measure global cognitive judgments of one's life satisfaction (not a measure of positive or negative affect) (Diener et al., 1985) with good psychometric properties, including high internal consistency and high temporal reliability.

Between the two assessments, we observed a slight increase in scores on the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS). Our subject's initial score was 2.2, which increased to 2.6 at the subsequent assessment, reflecting a slight improvement in life satisfaction. According to the SWLS scoring system, both scores are in the moderate satisfaction range, defined as scores between 3 and 5. Although an increase of 0.4 points may seem modest, it is significant in the context of overall personal well-being. This change, particularly in

relation to the use of a Job Crafting tool, suggests a positive impact. To ensure the accuracy of this finding, we also collected direct feedback to rule out other potential factors influencing this change.

The Internal Conflicts at Work Questionnaire is a three-item measure developed by the authors of this paper for this research (Box 1). The questionnaire measures the frequency and intensity of internal conflicts at work in terms of a person's distress and affect. The concept is defined as contradictions between inner values and required behaviours. Our subject did not show any variation on this questionnaire before and after using the Job Crafting procedure. In both measures, she reported internal conflicts several times a year with a disturbance and affect intensity of three on a scale of one to ten, where one means not at all and ten means very much.

Box 1 - Internal Conflicts at Work Questionnaire

Name:

Age:

Instructions: Read the questions below carefully and answer them based on your experience at the current work place.

1. It happens that you experience at work contradictions between your personal values and certain courses of action that are required?

YES/ NO

2. If you answered YES to the previous question, how often do you experience these situations?

Daily

A few times a week

A few times a month

A few times a year

Never, if I come to think of it

3. On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means not at all and 10 means a lot, how hard does it disturb/affect you these situations and their consequences?

The original MBI (MBI-HSS) was developed to measure burnout as an occupational problem for people providing human services (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). However, even after its original publication, the MBI was used to assess burnout in people who were not human service workers. As we have described, it was initially adapted for use with teachers, but as interest in burnout in other groups grew, it became clear that interpretation of the original MBI scales for other groups was not always straightforward (Coultas, 2023). The MBI-GS (Maslach Burnout Inventory - General Survey) was therefore developed. This was the version of the questionnaire used in this study. The MBI-GS assesses three core aspects of the burnout syndrome as experienced by people working in occupations other than human services: exhaustion, cynicism and lack of professional efficacy. The frequency with which the respondent experiences feelings related to each scale is assessed using a seven-point fully anchored response format (Coultas, 2023).

At the initial assessment, our subject scored 22 on the Exhaustion subscale and 16 on the Cynicism subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). These scores are on a scale where higher numbers indicate greater burnout, with the maximum possible score being 30. Thus, a score of 22 indicates a high level of burnout, while 16 indicates a moderate level. On the Professional Efficacy subscale, where lower scores indicate greater burnout, our subject scored 29, indicating a lower level of burnout.

The MBI manual explains that the Exhaustion scale measures general feelings of fatigue, the Cynicism scale measures feelings of detachment or indifference towards work (similar to depersonalisation in other versions of the MBI), and the Professional Efficacy scale measures one's sense of effectiveness at work.

At the follow-up assessment, the scores changed to 20 for exhaustion, 14 for cynicism and 33 for professional efficacy. These changes, a decrease of 2 points in both Exhaustion and Cynicism and an increase of 4 points in Professional Efficacy, indicate a positive shift towards lower levels of burnout.

The Job Satisfaction Survey - JSS is a 36-item questionnaire with a Likert scale from 1 to 6, written in both positive and negative directions, used to assess nine dimensions of job satisfaction in relation to overall satisfaction (Spector, 1985). The nine dimensions of the questionnaire are: Pay, Promotion, Supervision, Fringe Benefits, Contingent Rewards, Operating conditions, Coworkers, Nature of work, Communication (Spector, 1985).

In the initial assessment, our subject's total score on the Job Satisfaction Survey was 108, giving a weighted score of 12. This score indicated a low level of job satisfaction. However, at the second assessment, the total score increased to 115 and the weighted score increased slightly to 12.7. These

improved scores moved the subject's level of job satisfaction from 'low' to 'ambivalent or moderate'.

Breaking down the scores by dimension, the scores at the first measurement were as follows: 4, 4, 22, 4, 5, 14, 21, 12 and 22. At the second measurement the scores were 4, 4, 22, 4, 6, 14, 21, 18 and 22. It is worth noting that the only changes occurred in the Contingent Rewards and Nature of Work dimensions. The increase in the Contingent Rewards score reflects their perception or reality of receiving better recognition from their manager. The improvement in the Nature of Work score suggests that she found her work more meaningful, enjoyed her tasks more, took more pride in her work, and was overall more satisfied with her work.

In our research, we reassessed the sensitivity level of our subject, which might seem counterintuitive at first. Typically, personality traits are expected to remain stable in adulthood. However, our findings are not unique. For instance, a study conducted in Norway demonstrated that an Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP) intervention for OCD patients led to a decrease in their sensitivity levels (Holm et al., 2019). This suggests that specific interventions, like ERP, which focus on desensitization through exposure, might temporarily affect personality traits in the short term.

We hypothesize that the changes observed in the Norwegian study might be due to the unique characteristics of the ERP intervention. It's also possible that sensitivity levels could increase under certain conditions over a lifetime. Further studies are required to investigate and verify these possibilities.

In our case, the change in sensitivity level was not substantial. The initial assessment using the HSP-12 Scale showed a sensitivity level of 6, which slightly decreased to 5.8 in the second measurement. Importantly, there was no alteration in the subject's identification with the descriptors in the DOES acronym, indicating stability in specific aspects of her sensitivity.

Table 1 provides a summary of the results.

Table 1 – Summary of the results.

After completing the second round of assessments, we obtained direct feedback from our subject. Her responses were consistent with the measured outcomes and further highlighted a reduction in internal conflicts at work. In particular, she mentioned an incident in which the application of relational and cognitive crafting techniques positively changed her interaction with a new team member for whom she had some responsibility.

The subject described how the Job Crafting process had made her aware of her annoyance with the new employee's frequent interruptions and suggestions, which she had initially found disruptive to her work. Instead of reacting with frustration, she chose to reassess the situation. She tried to understand the new employee's motivations and considered that his eagerness to contribute and learn could be an asset. This shift in perspective led her to see his involvement as potentially reducing her workload and improving overall efficiency.

By using relational and cognitive crafting strategies, she not only managed her initial anger, but also identified a beneficial outcome. Recognising the new employee's potential to take on additional tasks was particularly beneficial as she was going through a particularly busy and demanding period at work. Ultimately, this approach helped to reduce her workload and alleviate some of her work-related stress.

Conclusion

Highly Sensitive Persons (HSPs) are recognised in the literature as a distinct group. Elaine Aron emphasises the importance of this categorisation in challenging and overcoming potential prejudices associated with their temperament (E. N. Aron, 2010). By understanding their unique needs and behaviours in the workplace, we can provide more effective support and assistance and tap into their potential as highly resourceful and well-adapted employees.

In our study, we investigated the effectiveness of the Job Crafting Manual and Workbook - a tool with proven benefits for the general population - when used by an HSP for personal job modification. Specifically, we investigated whether this tool could reduce work-related internal conflict and improve performance and well-being in HSPs. The results are encouraging; our case study showed positive changes in all three targeted indicators following the use of the tool. These findings suggest that Job Crafting could be a valuable strategy in career coaching or counselling for HSPs. However, further research is needed to determine whether these findings can be generalised to the wider highly sensitive population.

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