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So what exactly is my job? Exploring the outcomes of qualitative job insecurity for hospitality workers

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About the Author



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Employees in the hospitality industry experience some of the highest levels of work-related stress compared to workers in other industries. Moreover, when compared to other industries, hospitality, tourism, and related industries were especially adversely impacted by Covid-19, and, as a result, work-related uncertainties among service employees grew disproportionately (Gursoy & Chi, 2020). In particular, guidance from public health officials, changing consumer preferences and demands, and other pandemic-related factors caused many hotels, restaurants, and other hospitality organizations to significantly reduce their service offerings and/or close their business outright.

Unsurprisingly, these drastic business changes caused hospitality employees to experience heightened levels of work-related uncertainty, especially concerning whether they could maintain employment during the pandemic. At the same time, however, as many hospitality organizations struggled to attract and retain talented workers as they

re-emerged from the pandemic, hospitality workforces were and remain stretched thin, with many employees taking on added responsibilities that were previously carried out by workers in other positions. As such, many of these workers were asked to complete unfamiliar tasks and, perhaps, complete these tasks under a new set of working conditions (e.g., filling positions at multiple properties, working shifts at various times of day, completing work outdoors). Hence, while many hospitality workers lost their jobs in the midst of Covid-19, those who maintained employment were likely left wondering whether and at what point in the future their jobs would resemble what they had come to expect and appreciate about their jobs prior to the pandemic. With this in mind, the purpose of this research was to examine the impact of qualitative job insecurity on two relevant, yet underexplored work-related outcomes for hospitality workers: idiosyncratic deals and illegitimate tasks.

Let's make a deal!

Idiosyncratic deals are opportunities, privileges or special work arrangements that employees negotiate with their leaders that are unique to them and are not available to all other employees (Rousseau et al., 2006). An example of an idiosyncratic deal for hospitality workers may include an employee reaching out to their supervisor to come to an agreement on a flexible scheduling plan that allows the worker to balance work and caregiving responsibilities at home. Another example of an idiosyncratic deal might include a worker who, after becoming aware of a vacancy within a selective manager-in-training program, is able to secure a strong statement of support from their immediate supervisor in exchange for taking on a few added responsibilities to temporarily reduce some of the leader's workload. Idiosyncratic deals have been consistently linked to positive outcomes such as stronger leader-employee relationships, increased job satisfaction, and decreased turnover (Liao et al., 2016). As such, idiosyncratic deals are beneficial for employees, leaders, and the organizations to which they belong. However, we expected that as employees experienced higher levels of qualitative job insecurity, they would invest more of their time, energy, and other personal resources to cope with the strain caused by job insecurity, resulting in fewer resources for them to negotiate valuable idiosyncratic deals.

You asked me to do what?

An illegitimate task, on the contrary, is a task that has been delegated to an employee and that the employee perceives to be either unreasonable for them to have to complete or unnecessary for any employee to have to complete (Semmer et al., 2010). It is worth noting that simply because a delegated task falls outside of an employee's job description does not mean that the employee will perceive it as illegitimate. Hence, any delegated task could potentially be perceived by an employee as illegitimate. Given that it is commonplace for hospitality workers to be asked either by supervisors,

customers or their peers to complete tasks that fall outside of their job descriptions, it is particularly necessary for research to identify the factors that may determine whether hospitality workers classify certain delegated tasks as legitimate and others as illegitimate. As many may expect, illegitimate tasks have been linked to employee stress and burnout, feelings of organizational injustice, and reduced self-esteem while at work (Ding & Kuvaas, 2022). Thus, employees' perceptions of illegitimate tasks run contrary to their best interests and the best interests of their employers. Despite this, we expected that as hospitality employees experienced stronger feelings of qualitative job insecurity, they would report having been delegated more illegitimate tasks.

Taking Charge: The Role of Proactive Personality

When it comes to experiencing stress at work, many leaders and organizations rely on employees' resilience or other personality factors to enable them to effectively cope with the strain they experience while at work. Though certain personality traits can enable employees to cope with stress effectively, other equally desirable personality traits may exacerbate harmful effects of work-related stressors, such as feelings of qualitative job insecurity. Proactivity, a personality trait capturing the extent to which an individual is forward-thinking and strives to identify problems and implement solutions and strategies to promote future success (Bateman & Crant, 1993), may be one such example. Proactive employees thrive in environments that are predictable and provide an adequate amount of autonomy and self-determination. Unfortunately, as feelings of qualitative job insecurity increase, employees are likely to feel that their work situations are more unpredictable and do not provide them with an adequate amount of autonomy. As such, highly proactive employees may be more frustrated when experiencing qualitative job insecurity than less proactive employees.

Research Findings and Key Takeaways

To address these research aims, we surveyed a total of 180 hospitality workers over the span of four weeks about their feelings of qualitative job insecurity, proactivity, evaluations of stress in their work environment, as well as both idiosyncratic deals and illegitimate tasks. Our sample of participants was diverse with regard to a number of demographic characteristics such as the sector of the hospitality industry in which they worked, their gender, their racial/ethnic identity, and the level of their position within their organization. The results indicated that as hospitality workers felt higher levels of qualitative job insecurity, they tended to view the stress present in their work environments as less of a challenge and more of a hindrance to their on-the-job performance. Additionally, as feelings of qualitative job insecurity increased, hospitality workers reported negotiating fewer idiosyncratic deals for themselves and felt that they were delegated more illegitimate tasks. Moreover, highly proactive individuals felt that qualitative job insecurity stood in the way of them effectively carrying out their jobs –

resulting in them negotiating even fewer idiosyncratic deals and perceiving more illegitimate tasks relative to their less proactive counterparts. It is worth noting that prior research finds that idiosyncratic deals can be a focus of social comparisons between coworkers given that receiving these deals can imply that a leader is displaying favoritism toward specific employees (van Waeyenberg et al., 2023). Hence, caution must be taken when providing specific employees with unique privileges and opportunities so as not to cause conflict amongst employees.

There are at least a couple of noteworthy takeaways from this research study that can guide hospitality leaders' and organizations' efforts to improve worker well-being and build hospitality workforces better than they were pre-pandemic. First, this study highlights the notion that it is simply not enough to provide employees with quantitative job security by ensuring that they are able to remain employed, especially if the job that workers are able to keep is rife with instability and unpredictability. Feelings of qualitative job insecurity contribute to workers' feelings of stress and, ultimately, influence other critical work outcomes for these workers. Second, hospitality organizations should not expect that more proactive workers are able to predict and circumnavigate the stress caused by feelings of qualitative job insecurity. In fact, these highly proactive employees may be more adversely impacted by feelings of qualitative job insecurity than less proactive employees.

From Research to Practice

To combat workers' feelings of qualitative job insecurity, hospitality leaders might consider implementing strategies that provide employees with a greater sense of stability and predictability at work. One such strategy is to allow workers some latitude in crafting their jobs to fit their preferences and meet their needs with regard to personal and career growth and development rather than dictating which additional tasks these workers will complete each shift. This could be done by having one-on-one meetings with employees to identify their strengths and preferences and delegating additional tasks that best fit these strengths and preferences. Alternatively, leaders may consider providing a list of duties that remain unassigned due to staffing shortages and then allowing employees to self-select one or multiple additional tasks to complete. In either case, it is important for hospitality leaders to communicate to their employees whether changes to employees' jobs are permanent or temporary and, if only temporary, for how long. Through the implementation of strategies such as these, hospitality workers are left feeling a greater sense of autonomy and control over their work situations and, thus, feel that their jobs are more stable and predictable. By reducing employees' feelings of qualitative job insecurity, hospitality organizations are able to reduce worker stress, improve employee satisfaction, and retain talented workers for longer.

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