Correlates of Flow at Work Among Norwegian Journalists

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ABSTRACT. This exploratory study examined potential correlates of the experience of flow at work among 211 Norwegian journalists. Data were collected using anonymously completed questionnaires. Correlates included personal and work situation characteristics, workaholism components, burnout, positive and negative affect and absenteeism. Journalists reporting more flow were older, had longer company and career tenure, worked in larger work units and earned more income. The experience of flow was positively correlated with work enjoyment, negatively correlated with feeling driven to work because of internal needs, and positively correlated with positive affect and feelings of professional efficacy. Levels of flow at work were not correlated with levels of employee absenteeism.

KEYWORDS. Norwegian, journalists, work, absenteeism

Csikszentmihalyi coined the term flow in 1990 (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). He also uses the term optimal experience to refer to times when

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individuals feel in control of their actions and masters of their own destinies. Optimal experiences commonly result from hard work and meeting challenges head on. Individuals make optimal experiences happen. Optimal experiences contribute to a sense of mastery, of participating in the events of one's life. Csikszentmihalyi developed a theory of optimal experience based on the concept of flow, a state in which individuals become so involved in an activity that nothing else matters.

Csikszentmihalyi believes that since so much time is invested and spent in working, the experience of flow at work is likely to have significant effects on one's quality of life. Flow also plays major role in how people respond to stress. Csikszentmihalyi reports data showing that women and men experience more flow at work than in leisure (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). He also reports that managers and supervisors were more often in flow at work (64 percent) than were clerical workers (51 percent) and blue collar workers (49 percent). Apathy was reported at work more often by blue collar workers than managers (23 versus 11 percent), and in leisure more often by managers than by blue collar workers (61 versus 46 percent). Certain activities are more conducive to flow as they make optimal experience easier to achieve (e.g., learning skills, goals and new solutions) (Seligman & Czikszentmihaly, 2000).

Clawson (1999) identifies resonance as the key underlying superior performance, even world class performance, in any field of endeavour. Resonance is a special type of experience that high level performance in a chosen valued field brings to an individual. People who perform at their best report a common experience. Professional athletes refer to it as "being in the zone," jazz musicians refer to it as "being in the groove," managers use the term "resonance" to capture these experiences.

The general hypothesis underlying this exploratory research was that the experience of flow at work would be related to particular workaholism components (positively to work enjoyment and negatively to feeling driven to work), affect (positively with positive affect, negatively with negative affect), burnout (negatively with exhaustion, positively with professional efficacy) and negatively with absenteeism.

METHOD

Respondents

Data were collected from 211 journalists working in the city of Bergen, Norway. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the

TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Age	N	%
29 or less	42	20.1
30-39	94	45.0
40-49	38	18.2
50-59	31	14.8
60 or over	4	1.9
Gender		
Males	138	67.0
Females	68	33.0
Marital Status		
Single	47	22.8
Married	145	70.4
Separated/divorced	13	6.3
Widowed	1	.5
Children at Home		
Yes	95	45.7
No	113	54.3
Education Beyond Primary		
0-3	27	13.0
3-6	83	39.9
6 or more	98	47.1
Title		
Journalist	178	85.2
Layout designer	14	6.7
Photographer	15	7.2

Organizational Tenure	N	%
1-2 years	47	22.5
3-4 years	41	19.6
5-10 years	65	31.1
Over 10 years	56	26.8
Journalism Tenure		
1-3 years	28	13.5
4-10 years	95	45.7
10-20 years	53	25.5
Over 20 years	32	15.4
Organization Size		
1-15	22	10.8
16-100	31	15.2
101-150	44	21.6
151 and over	107	52.0
Unit Size		
1-15	81	39.3
16-100	62	30.1
101-150	57	27.7
151 and over	6	2.9
Job Tenure		
Less than 1	30	14.6
1-2	65	31.6
2-4	48	23.3
5-8	36	17.5
9 and over	27	13.1

TABLE 1 (continued)

Work Status	N	%	Income	N	%
Permanent	185	89.4	275,000 or less	42	20.4
Temporary	16	7.7	275,000-350,000	65	31.6
Freelance	6	2.9	351,000-450,000	64	31.1
Leadership Responsibility					
Yes	54	26.0			
No	134	74.0			
Hours Worked					
30 or less	14	6.8			
31-40	114	55.0			
41-50	75	36.3			
51 and above	4	1.9			

sample. Two-thirds of the sample were male (67%), most were married (70.4%), worked in permanent jobs (89.4%), were under 40 years of age (65.1%) worked between 31 and 40 hours per week (55.0%), had relatively low levels of job and organizational tenure (42.1% had fewer years or less organizational tenure and 46.2% had two years or less job tenure), and most had no supervisory responsibilities (74%).

Procedure

Data were collected from 211 journalists using anonymously completed questionnaires, representing a response rate of forty-three percent. Five hundred questionnaires were mailed out by the journalists' union; completed questionnaires were returned to a university address. Measures originally appearing in English were translated into Norwegian by members of the research team (e.g., flow); other measures (e.g., Spence and Robbins' workaholism components) had already been translated into Norwegian from English and used in other research projects.

Measures

Flow

Optimal experience or flow was measured by a 36-item instrument developed and validated by Jackson and Marsh (1996). Nine dimensions of flow were identified from previous writing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Jackson, 1995). These were: challenge-skill balance, action-awareness merging, clear goals, ambiguous feedback, concentration on the task at hand, paradox of control, loss of self-consciousness, the transformation of time and an autotelic (enjoyable) experience. Each was measured by four items; respondents indicated their agreement with each item on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Sample items included: "My abilities matched the high challenge of the situation." "It felt like time stopped while I was working." A measure of total flow was created (α = .89) by combining scores on the nine subscales since all were positively correlated and most significantly ($p < .05$).

Workaholism Components

Spence and Robbins (1992) derive three workaholism components on the basis of an extensive literature review: work involvement, feeling driven to work and work enjoyment. Their measures were used in this study. *Work involvement* (α = .67) had eight items (e.g., "I get bored and restless on vacations when I haven't anything productive to do"). *Feeling driven to work* (α = .80) had seven items (e.g., "I often feel that there's something inside me that drives me to work hard"). *Joy in work* (α = .88) had ten items (e.g., "My job is more like fun than work").

Affect

Positive and negative affect were measured using the PANAS scales (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988). Positive and negative affect (α_s = .89 and .83, respectively) were each measured by ten words that describe different feelings and emotions. Respondents indicated the extent to which each word described their feelings on a five-point scale (1 = very slightly or not at all, 3 = moderately, 5 = extremely).

Burnout

Three burnout components were measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS) developed by Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach and Jackson (1996). Exhaustion (five items, $\alpha = .90$) assesses fatigue, Cynicism (five items, $\alpha = .81$) reflects indifference or a distant attitude towards work, and Professional Efficacy (six items, $\alpha = .83$) includes both social and non-social aspects of occupational accomplishments. Respondents indicated how frequently they experienced each item on a seven-point frequency scale (0 = never, 6 = always).

Absenteeism

Respondents indicated the number of days they had been absent from work in the previous year as a result of their own sickness, absent for family reasons and absent because of work stress.

RESULTS

Demographic Characteristics and Flow

Table 2 presents the correlations between several personal demographic and work situation characteristics and the measure of total flow. Individuals indicating higher levels of flow were older, had longer company and journalism tenure, worked in larger units and earned more income. Flow was unrelated to gender, level of education, job tenure, company size and whether the journalist had any supervisory responsibilities.

Work Attitudes and Flow

Table 3 shows the correlations between the measure of total flow and various work attitudes. The following comments are offered in summary. First, journalists reporting higher levels of flow also indicated greater work enjoyment and lower feeling driven to work because of inner needs. Second, journalists indicating higher levels of flow also reported more positive affect. Third, journalists reporting greater flow also indicated greater professional efficacy. Fourth, levels of flow at

TABLE 2. Demographic Characteristics and Flow

Demographic Characteristics	Flow
Age	.18*
Gender	.02
Education	−.02
Job Tenure	.07
Company Tenure	.17*
Journalist Tenure	.20**
Unit Size	.16*
Company Size	.08
Leadership Role	−.07
Income	.16*

** p < .01
* p < .05

TABLE 3. Work Attitudes and Flow

Workaholism	Flow
Work involvement	.03
Feeling driven	−.20***
Work enjoyment	.34***
Affect	
Positive	.37***
Negative	.03
Burnout	
Exhaustion	−.10
Cynicism	−.10
Efficacy	.19**
Absenteeism	
Own sickness	−.03
Family reasons	.12
Work stress	.10

*** p < .001
** p < .01

work were uncorrelated with levels of work involvement, negative affect, emotional exhaustion, cynicism and absenteeism.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this exploratory study of flow experiences and work attitudes and experiences among Norwegian journalists showed a somewhat consistent pattern (see Table 3). Journalists reporting higher levels of flow at work also indicated higher levels of other positive attitudes and behaviors (work enjoyment, positive affect, professional efficacy) but not lower levels of negative attitudes (negative affect, exhaustion and cynicism, or absenteeism). Watson and Clark (1984) have shown that positive and negative affect are relatively independent concepts.

Czikszentmihalyi (2003) suggests that when individuals see themselves as above their typical average level on both challenge and skill, they will experience flow. High anxiety, associated with workaholism (see Robinson, 1998; Porter, 1996) is proposed by Czikszentmihalyi to exist when challenge is seen as high and skills as low, reflecting perhaps the insecurity and low self-esteem reflected in workaholism. In this study flow was negatively and significantly correlated with feeling driven to work because of internal needs.

The study of flow in organizations has received relatively little research attention. Czikszentmihalyi (2003) undertook a qualitative interview study with 39 business leaders nominated because they combined high achievement with a strong moral commitment. It is easy to understand why and how these individuals might experience flow. Their jobs had meaning, freedom, control and knowledge of results. But is the concept of flow relevant to lower level and less skilled employees?

There are several reasons why flow does not happen at work (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). Many job lack clear goals. Many jobs do not provide feedback to the employee on how they are doing. In addition, employee skills are often not well matched to the jobs they are holding. Many workers have little or no control over their work processes. Finally, work is devalued in many societies as leisure and relaxation are praised. It is difficult to experience flow if employees believe their jobs contribute little of value or meaning (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

It is important to undertake research that contributes to a greater understanding of flow in organizations. This should increase our ability to build flow in organizations. Csikszentmihalyi makes a start here. Senior

management must believe that they need to be responsible for contributing to the emotional well-being of their employees. Then the mission of their organizations must be made clear to all. Job responsibilities must be spelled out and feedback on performance and accomplishments available to all. Training and development needs to be available to balance challenges and skills. Work interruptions should be kept to a minimum. Employees need to have as much control over their work processes as possible. It should be possible to create flow experiences at work and in life more broadly throughout one's career.

Limitations of the Study

Some limitations of the study need to be noted to help put the findings in a larger context. First, all data were collected using questionnaires opening up the possibility of response set consistencies. Second, the data was collected at one point in time making it impossible to address issues of causality. Third, it is not clear the extent to which these findings would generalize to other occupational groups in other countries.

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