

Panel: 19 - Amplifying the Voice of Blue-Collar Workers in HRM Research and Beyond

Title: HOW ORDER PICKER'S WELL-BEING AT WORK IS INFLUENCED BY THEIR LEADERS

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Abstract:

1. INTRODUCTION

The work of blue-collar warehouse workers is strongly regulated by order-picking planning models, which aim to optimise the order-picking process. However, as the use of such optimisation models leads to increases in work pressure, warehousing companies are struggling to retain their staff. Resolving this challenge requires moving beyond managing warehouse workers through order-picking models focused on warehouse productivity and paying more attention to ensuring warehouse workers' well-being. This study uses semi-structured interviews to explore **how leadership impacts the order picker's well-being at work**.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The **antecedents of employee well-being** can be divided into three clusters: individual, organisational and interpersonal factors. **Interpersonal factors** that have an essential effect on employee well-being include the opportunity for interpersonal contact, social support, supportive supervision and valued social position or status (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Sirgy, 2013; Warr, 1987).

Given the importance of these interpersonal antecedents, research (e.g., Inceoglu et al. (2018); Kuoppala et al. (2008)) shows that **good leadership is associated with increased well-being at work**. Das and Pattanayak (2023) posit that transformational and empowering leadership are two leadership styles that can be important to ensure workplace well-being. Transformational leadership is defined by relatedness, stimulation of creativity, autonomy and competence. Leading by example, informing, participative decision-making, coaching and showing concern for subordinates are the characteristics of empowering leadership.

Despite this increased recognition of leadership for well-being, current research (e.g., Inceoglu et al. (2018); Kuoppala et al. (2008)) also emphasises the need to further clarify the link between leadership and employee well-being. By studying how leadership impacts order pickers' well-being, this study adds to our understanding of this link in the context of blue-collar warehouse workers. In doing so, it also answers the calls of Grosse et al. (2015) and Neumann et al. (2021) to give more attention to human factors in order-picking modelling and psychosocial aspects of managing warehouses.

3. METHODOLOGY

As we want to offer an in-depth understanding of how leadership impacts order pickers' well-being at work, a **qualitative approach** was adopted. Forty-four **in-depth semi-structured interviews** were conducted in six Belgian logistics companies. We selected companies of varying sizes and sectors using a maximum variation sampling approach. In each company, we interviewed at least five order pickers, one supervisor and an employee of the human resources department with profound knowledge of the company's well-being policy. We also used the maximum variation sampling principle to select the order pickers, which vary in age, seniority, gender, origin, contract type, motivation and day/night shift. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed using **thematic analysis**. The themes from the interviews were compared to transformational and empowering leadership characteristics.

4. KEY FINDINGS

Reflecting the relatedness dimension of **transformational leadership**, order pickers in all sample companies emphasised the importance of the supervisors' friendliness towards the workers, of being approachable and of informal contact. However, they also described how this could go too far, sometimes expressing irritation when management became too patient, lenient and encouraging with other employees. Order pickers rather appreciated the encouragement to achieve higher goals and, in this way, satisfy their need for competence. By contrast, aspects of transformational leadership, such as the stimulation of creativity and autonomy, did not appear in the interviews as an essential factor for well-being.

Reflecting on aspects of **empowering leadership**, the interviews demonstrate that employees are willing to go the extra mile when the supervisor leads by example and value being informed. Participative decision-making did not appear once in the interviews as an existing way of working. However, the need for it is present as order pickers want to be heard. The workers like to be coached by the team leader. Whether or not a team leader has a coaching approach depends on the personal style and the level of leadership training received. Management and order pickers recognise leadership training as a priority. Showing concern for subordinates is emphasised by order pickers, team managers, and supervisors.

In addition, the interviews show us **extra leadership concepts that positively impact employee well-being**. All the order pickers want to be treated equally. They sometimes feel like their colleagues with interim contracts are handled more gently. Secondly, relational appreciation and respectful communication come up in all the sample companies. Simple words such as 'thank you' and 'well done' make a huge difference. Lastly, giving and taking should be balanced for the aspect of flexibility. Often, there is a trade-off between the order pickers' willingness to do overtime and the supervisor's smooth granting of leave days.

5. REFERENCES

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