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The Moderating Role of Self-Efficacy on the Relationship between Job Autonomy and Proficiency

Carlota Maria Cruz Ribeiro Lemos Bessa

Mestrado em Gestão de Recursos Humanos e Consultadoria
Organizacional

Orientadores:

Prof. Doutora Ana Junça Silva, Professora Auxiliar,
Departamento de Recursos Humanos e Comportamento
Organizacional, ISCTE- Instituto Universitário de Lisboa

Setembro, 2024

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Resumo

Tendo em conta as rápidas e multifacetadas mudanças no mercado e no ambiente de trabalho competitivo desde o início do século XXI, as empresas têm enfrentado grandes dificuldades para atrair, reter e desenvolver o seu capital humano. Assim, tornou-se cada vez mais importante para as organizações focarem-se em práticas eficazes de contratação e gestão de pessoas. Os académicos salientam a importância da autonomia no trabalho e como esta contribui para o compromisso, motivação, envolvimento e estabelecimento de confiança. Defende-se também que a autonomia melhora o desempenho no trabalho e, consequentemente, o desempenho da empresa. A autoeficácia é geralmente considerada uma variável que afeta positivamente o desempenho no trabalho. Neste estudo, explorámos as três dimensões da autonomia: planeamento, métodos e decisão; duas facetas do desempenho no trabalho: proficiências elevadas de autoeficácia (em comparação com níveis mais baixos).

Palavras-chave: autoeficácia, desempenho no trabalho, autonomia no trabalho, planeamento autónomo, métodos autónomos, autonomia na tomada de decisão, significado do trabalho, desempenho em tarefas, proatividade e proficiência.

Sistema de Classificação JEL: J24 – Human Capital, Skills, Occupational Choice, Labor Productivity; O15 - Human Resources;

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Abstract

Considering the rapid and multifaceted shifts within the market and competitive work environment since the beginning of the 21st century, companies have found it incredibly difficult to attract, retain and nurture its human capital, therefore it has become increasingly important for organizations to focus on effective human hiring and management. Academics accentuate the importance of job autonomy and how it contributes to commitment, motivation, engagement and establishment of trust. It's also defended that enhances job performance and consequently, the company's performance. Self-efficacy has generally been considered a variable that positively affects job performance. In this study, we have delved into the three dimensions of autonomy: planning, methods and decision; two aspects of job performance: proficiency and proficiency (delving substantially more on the latter); self-efficacy and the meaning of work. The current research aims to examine the moderating role that self-efficacy has on the relationship between job autonomy and individual performance. To test the model, we obtained 262 answers from working individuals about their work, role, current contractual situation, autonomy at work, well-being, satisfaction, performance and self-efficacy. The results were supported and showed that there is a positive relationship between autonomy and proficiency, and that self-efficacy moderates the indirect relationship between autonomy and proficiency, through the meaning of work and that therefore, this relationship becomes stronger when the worker has higher levels of self-efficacy (versus lower levels).

Keywords: self-efficacy, job performance, job autonomy, autonomy planning, autonomy methods, decision-making autonomy, meaning of work, task performance, proactivity and proficiency.

JEL Classification System: J24 – Human Capital, Skills, Occupational Choice, Labor Productivity; O15 - Human Resources;

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Introduction

In recent studies within organizational psychology and leadership, the management of human resources, alongside concepts such as performance, efficacy, and worker autonomy, has gained significant attention (Parent-Lamarche, 2023). The human dimension is a critical and indispensable aspect of organizations, serving as a fundamental principle across all institutions, as they are reliant on the individuals who comprise them (El Fissi, 2023). Organizations have increasingly recognized the necessity of adapting their strategies and policies to retain a motivated and high-performing workforce. Research consistently demonstrates that job autonomy, recognition, and the pursuit of meaningful work are positively correlated with job satisfaction, aligning with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci et al., 2018).

Historically, job autonomy has been a central element of organizational design. According to the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006), job autonomy refers to the extent to which employees are provided with freedom, independence, and discretion in scheduling their work and determining the methods for its execution. A significant body of literature has focused on the relationship between job autonomy and various work-related outcomes, often framed by models such as the Job Demand-Control Model (Karasek, 1979) or the Job Demands-Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). These models are based on the premise that increased job autonomy positively affects employees' psychological well-being. In the Job Demands-Resources Model, job autonomy is classified as a resource within the work environment, which is expected to reduce strain caused by job demands, enhance employees' ability to achieve work-related goals, and promote both personal and professional development (Bakker et al., 2023). Greater autonomy is also believed to improve workers' capacity to cope with job demands and other potential stressors at work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Furthermore, in the Job Characteristics Model, job autonomy is one of the five core job characteristics, proposed to be closely linked with positive affective outcomes (Hackman & Oldham, 1976).

Job autonomy has also been shown to be closely related to job performance (Bakker et al., 2023). Performance is defined as the total expected value to the organization of the discrete behavioral episodes that an individual performs over a given period (Motowidlo, 2003). An organization's productivity is inherently tied to employee performance, meaning that individual

and group behaviors significantly influence organizational outcomes (Akob et al., 2020; Haerani et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2019). Effective management of organizational productivity is, therefore, contingent on managing individual work performance (Abun, 2021), as employees are key stakeholders in shaping the organization's human and social capital, serving as knowledge sources that support sustainable human resource management practices.

In this study, job performance was examined through one dimension: proficiency. Proficiency refers to an individual's ability and capacity to address specific problems (Bass, 1980); it reflects the extent to which a worker meets the defined expectations and demands of their role as an individual (Griffin et al., 2007). Job proficiency can vary due to numerous factors, including intrinsic motivation, training, job autonomy, and the sense of meaningful work. Intrinsic motivation, in particular, acts as a driving force, generating positive, creative energy that encourages employees to engage deeply with their tasks (Shafique, 2019). Furthermore, there is a strong association between job proficiency and the experience of meaningful work (Truitt, 2011).

The importance of meaningful work has been well-established in research, particularly in relation to employee satisfaction and well-being (Martela, 2021). Self-Determination Theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between meaningful work and psychological needs, suggesting that autonomy, relatedness, and competence are fundamental pathways to experiencing work as meaningful. The meaning of work is defined as an employee's subjective perception of how existentially valuable they believe their work to be (Both-Nwabuwe et al., 2017; Martela & Pessi, 2018). A substantial body of literature indicates that individuals who perceive their work as meaningful tend to perform better (Allan et al., 2019). This notion is further supported by evidence showing that some individuals are even willing to accept lower pay for work that holds emotional significance for them (Achor et al., 2018).

According to Self-Determination Theory, autonomy plays a critical role in enhancing the sense of meaningful work (Martela & Riekkari, 2018). This encompasses both personal fulfillment, defined as the intrinsic value the work holds for the individual, and a broader purpose, defined as the intrinsic value the work provides beyond the individual. Among the three psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—autonomy is often considered the most important (Martela & Pessi, 2018), and it has been associated with positive organizational outcomes such as increased work engagement, reduced burnout, and higher self-rated performance (Deci et al., 2017).

One variable that remains underexplored in research and often overlooked by organizational management is self-efficacy. Rooted in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1977), self-efficacy is defined as an individual's belief in their ability to exert control over their functioning and influence the situations that affect their lives. Individuals with high self-efficacy are confident in their abilities, enabling them to mobilize motivation, mental resources, and take appropriate action to meet contextual demands (Wood & Bandura, 1989). This confidence significantly influences how they think and behave when performing tasks, ultimately impacting their effectiveness and performance (Abun, 2021).

Despite existing research highlighting the positive impact of job autonomy on job performance (Khoshnaw, 2020; Sørli, 2022; Tabiu, 2020) and the relationship between job performance and self-efficacy (Hur, 2021; Machmud, 2018; Mehmood, 2019), there is still a lack of studies—at least to the best of our knowledge—examining the interconnectedness of these four variables: job autonomy, proficiency, meaning of work, and self-efficacy. This study, therefore, was drawn on the Job Characteristics Model and the Job Demands-Resources Model to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interrelations among these variables. In particular, the study sought to determine how and under what conditions job autonomy might affect proficiency. It was hypothesized that meaning of work could function as a psychological mechanism through which autonomy enhances proficiency, with self-efficacy serving as a boundary condition that strengthens this indirect relationship. Thus, meaning of work was investigated as a mediating variable that could influence the relationship between job autonomy and proficiency and self-efficacy was examined as a moderating variable in the indirect effect.

Given the lack of substantial research on this topic, the aim of this study was to explore whether self-efficacy could act as a boundary condition that enhances the effect of job autonomy on proficiency through the mediating role of meaning of work. Understanding these dynamics may provide valuable insights and serve as a foundation for future research, potentially guiding organizations in leveraging these factors to optimize performance outcomes.

Considering what was previously mentioned, we believe that this will be a relevant study, from a theoretical and practical point. The results will deepen the knowledge on the relationship between job autonomy and performance, as well as how self-efficacy affects the connection between the meaning of work and performance. Further, this study will give a clearer perspective on how these variables are connected. When exploring the circumstances of how self-efficacy influences the other variables, this study aims to provide information based on empirical evidence and results.

This research is divided into four sections. Initially, we will explore the theoretical frameworks, thoroughly examining all variables that are related to the main theme. In the second chapter, we will outline the research methodology, including procedures and sample characterization, leading to the analysis of results in the third section. Lastly, in the fourth chapter, we will present the main conclusions of the study, along with its practical and theoretical limitations, while also proposing suggestions for future research on the topic.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

Job Autonomy

Research on job design has extensively examined job autonomy as one of the core job characteristics. Job autonomy is defined as the degree of freedom employees have to determine when, where, and how their tasks are completed (Khoshnaw, S., & Alavi, H., 2020). Theoretical models such as the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), the Job Demand-Control Model (Karasek, 1979), and the Job Demands-Resources Model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007) underscore the significance of autonomy in the workplace.

Hackman and Oldham (1976) conceptualized autonomy as the substantial freedom, flexibility, and discretion afforded to employees in arranging their work schedules and establishing procedures. That is, in the context of employment, having autonomy refers to having discretion over work scheduling, decision-making, and work methods (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Building on this, Morgeson and Humphrey (2006) expanded the definition to include independence and the ability to decide, organize, and select methods for task completion. Similarly, Deci and Ryan (2000) defined autonomy as the feeling of having control and personal responsibility for one's actions, where individuals perceive themselves as the initiators of their own behaviors. Additionally, the Job Demand-Control Model (Karasek, 1979) posits that autonomy functions as a crucial job resource, transforming highly demanding jobs into more active and engaging roles. This model suggests that autonomy is preferable and more beneficial than jobs that, although less demanding, offer lower levels of autonomy. We can conclude that there is a consensus on the definition of job autonomy, according to different scholars. In sum, job autonomy is the degree of freedom that employees have on how they can make choices in their work (Saragih, 2015), giving them the responsibility of how to perform their jobs.

The aforementioned theoretical models provide various insights into the benefits of higher job autonomy. Specifically, the Job Characteristics Model posits that autonomy is associated with a motivational effect due to increased responsibility (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). This model describes the relationship between job characteristics and employees' attitudes and behaviors. Accordingly, a high degree of job autonomy indicates that employees have some freedom to determine how, when, and where they work (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). Specifically, the Job Characteristics Model identifies five core job characteristics—skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback—that can potentially lead to

increased employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance. According to the model, these core characteristics influence three critical psychological states: experienced meaningfulness of work, experienced responsibility for outcomes, and knowledge of the actual results of work activities. These psychological states, in turn, contribute to enhanced employee thriving and overall job performance.

The Job Demand-Control Model emphasizes that increased autonomy in the workplace is linked to several positive outcomes. Specifically, higher levels of autonomy are associated with reduced stress levels, as employees have more control over their work processes and can manage their workload more effectively (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). This reduction in stress is crucial for maintaining overall well-being and preventing burnout. In addition to lowering stress, greater autonomy provides employees with more opportunities for learning and development. When employees have the freedom to make decisions and shape their own work methods, they are more likely to engage in problem-solving and continuous improvement, which enhances their skills and knowledge (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). This learning process is beneficial for both personal growth and professional advancement. Furthermore, autonomy facilitates informed decision-making by allowing individuals to use their judgment and expertise to navigate complex tasks and challenges. This empowerment leads to improved effectiveness, as employees can tailor their approaches to fit specific situations and needs. It also enhances adaptability, as employees who have control over their work are better equipped to respond to changing conditions and unforeseen problems (Karasek, 1979). Overall, increased autonomy contributes to a more dynamic and resilient work environment, where employees can thrive and perform at their best.

Moreover, autonomy is essential because it enables individuals to fulfill all their psychological needs, as argued by the Self-Determination Theory (Deci et al., 2017). This theory posits that autonomy is a basic psychological need essential for fostering motivation, engagement, and overall well-being. When individuals experience autonomy, they feel more in control of their actions and decisions, which enhances their sense of ownership and intrinsic motivation. This alignment with the Self-Determination Theory underscores the importance of providing employees with the freedom to make choices and exercise control over their work, ultimately contributing to their satisfaction and effectiveness in the workplace.

The concept of job autonomy has been extensively examined over the past decades, particularly within the framework of the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Job autonomy encompasses several dimensions within organizational settings, including control over work pace, procedures, methods, work environment, collaboration levels, and

performance evaluation metrics (De Jonge, 1995). Scholars have also identified flexible working hours (Beckmann, 2016) and telecommuting (Onyemaechi et al., 2018) as important subdomains of job autonomy, commonly implemented across various organizations.

Despite the positive connotations associated with job autonomy, differing perspectives exist regarding its effectiveness. While some view it as a means to enhance employee empowerment, others caution that unchecked autonomy may negatively affect organizational outcomes by leading to deviations from work-related goals (Lu et al., 2017). Employees with greater decision-making freedom tend to assume more responsibility for their tasks, often making significant contributions to overall workplace performance (Lu et al., 2017; Johari et al., 2018). Conversely, insufficient autonomy has been linked to diminished performance (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016; Sai, 2016), increased absenteeism and turnover (Johari et al., 2018), as well as elevated stress and frustration, which may necessitate the intervention of vertical authority figures to reestablish control (Tai & Liu, 2007).

The influence of job autonomy on employee performance varies depending on task complexity. Some researchers argue that autonomy is most beneficial for complex tasks and may have a limited impact on simpler ones (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016). Additionally, the role of supervisory support in fostering autonomy has gained attention for its contribution to continuous learning, skill development, and alignment with employee preferences (Maymon & Reizer, 2017).

In addition, to the former perspectives, empirical research has demonstrated that individuals with higher levels of job autonomy tend to experience lower levels of emotional exhaustion, which, in turn, enhances their motivation and performance at work (Farfán, 2020). Employees who experience job autonomy tend to feel authentic and communicate openly with others. Indeed, nearly half of employees would renounce a 20% raise for greater control over their work, which clearly demonstrates the importance of autonomy in attracting and retaining talent (Tian, 2018). Plus, according to a study conducted by PwC ("Secure your future people experience," 2019), 70% of the participating organizations emphasized the importance of fostering employee autonomy for the future. Autonomy and accountability go "hand-in-hand", and the key to fostering both is through well-defined expectations and measurable metrics, which enables employees to effectively fulfill assigned tasks when joining new projects and ensures that evaluations are conducted fairly, considering each individual's contribution. (Zak, 2017). In addition, having the flexibility to change routines and the freedom to implement new ideas for work methods and policies can promote self-improvement and enhance job performance (Zampetakis, 2023). Employees who feel they can act autonomously at work tend

to exhibit stronger job performance, higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Additionally, studies have shown that increased control over one's job not only boosts motivation but also improves proficiency (Chiang, 2018). These findings underscore the positive impact of job autonomy on employee well-being and effectiveness, highlighting its critical role in optimizing workplace outcomes.

Proficiency

Over the past decades, both scholars and organizations have increasingly focused on understanding employee performance in uncertain and complex work environments characterized by heavy workloads and high pressure (Demerouti, 2017). Organizational management has prioritized a results-based approach to performance evaluation, relying on outcomes, measurable results, and performance key indicators over time (Setiawan et al., 2018). In this context, organizations require proactive, committed employees who can help establish and maintain a healthy work environment (Sakuyara, 2016; Van Den Heuvel, 2015). Human Resources Management (HRM) practices are significantly influenced by employee performance and satisfaction levels, underscoring the need for a deeper understanding of these factors to reshape HRM strategies to meet current market demands. Effectively managing employee performance is critical to fostering a culture of excellence, driving productivity, and ensuring long-term organizational success (Abdelwahed, 2023).

Furthermore, given that job performance is a multidimensional concept, understanding the processes and mechanisms underlying its various facets is essential for developing a comprehensive knowledge base applicable across multiple work environments. In addition, job performance also serves as a vital indicator of an individual's contribution to the organization's success.

Task performance is one of the dimensions of job performance and proficiency is one of the criteria to measure task performance (Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996). Task performance refers to how effectively employees carry out tasks that are crucial to the organization's technical operations, either directly executing parts of its technological processes or indirectly supporting them by supplying necessary materials or services (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993).

Job proficiency refers to the effective performance of tasks (Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996) and involves behaviors that are formalizable and independent of social context (Griffin et al., 2007). These behaviors reflect how well an employee meets the explicit expectations and requirements of their role that are formally defined. When these role requirements are

formalized, proficiency can be evaluated against a clear standard, facilitating accurate assessment of performance (Griffin et al., 2007). For instance, in a nursing context, individual task proficiency includes accurately administering medications to patients. When role requirements are clearly defined and uncertainty is minimized, they are typically detailed in formal job descriptions. Consequently, traditional performance management systems largely focus on this dimension of performance, as it provides a reliable basis for evaluating task performance.

Historically, the relationship between autonomy and job performance has been primarily understood through a motivational lens, as articulated in the Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). The theoretical underpinnings of the Job Characteristics Model highlight job autonomy as a pivotal factor in predicting various dimensions of job performance, including proficiency, proactivity, and adaptability (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Additionally, in line with the Job Demands-Resources Model, autonomy is classified as a key job resource that enhances both task and contextual performance by promoting greater work engagement and organizational commitment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017).

Many scholars have increasingly emphasized job autonomy as a critical factor in enhancing employee performance (e.g., Chen et al., 2024; Morgeson et al., 2005; Tisu et al., 2023). Job autonomy fosters trust and enthusiasm among employees, making them feel integral to achieving organizational goals (Terason, 2018). Saragih (2011) argued that autonomy positively impacts both employee and organizational performance by boosting satisfaction, enhancing self-efficacy, and reducing job stress. Further research supports that job autonomy increases commitment, motivation (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), and engagement, while also fostering greater trust in top management (Lu et al., 2017). Employees with higher job autonomy perceive that the organization trusts them to fulfill their responsibilities, which in turn enhances their motivation and productivity (Saragih, 2015; Johannsen, 2020; Zak, 2017). Hackman and Oldham (1980) further argued that psychological states such as meaningfulness of work, responsibility for outcomes, and awareness of actual results serve as key mediators between job resources, such as autonomy, and performance outcomes. While monetary compensation remains important, employees increasingly seek autonomy, purpose, and meaning in their work (Zak, 2017b; Savvides, 2020). Providing autonomy not only enhances employees' ownership of results but also improves performance (Zak, 2017b). Employees empowered to choose their assignments and manage their projects tend to exhibit greater productivity due to the increased perceptions of meaning in work (Zak, 2017b; Kirkman, 2020).

Thus, autonomy may create the necessary conditions for employees perceive their work as meaningful which, in turn, leads to increased proficiency levels.

Meaning of Work

The concept of meaningful work, defined as activities perceived by individuals as purposeful and fulfilling, has been notably overlooked in contemporary economic studies (Nikolova, 2020). However, given the ongoing transformations and increasing uncertainty in the work environment, meaningful work has gained prominence in management research (Pignault, 2021). Although organizational expansion and process development can lead to a loss of meaning at work, the growing awareness of economic, social, and environmental challenges has intensified the desire to find meaning in the work experience (Wrzesniewski, 2002).

In this context, meaningful work has become a fundamental concept, increasingly valued as an essential job characteristic (Grant, 2007) and a component of the organization's common good (Fontrodona, 2013). In the modern world, work is a primary domain in which people seek meaning (Allan et al., 2019), demonstrating individuals' willingness to accept significantly lower wages in exchange for more meaningful work (Achor et al., 2018). It is important to emphasize that the construction of a career refers to how people give meaning to their work, rather than the meaning and importance experienced by the individual in performing their tasks, distinguishing it from meaningful work (Breg et al., 2013). Plus, within the framework of the Job Characteristics Model, meaningful work is conceptualized as a psychological state influenced by key job characteristics, such as job autonomy, which are essential for fostering employee motivation, satisfaction, and performance. Consequently, designing jobs that promote meaningful work environments becomes a strategic asset for enhancing job proficiency (Hackman & Oldham, 1980).

Meaningful work refers to an individual's perception of how their tasks contribute to a greater good, while simultaneously offering personal growth (Steger et al., 2012). According to Steger et al. (2012), meaningful work is not just about what work means to people (meaning), but work that is both meaningful and positive in terms of valence (significance). Furthermore, the authors highlighted that the positive valence of meaningful work has an eudaimonic focus (oriented towards growth and purpose) rather than a hedonic one (oriented towards pleasure). For Steger et al. (2012), meaningful work comprises three dimensions: (1) personal meaning at work: this dimension directly reflects the idea of psychological meaning that has been part of work psychology since the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). As pointed

out by Rosso and colleagues (2010), meaningful work is a subjective experience because what one does has personal importance and varies between individuals. This dimension assesses the extent to which people perceive their work as important and meaningful; (2) meaning-making through work: empirical studies have shown that work is an important source of meaning in life as a whole (e.g., Steger & Dik, 2010). There seems to be a common overlap between a person's work and their life work (Michaelson, 2005). Rosso et al. (2010) also emphasized this notion by including self-directed action in meaningful work. This dimension measures specific ways in which meaning in people's lives results from meaning in work. In this regard, Steger and Dik (2010) suggested that meaningful work can help individuals deepen their understanding of themselves and the world around them, facilitating personal growth. Thus, this dimension helps capture the broader context of people's work life (Steger et al., 2012); finally, (3) motivations for the greater good: the desire to have a positive impact on the greater good is consistently related to the experience of meaningful work (e.g., Grant, 2007). Rosso and colleagues (2010) and Steger and Dik (2010) suggested that part of meaningful work results from actions directed toward others. This dimension reflects the idea that work is more meaningful if it has a significant impact on others.

The concept of meaningful work can be grounded in the Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985; Ryan and Deci, 2000); the theory defined the conditions that foster motivation and the meaning of work and argues that fulfilling three basic psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—is essential for inherent motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Without competence, autonomy, and relatedness, individuals cannot obtain value from meaningful experiences. In the Self-Determination Theory, competence is the perceived skill to effectively tackle challenging tasks at work and support a cause, fostering feelings of mastery (Martela and Riekk, 2018; Rosso et al., 2010; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Additionally, the need for autonomy is satisfied when individuals feel they have the freedom and authority to make choices about their own actions, which is strongly associated with work meaningfulness (Martela and Riekk, 2018; Martela et al., 2018; Ryan and Deci, 2000) since it allows for self-expression, control over work tasks and processes, as well as the ability to decide how and when to use different skills. Relatedness, on the other hand, involves the quality of interpersonal relationships at work (Martela and Riekk, 2018; Ryan and Deci, 2000). Employees experience relatedness when they feel genuine care and support from their supervisors and colleagues and reciprocate that care towards them.

The study “What Makes Work Meaningful and Why Economics Should Care About It?” conducted by the Institute of Labor Economics, in 2020, quantified the relative importance of

job attributes that influenced work meaningfulness. The findings suggested that autonomy, competence, and relatedness were approximately 4.6 times more significant for work meaningfulness at work than salary, benefits, career progression, job insecurity, and working hours. This information can help shape the policies in organizations aimed at boosting work meaningfulness.

The concept of meaningful work has been analyzed by diverse empirical studies that explored its connection to both individual and organizational outcomes (Bailey, 2019; Both-Nwabuwe, 2017), such as job performance (Tommasi, 2021). Evidence showed that meaningful work is associated with well-being (Autin, 2022) and proficiency (Shim, 2022). Furthermore, work engagement, commitment and job satisfaction might be close outcomes of meaningful work, implying they are immediate, steady and significant in experiencing work as meaningful. This subsequently influences self-rated job performance and withdrawal intentions (Allan, 2019).

The mediating role of meaningful work

As previously mentioned, the Job Characteristics Model identifies five key job characteristics, including job autonomy, which enables employees to find greater meaning in their work. This, in turn, leads to enhanced focus, concentration, and ultimately higher levels of proficiency (Li et al., 2023). This was backed up by other scholars who stated that employees with high autonomy tend to feel trusted and responsible, enhancing performance (Farfán, 2020; Saragih, 2015; Zak, 2017). Psychological states like work meaningfulness and responsibility are key mediators between job resources and performance (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). Additionally, according to the Job Demands-Resources Model, autonomy functions as a valuable job resource, promoting both task-related and contextual performance by fostering greater work engagement, commitment, and perceived meaning in work (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Lastly, the Self-Determination Theory defends that autonomy, relatedness, and competence are key routes to meaningful work, with autonomy being the most important for favorable outcomes like performance, engagement and reduced burnout (Deci et al., 2017).

This relationship has been extensively explored in empirical research. Over the past decade, an increasing number of studies have highlighted job autonomy as a critical factor in enhancing employees' sense of meaning at work and improving their proficiency (e.g., Lysova et al., 2019). The heightened sense of accountability for organizational productivity that accompanies job autonomy suggests that merely completing one's own tasks may be insufficient if colleagues

are not meeting their responsibilities. This awareness may serve as a motivator to assist and support others, reinforcing the interconnectedness of individual and team success (Park, 2020). Furthermore, the flexibility associated with autonomy allows employees to adapt their roles based on contextual demands, while limited autonomy can restrict actions to those strictly outlined in job descriptions (Malik & Dhar, 2017). As a result, numerous empirical studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between autonomy and contextual performance, as well as related constructs such as organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and extra-role performance (Park, 2020).

Several scholars have also examined the positive effects of autonomy on workers, noting that it ultimately enhances organizational productivity by increasing employee satisfaction, reducing stress, and enhancing the perceived meaningfulness of work (Saragih, 2011). Moreover, other researchers have found that job autonomy strengthens commitment (Sisodia & Das, 2013), fosters a sense of meaningful work (Hackman & Oldman, 1976), and improves performance levels (Lu et al., 2017). Employees who feel they can work autonomously, tend to find their work more meaningful (Martela and Riekkari, 2018; Martela et al., 2018; Ryan and Deci, 2000) and consequently, tend to perform better, sometimes even accepting lower pay for an emotionally significant type of work (Allan et al., 2019; Achor et al., 2018).

Thus, based on the Job Characteristics Model, the Job Demands-Resources Model, and empirical evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Autonomy has a positive relationship with proficiency through the meaning of work.

The moderating role of self-efficacy

The relationship between job autonomy and proficiency through meaning in work may be moderated by individual characteristics that either enhance or diminish its indirect effect. One such characteristic that has garnered significant attention in organizational behavior studies is self-efficacy, due to its profound influence on how employees perceive their work environment, interpret experiences, and respond to challenges (Junça-Silva et al., 2024).

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in their capacity to execute the behaviors necessary to achieve specific performance goals (Bandura, 1977). In essence, it is the belief in one's ability to manage actions and influence motivation. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to persist in the face of difficulties (Wood & Bandura, 1989), as they believe they can overcome challenges and achieve desired outcomes. Thus, self-efficacy can significantly

shape outcomes, particularly in terms of mental imagery, by serving as a predictor of both effectiveness and satisfaction (Kalicinski, 2016). People with high self-efficacy tend to enjoy work activities more when they feel confident in executing them (Ismayilova, 2019). Furthermore, strong self-efficacy enables individuals to confront challenges and remain committed to their goals, while low self-efficacy can lead to avoidance behaviors and negative emotions, which adversely affect both performance and well-being (Waddington, 2023).

According to Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986), self-efficacy is central to an individual's confidence in his/her ability to gather the motivation and take the necessary actions to complete a task. The theory posits that individuals with higher self-efficacy exert greater effort to accomplish tasks (Bandura, 1977). They tend to display perseverance and willingly engage in more challenging tasks, ultimately resulting in higher performance (Guarnaccia et al., 2018). As noted, employees with high self-efficacy are more inclined to exert effort and persist when faced with work-related challenges or hassles. This often leads to increased work engagement and a stronger investment in their tasks within the organization (Musenze, 2021). In contrast, those with lower self-efficacy are more likely to succumb to obstacles, which can negatively impact their performance.

Self-efficacy can be conceptualized as a personal resource, as outlined in the Job Demands-Resources Model (Demerouti et al., 2001). According to this model, personal resources, such as self-efficacy, serve as boundary conditions that mitigate the negative impact of job demands on employees' health and performance (Bakker et al., 2023). By bolstering individuals' ability to handle and manage job-related challenges, self-efficacy not only shields against stress and burnout but also enhances overall well-being and work effectiveness. Moreover, personal resources can amplify the impact of job resources, such as autonomy, on various affective and behavioral outcomes (Bakker et al., 2024). Specifically, when employees have confidence in their capabilities, they are more likely to engage actively in their work and leverage their autonomy more effectively. This heightened engagement and purposeful use of autonomy can enrich the perceived meaning of work, thereby improving performance.

Empirical findings have shown consistent findings regarding the conditional effect of self-efficacy, mainly because self-efficacy is related to job satisfaction, and commitment (Yu, 2020). When employees hold a sense of competence and confidence in their abilities due to high self-efficacy, they often experience increased job satisfaction. This heightened satisfaction stems from the enjoyment derived from feeling capable and empowered to navigate workplace challenges effectively (Yu, 2020). Moreover, as argued by the Job Demands-Resources Model, individuals with higher self-efficacy are better equipped to cope with demands and stressors

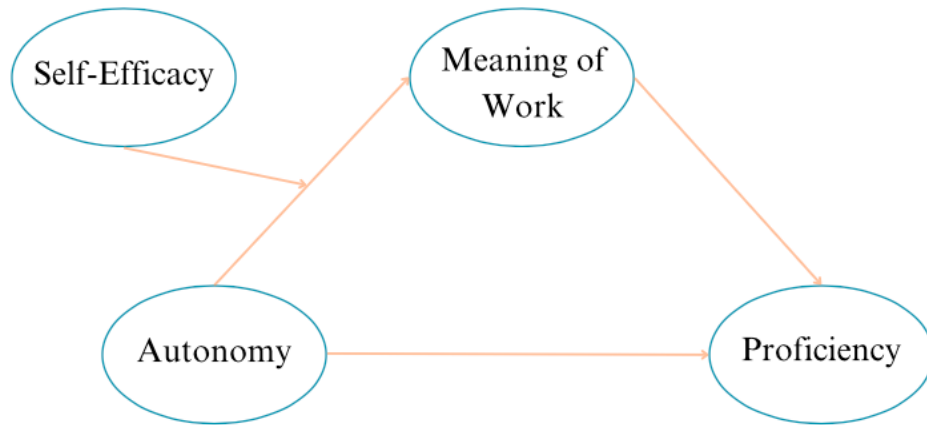
encountered in their roles, leading to improved stress management and overall well-being in the workplace (Bakker et al., 2024). Hence, cultivating self-efficacy among employees not only encourages greater effort and persistence in overcoming demands and hassles but also significantly contributes to job satisfaction and performance while assisting in the effective management of job-related stressors (Bakker et al., 2023).

Research indicated that self-efficacy beliefs play a significant role in influencing motivation, learning, and achievement (İnce, 2023; Yüner, 2020). The most beneficial efficacy judgments are those that slightly surpass one's actual capabilities, as this modest overestimation can increase effort and persistence during challenging times (Guarnaccia et al., 2018; Musenze, 2021). However, it is important to note that this overestimation should stay “modest”, since exaggerating one's abilities can lead to inappropriate behavior or unrealistic expectations (Wyatt, 2018). Wyatt demonstrated how an inflated sense of ability could result in reduced effort or even complacency. Strong self-efficacy beliefs enable individuals to confront challenges and remain committed to their goals. On the other hand, low levels of self-efficacy may lead to avoidance behaviors and negative feelings, ultimately affecting both performance and well-being (Wyatt, 2018).

Based on the existing literature and the Job Demands-Resources Model, we anticipate that self-efficacy will function as a moderating variable in the relationship between job autonomy and job performance. There is substantial evidence indicating that self-efficacy affects the strength and direction of this relationship. Individuals with higher levels of both job autonomy and self-efficacy are likely to perceive their autonomy more positively, viewing their work as more meaningful and utilizing their autonomy for purposeful actions, such as in-role behaviors (i.e., proficiency). Consequently, the following hypothesis was formulated (see Figure 1):

H2: Self-efficacy moderates the indirect relationship between job autonomy and proficiency, through the meaning of work, in a way that the relationship will become stronger when the employee has higher levels of self-efficacy (versus lower levels).

Figure 1 - *The proposed conceptual model.*



Chapter II - Methodology

To test the proposed hypotheses, we conducted a correlational study using an online questionnaire, performed and available on Qualtrics. The participants were required to be active working individuals in the labor market. Additionally, it's important to state that the questionnaire was answered both in Portuguese and English.

Sample and Procedure

The study utilized a quantitative methodology, collecting data via the survey on Qualtrics. All participants were informed about the research purpose and assured of their anonymity and data confidentiality. The sampling method was non-probabilistic convenience sampling. We invited participants via social media (Linkedin) and messages (WhatsApp) to participate, as long as they were actively employed, regardless of the industry or position - being employed was the sole criterion for participation.

We received 478 answers but only 262 were considered valid because only 262 participants answered the entire survey. The participants' average age was 47.48 years (DP =11.85). Out of these participants, 49.8% (N=130) were female and 50.2% were male (N=131). In addition, 5.4% (N=14) were fully teleworking, 20.4% (N=53) were in hybrid work and 74.2% (n=193) worked in-person. In terms of education, 28.5% (N=74) had a master's degree or higher, 55.8% (N=145) had a bachelor's degree, 13.1% (N=34) had high school level, and 2.7% (N=7) up to 9^o grade. Regarding employment status, the participants indicated that 8.8% (N=23) were working independently (providing services to other or more organizations), 69.2% (N=180) had a permanent contract and 10% (N=26) had a fixed-term contract. Moreover, 40.5% (N=104) occupied managerial positions and, on average, participants worked about 31-40 hours a week.

Instruments

The data was collected on a quantitative methodology basis through a questionnaire that was composed by scales already validated by available literature.

Operationalization of Variables

To test the proposed hypotheses, we conducted a correlational study using an online questionnaire, performed and available on Qualtrics. The participants were required to be active working adults in the labor market. The questionnaire was answered both in Portuguese and English.

Job Autonomy

To measure job autonomy we used the Work Design Questionnaire (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). We used nine items that measured three autonomy dimensions: planning autonomy, methods and decision. “This role allows me to make my own decisions about how I schedule my work.”, “This role allows me to make my own decisions about how I schedule my work.”, “This role allows me to plan how I do my work.”, “This role gives me the ability to use my personal initiative or judgment in carrying out the work.”, “This role allows me to make a large number of decisions on my own.”, “This role gives me significant autonomy in decision-making.”, “This role allows me to make decisions about the methods I use to complete my work.”, “This role gives me considerable independence and freedom in the way I do my work.”, “This role enables me to independently determine how to approach my tasks.”. The participants had to answer on a Likert Frequency scale of 5 points (“1- *Never*”; “5 – *Always*”). The overall scale showed a *Cronbach* alpha of 0.94.

Meaning of Work

To measure the meaning of work, we used three items from the Work Design Questionnaire (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006): “The results of my work are likely to significantly affect other people's lives.”; “The role itself is very significant and important within the broader context.” and “This role has a major impact on people outside the organization.”. The participants had to answer on a Likert Frequency scale of 5 points (“1- *Never*”; “5 – *Always*”). The scale showed an alpha *Cronbach* of 0.74.

Proficiency

To measure proficiency, we used the Individual Adaptive Performance Scale (Griffin et al., 2007). We used 3 items: “I perform the essential tasks of my job well.”, “I complete the key tasks of my job well using standard procedures.” and “I ensure that my tasks are completed correctly.” The participants had to answer on a Likert Agreement scale of 5 points (“1 – *Completely disagree*”; “5 – *Completely agree*”). The scale showed an alpha of 0.71.

Self-Efficacy

To measure self-efficacy, we used the compound psychological capital scale-12 (Lorenz et al., 2016). We used three items: “I am confident that I could efficiently deal with unexpected situations.”, “I can solve most of my problems if I invest the necessary effort.” and “I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I trust my coping skills.” Participants had to answer on a Likert Agreement scale of 5 points (“1 – *Completely disagree*”; “5 – *Completely agree*”). The scale showed an alpha *Cronbach* of 0.71.

Data Analysis

We evaluated the internal consistency and descriptive statistics of the variables, as well as their correlations. For hypothesis 1, we used model 4 from the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes, 2018). This model is particularly effective for estimating indirect effects because it employs the bootstrapping technique (5,000 iterations) to establish confidence intervals. For hypothesis 2 (moderated mediation), we applied model 14 (Hayes, 2018). The moderations were centered on their mean value, and the bootstrapping method (5,000 iterations) was utilized to determine the confidence intervals.

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Capítulo III – Results

Analysis of the normality of variables

To ensure data quality, a preliminary analysis was performed to identify any anomalies. To simplify this data and make sure we have used the confirmatory factor analysis, and the internal consistency of each item was calculated. Additionally, the normality of each variable was evaluated, and their respective histograms were observed. According to Hair et al. (2021), it is possible to analyze deviations concerning the relationships of multiple variables if the following criteria are met: skewness values are between -1 and +1 and the kurtosis is between -2 and +2. Based on these criteria, we concluded that no variable presents abnormal deviations from the normal distribution

Common method bias and multicollinearity issues

Although we implemented several recommended procedures to minimize potential common method bias—such as using previously validated surveys to assess the variables under study—it cannot be entirely eliminated (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Therefore, to gauge its presence in the study, we adhered to specific recommendations from Podsakoff et al. (2003).

First, we conducted Harman's single-factor test to check for common method bias. The results indicated that the first factor accounted for only 37.03% of the total explained variance, suggesting that common method bias was not a significant issue. Second, following Kock's (2015) recommendation, we performed a full collinearity assessment to identify potential common method bias. The results showed that all variance inflation factor (VIF) values ranged from 1.17 to 1.45; since these values were below the cutoff point of 3.33, multicollinearity was not a major concern in this study.

Lastly, we conducted four confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) to check for the independence of the variables under study. To assess the model's adequacy and compare it with other reasonable alternative models, we analyzed various fit indices (Hair et al., 2010), namely CFI, TLI, SRMR, and RMSEA. Model 1 was the hypothesized four-factor model, comprising separate scales for autonomy, meaning of work, proficiency and self-efficacy. Model 2 was a three-factor model, combining meaning of work and proficiency into one factor, another factor for autonomy, and a third factor for self-efficacy. Model 3 was a two-factor model, combining the meaning of work and proficiency into a single factor and another factor combining

autonomy and self-efficacy. Model 4 was a one-factor solution in which all items were loaded onto a single factor.

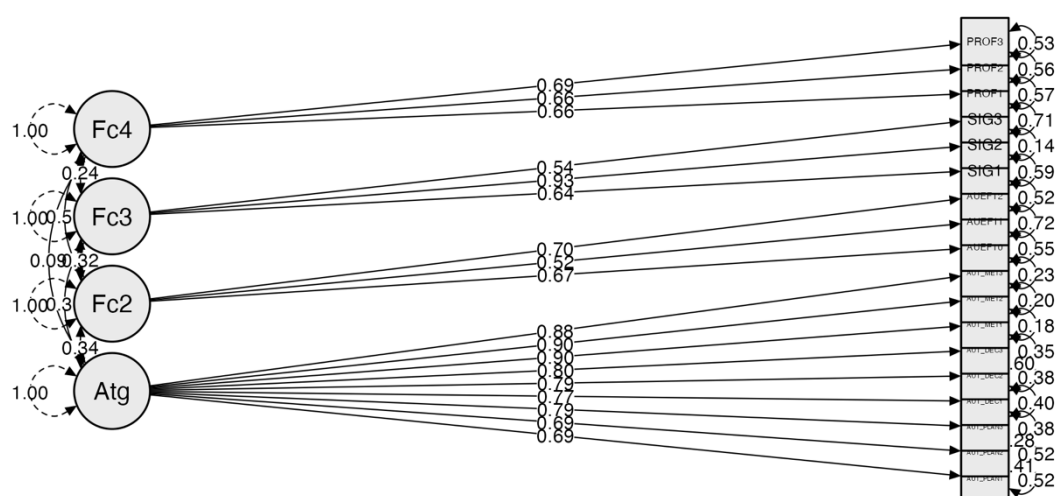
Table 1 shows that the four-factor model (Model 1) provided the best fit for the data ($\chi^2/df = 1.86$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, SRMR = 0.04, and RMSEA = 0.05 CI 95% [0.04, 0.07] (see Figure 2), while all other alternative models showed a poorer fit. These results, along with Cronbach's alpha reliability scores across all measurements scales, demonstrated the discriminant and convergent validity of the study. Consequently, we proceeded with testing the hypotheses.

Table 1 - Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Models	χ^2 /df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Model 1	1.86	0.96	0.95	0.05	0.04
Model 2	3.02	0.90	0.88	0.08	0.08
Model 3	3.80	0.86	0.84	0.10	0.09
Model 4	5.24	0.79	0.76	0.13	0.11

Figure 2 - Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results

Model plot



Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics, correlations and indices of the variables. As shown in Table 3, the reliability of the study variables exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, consistent with Fornell and Larcker (1981). The result for convergent validity, which measures how well the indicators correlate with the latent construct, revealed that the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for all latent constructs in the study were above 0.5. Additionally, the AVE for each construct was compared to its correlation with other constructs, and the AVE value was found to be greater than the construct's correlation with other constructs, thereby supporting convergent validity.

Regarding discriminant validity, which demonstrates the uniqueness of the indicators for each latent variable, the square roots of the AVE, as indicated by the diagonal values for each latent variable, were all greater than the correlations between each variable (Hair et al., 2010). Furthermore, the Maximum Shared Variance (MSV) was also analyzed; the results showed that the MSV was lower than the AVE for all constructs. Thus, discriminant validity was supported.

All in all, the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the study were confirmed. Based on the validity of the study instrument, we proceeded with the test of the study's hypotheses.

Table 2 - Averages, Standard-Deviation, Correlations and Indexes of internal consistency of the variables

Variable	M	SD	CR	AVE	MSV	1	2	3	4
1. Proficiency	4.24	0.45	0.84	0.63	0.13	(0.79)	[0.71]		
2. Meaning of Work	4.03	0.82	0.86	0.68	0.07	0.16**	(0.46)	[0.74]	
3. Self- Efficacy	3.96	0.38	0.81	0.60	0.11	0.35**	0.27**	(0.36)	[0.71]
4. Autonomy	4.10	0.74	0.95	0.70	0.11	0.12*	0.22**	0.33**	(0.83)

$N = 262$; * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.001$.

¹Scale from 1 to 5. Cronbach Alpha are within parenthesis.

²Sex: 1 - male; 2 – female.

The square roots of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) are in parentheses. M = Mean; SD = Standard Deviation; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; MSV = Maximum Shared Variance; CR = Composite Reliability. Cronbach's alphas are in brackets [].

Hypotheses Test

Hypothesis 1

To test this hypothesis we performed a mediation analysis (model 4) through the macro PROCESS on SPSS version 27 (Hayes, 2018).

The mediation is significant when the predictor variable (X = autonomy) influences the criterion variable (Y = proficiency), through the mediator variable (M = meaning of work), therefore the meaning of work is the mediator between autonomy and proficiency. On the indirect effect, we added the mediator variable, which translates into autonomy influencing proficiency through the meaning of work. The mediation will be partial if the direct effect is significant, so $p < 0.05$.

Hypothesis 1 estimated that the relationship between autonomy and proficiency would be mediated by the meaning of work.

Based on the results, the indirect effect between autonomy and proficiency was 0.021, with a confidence interval of 0.003 and 0.046, which did not include zero. Therefore the indirect effect was statistically significant. The model explained 2.8% ($R^2 = 0.028$, $p < 0.01$) of the variance of autonomy. The relationship between autonomy and meaning of work ($p < 0.001$) was statistically significant. Despite the relationship between autonomy and proficiency being significant, at the first step, when we introduced meaning of work, the effect of autonomy over proficiency left being statistically significant (0.198, $p > 0.05$), therefore the findings showed a full mediation. Thus, H1 was supported by the data.

Table 3 - *Test of Hypotheses: results of indirect effects*

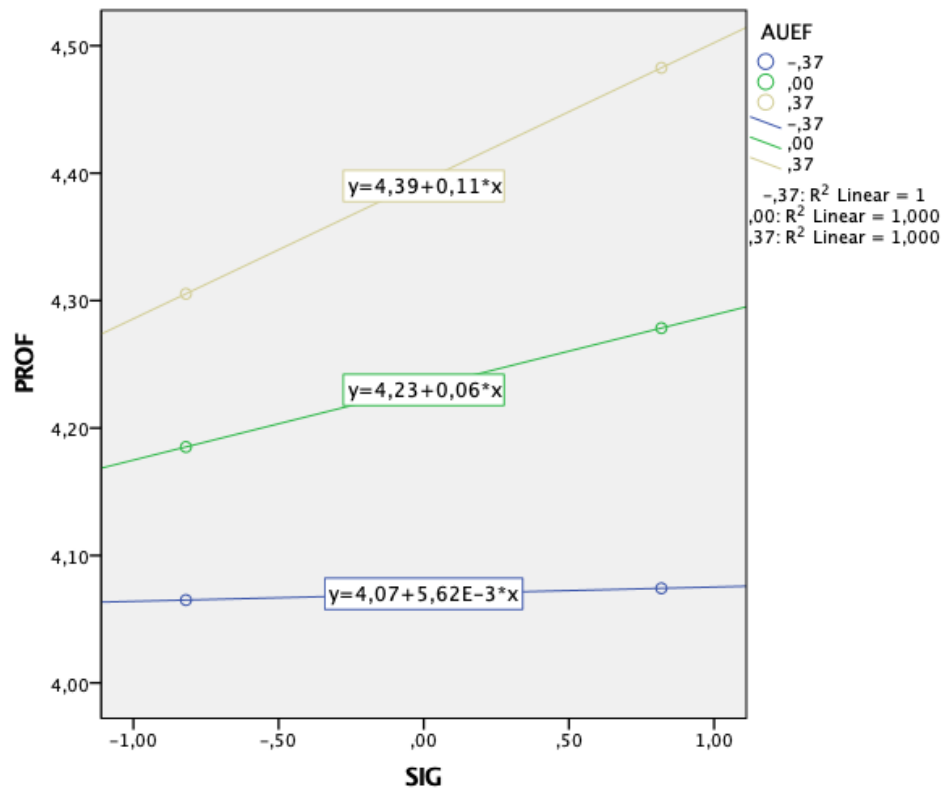
	Proficiency	
	B	SE
Intercept	3.79	0.19
Meaning of Work	0.09	0.04
Global Autonomy	0.03	0.04
F	3.75	
R ²	0.03	
Df	2; 259	
Direct Effect	0.026	0.04
Indirect Effect	0.022	0.01
CI 95% indirect effect	0.003; 0.046	0.002; 0.0457

Hypothesis 2

This hypothesis asserted that self-efficacy would moderate the indirect relationship between autonomy and proficiency through the meaning of work, in such a way that the relationship would become stronger when the worker had higher levels of self-efficacy (versus lower levels). To test this hypothesis, we used model 14 of PROCESS.

The results showed that the index of the moderated mediation was statistically significant ($B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.02$, IC 95% [0.002, 0.078]). The significant interaction revealed that the indirect effect varied according to the different levels of the moderator variable, self-efficacy. We concluded that the indirect effect was statistically significant when self-efficacy presented a higher level (+ 1 SD: $B = 0.03$, $SE = 0.01$, IC 95% [0.003, 0.062]). On the other hand, the indirect effect left being statistically significant when the individuals presented a lower (- 1SD: $B = 0.00$, $SE = 0.01$, IC 95% [-0.019, 0.022]) and a medium level of self-efficacy ($B = 0.01$, $SE = 0.01$, IC 95% [-0.004, 0.038]). Therefore, H2 was supported by the data.

Figure 3 – Interaction between meaning of work and self-efficacy (moderate mediation model for proficiency)



Chapter IV - Discussion

This study uses the Job Characteristics Model and the Job Demands-Resources Model to analyse the moderating role of self-efficacy on the indirect relationship between job autonomy and proficiency through meaning of work. This study answers the recent call for more studies that disentangle how and when job autonomy leads to improved proficiency (Chong et al., 2021). For that, we rely on individual-level variables that can potentially influence the relationship between job autonomy and proficiency. Specifically, we analyse an affective (meaningful work) and a cognitive-based characteristic (self-efficacy) to answer Chong's et al. (2021) call.

Overall, the findings show that job autonomy influences proficiency through an increase in the perceived meaning of work. This relation is moderated by the individual's level of self-efficacy in such a way that it becomes stronger for those who score higher on their self-efficacy level (versus lower levels). In a scenario where workers have autonomy to work, alongside finding their work meaningful, the relationship will be strengthened when they have high levels of self-efficacy (vs low levels).

Theoretical implications

Our findings contribute to the understanding of the job autonomy-performance relationship in several key ways. First, according to the Self-Determination Theory (Deci et al., 2017), autonomy is a fundamental psychological need, that when fulfilled fosters intrinsic motivation, leading to better performance and proficiency. This study supports this by showing that employees with greater autonomy, are able to perform their job without feeling overly oversight by their superiors, the better they do their own job. Competence is another core element of the Self-Determination Theory, and the fact that self-efficacy strengthens the relationship between autonomy and proficiency reflects the theory's notion that feeling competent enhances the positive effects of autonomy. In other terms, autonomy at work can help workers to become more skilled, since they feel responsible for the outcome, providing their feelings of confidence to perform decisions. However, how much autonomy improves their skill set, also depends on their belief in their capability to solve problems and make decisions. In the Job Characteristics Model, autonomy is also one of the core dimensions that lead to higher performance, arguing that autonomy enhances the sense of responsibility and investment in their work, which leads

to higher proficiency. Job autonomy and meaning of work are also considered a resource, in the light of Job Demands-Resources Model.

Second, we identify meaningful work as a crucial mediating mechanism for job proficiency, underscoring the significance of perceiving work as meaningful for both individual and organizational performance. This highlights the relevance of the meaningful work literature in explaining job proficiency, positioning the perception of work's meaning as a prerequisite for high-quality motivation and enhanced performance. By examining the relationship between job autonomy and proficiency through the lens of employees' perceptions of meaningful work, and grounding our analysis in two established theoretical frameworks—the Job Characteristics Model and the Job Demands-Resources Model—we demonstrate that the perception of meaningful work serves as a vital affective mechanism. This mechanism deepens our understanding of the proximal outcomes of job autonomy by focusing on an affective state that can directly enhance proficiency. In essence, framing meaningful work as a key explanatory mechanism in the autonomy-proficiency relationship provides a novel perspective on the outcomes of job autonomy. According to the literature, the benefits of meaningful work extend beyond the mere perception of one's tasks. Meaningful work has the potential to inspire employees, driving them to perform better and achieve more (Lysova et al., 2019).

Third, our results broaden the understanding of the impact of job autonomy on job proficiency by highlighting the role of individual-level characteristics in shaping this relationship. By incorporating an affective mechanism as a mediator and a personal resource as a moderator, we offer insights into both the *how* and *when* job autonomy enhances job proficiency. Specifically, our findings reveal that the process through which job autonomy influences proficiency is not linear but is shaped by the interplay between meaningful work as an affective mediator and self-efficacy as a moderating resource, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the conditions that drive this relationship.

Lastly, the inclusion of self-efficacy as a boundary condition in the indirect relationship between autonomy and proficiency, mediated by meaningful work, contributes to the literature on the Job Demands-Resources Model. The results show that autonomy influences proficiency through the meaning of work and that self-efficacy moderates that indirect relationship, therefore the positive impact of autonomy on proficiency is more pronounced at higher levels of self-efficacy (*versus* lower levels). Specifically, we show that higher levels of self-efficacy enable employees to more effectively leverage their autonomy at work, enhancing their perception of work as meaningful. This, in turn, leads to greater engagement with their tasks and ultimately improved proficiency. According to Social Cognitive Theory, individuals with

higher self-efficacy are more likely to persevere and succeed, so they do well at their job because they do not give up easily and find ways to solve problems, which the study confirms in the context of job performance. By emphasizing the role of self-efficacy, we provide a deeper understanding of how personal resources influence the autonomy-performance dynamic.

In conclusion, this study highlights the role of self-efficacy in enhancing the relationship between job autonomy and proficiency through the meaning of work. While autonomy and meaningful work are essential for improving performance, the impact is significantly stronger when employees are confident in their abilities. This emphasizes the importance of fostering both autonomy and self-efficacy in the workplace to maximize employee proficiency and overall performance.

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Chapter V - Limitations and suggestions for future studies

While this study provides valuable insights, certain limitations must be acknowledged. First, although the sample size is considerable ($n=262$), is not large enough to ensure highly significant outcomes, so the generalization of the findings should be approached with caution. Another limitation stems from the study's cross-sectional design, so the data was collected from the population at a single point in time. This design makes it challenging to establish a cause-and-effect relationship or analyze behavior over a period of time (Solem, 2015).

Additionally, this study does not address the potential negative effects of job autonomy. Traditionally, job autonomy has been viewed as a job characteristic that promotes positive outcomes and past research has concentrated on that, overlooking possible downsides. Theoretically, if job autonomy were to foster unethical behavior, it could broaden the understanding of what job autonomy is (Vardu & Weitz, 2016). Individuals who experience high job autonomy will gain a high sense of freedom and decision-making, and this experience not only fosters positive attitudes and behaviors (Deci et al., 2017; Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980) but also might lead individuals to feel unrestricted in pursuing their own interests or being deceiving about work hours, procrastinating and misusing company resources for personal advantage (Lu et al., 2017). In a fast-changing time, the traditional ways to regulate and manage employees might seem antiquated and not work. Organizations must increasingly adopt policies promoting job autonomy to enhance motivation and creativity. Paradoxically, environments characterized by high flexibility and indirect control might feel uncertain and ambiguous, leading to undesirable outcomes (Zhou, 2020). For future research, it would be valuable to explore the optimal level of autonomy that should be granted to employees.

It would also be interesting to perfect the existing high-performing systems, which are aimed at fostering organizational effectiveness but can also intensify work demands, make work more challenging, and foster employees' feelings of exploitation and even burnout. The study performed by Prentice and Thaichon (2019), proposes that employee job performance precedes burnout, so the concept of employee commitment concept is incorporated into the job performance–burnout relationship. Results affirm this study's hypotheses, demonstrating that job performance correlates with burnout, and employee commitment significantly plays a significant mediating role in this relationship. It has also been proposed that burnout and work engagement can be seen as two extremes on a spectrum that indicates employees' energy levels and commitment to their work (Demerouti and Bakker, 2008).

Although job autonomy and performance are well-researched concepts, could be valuable to perform further investigation how their relationship with the meaning of work and self-efficacy, through longitudinal ou daily studies to explore the long-term effects of self-efficacy on the relationship between autonomy and proficiency and to determine if this relationship changes overtime, according to i.e., the department, role or team that the workers' in, or other factors, such as age, personal life and well-being.

Chapter VI - Practical Implications

Companies are increasingly recognizing the vital role the human element plays in the organization's success. As a result, businesses must keep adapting their strategies and policies to maintain a motivated and high-performing workforce. The studies show that an increment of job autonomy enhances performance (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and that is even more evident when self-efficacy is already high.

Considering the findings, we believe implementing flexible work schedules could be important, allowing collaborators to have greater control over their work hours and location. Another way to boost autonomy could be encouraging employees to set their own goals and prioritize their tasks, leading to a greater sense of ownership and responsibility. Simultaneously, the employee should be encouraged to regularly assess their work process while the manager provides regular and constructive feedback, not only on the outcomes but also on the methods used, along with actionable steps for improvement. To develop proficiency, it would also be important to offer training programs tailored to the specific skills and competencies needed for each role, such as workshops, online courses or mentoring programmes. Additionally, rewarding employees who have outstanding performances with bonuses or promotions can motivate them to excel. Another measure that can be valuable, is to assign meaningful and challenging tasks that stretch employees' abilities and to also include them in the "bigger picture" of the company's mission, by explaining how their work contributes to the overall success of the company.

Conclusion

The research presented in this study has explored the moderating role of self-efficacy on the relationship between job autonomy and proficiency, with a focus on the mediating role of the meaning of work. The findings suggest that higher job autonomy positively influences proficiency, with self-efficacy enhancing this relationship when employees perceive their work as meaningful. Self-efficacy plays a critical role in strengthening the indirect relationship between job autonomy and proficiency, particularly in workers with higher self-efficacy levels.

These results contribute to the theoretical understanding of how individual characteristics such as self-efficacy can shape the effects of job autonomy on performance. The study confirms that job autonomy is a key factor in improving employee performance, especially when employees perceive their work as meaningful. Additionally, self-efficacy not only strengthens this relationship but also allows employees to leverage their autonomy more effectively.

While the study provides significant insights into the dynamics between job autonomy, proficiency, and self-efficacy, there are limitations, including the cross-sectional design, which restricts causal conclusions, and the sample size, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could focus on longitudinal studies to explore these relationships over time, as well as the potential downsides of job autonomy, such as its influence on unethical behavior.

From a practical standpoint, organizations can enhance performance by fostering job autonomy and self-efficacy, providing employees with flexible work environments, opportunities for professional development, and meaningful tasks that contribute to organizational goals. These efforts could lead to a more motivated and high-performing workforce, aligned with the company's broader mission.

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Annex A

Annexes from the questionnaire relevant for the present study.

Please indicate, on the respective scale, the degree of frequency of each statement presented below about your approach towards work.

	Never/Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always/Almost Always
I start new tasks autonomously when the old ones are already finished.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I take on challenging tasks when I am available.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I try to keep my work knowledge up to date.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I come up with ideas for creative solutions to new problems.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I continuously look for new challenges in my job.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Annex B

Consider the functioning of your job/role.

	Never/Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Always/Almost Always
This role allows me to make my own decisions about how I schedule my work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This role allows me to decide on the order in which things are done in my work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This role allows me to plan how I do my work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This role gives me the ability to use my personal initiative or judgment in carrying out the work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This role allows me to make a large number of decisions on my own.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This role gives me significant autonomy in decision-making.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This role allows me to make decisions about the methods I use to complete my work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This role gives me considerable independence and freedom in the way I do my work.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This role enables me to independently determine how to approach my tasks.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The results of my work are likely to significantly affect other people's lives.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The role itself is very significant and important within the broader context.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
This role has a major impact on people outside the organization.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Annex C

Please indicate, on the respective scale, the degree of agreement with each statement presented below about how you usually perform your job.

	Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Completely Agree
I adapt well to changes in the core tasks.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I've been learning new competencies that help me adapt to the changes in the core tasks.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I deal well with the changes in the way of how I should perform my core tasks.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I perform the essential tasks of my job well.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I complete the key tasks of my job well using standard procedures.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I ensure that my tasks are completed correctly.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I take initiative on finding better ways to accomplish my core tasks.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have ideas to improve the way how my core tasks are done.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can make alterations in the way how the core tasks are done.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Annex D

Lastly, consider the following statements and indicate the extent to which they describe you:

	Completely Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Completely Agree
If I found myself in difficulties, I would think of different ways to solve them.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
At the moment, I see myself as a successful person.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can think of several ways to achieve my current goals.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I'm looking forward to the life that lies ahead.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Great things await me in the future.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overall, I hope for more positive experiences than negative ones in my life.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Sometimes I force myself to do things, whether I want to or not.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
When I'm in a difficult situation, I can usually find a solution.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I don't mind if there are people who don't like me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am confident that I could efficiently deal with unexpected situations.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can solve most of my problems if I invest the necessary effort.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I trust my coping skills.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>