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# Guest editorial: Change, well-being and meaning in organizations: reflections and recommendations for future research

## Introduction

Organizational behavior research has been, since its inception, characterized by debate and dualism, between micro perspectives focusing on individual behavior within organizations and macro-focused work that centers on explaining groups and organizations (Porter and Schneider, 2014), between strong interpretivism and post-positivism and between perspectives that prize stability versus those that prize change (Hussenot and Missonier, 2016). Rather than problems to resolve, these tensions constitute the field of organizational behavior. However, if tensions are constitutive, living well with them requires synthesis, collectively grasping the reality that emerges from their connections. Indeed, researchers within the field have evidenced the benefits of acknowledging such tensions and incorporating them into their research designs (Nordbäck *et al.*, 2024), suggesting acknowledging tensions could help support explanations powerful enough to guide practice in our current environment.

If one tension has occupied the main stage recently, it would be that of stability and change. Traditionally, organizational behavior research has emphasized stability, seeking characteristics, capabilities and moderating contexts that explain individual or organizational performance (Bobbitt and Behling, 1981). But this perspective struggles to account for the dramatic events of the past few years, not just in terms of how our material resources are situated and flow, but also how we relate to one another (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Stability views struggle with the very elements – autonomy, spontaneity, agency and sensemaking, to name a few – that feature so crucially in organizational life. As others have emphasized (Graetz and Smith, 2010), both views are possible and it is through their synthesis, the *sublation*, incorporating the lessons learned through our inquiries into the way we behave, that we can arrive at a sustainable future (Bhaskar, 1993).

Indeed, recent research in organizational and industrial sustainability has revealed that achieving sustainable change extends far beyond mere technological advancements (Baumann and Lindkvist, 2022). It calls for a renewed focus on leadership based in understandings of human behavior (Banks *et al.*, 2023), where sustainable change encompasses complex socio-technical and socio-material challenges involving both humans and non-humans (Babri *et al.*, 2022). Addressing these issues requires relational and materially grounded approaches to organizational theorizing (Babri, 2024), paying heed also to the resilience of the natural ecosystem (Rockström *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, scholars and managers are exploring various forms of interactions and interplay, emphasizing the intertwined relationships between parts and whole, and, thus, the roles of leadership and systems thinking to drive meaningful sustainable change while simultaneously creating stability.

At the organizational level, these recent developments have caused significant disruption and change, including the rise of remote work and the need for new routines as managers and employees balance personal and organizational needs. This has led to shifts in perspectives incorporating relationality, systemic stances and focus on interdependencies and



co-evolution (see, e.g. Breslin *et al.*, 2021). It has also sparked both the revival and further development of long-established organizational concepts and the emergence of new ones to understanding and managing contemporary disruption and change. In lieu of this, this special issue casts renewed attention on and enhancement of concepts within organizational behavior research.

This special issue highlights, more specifically, three key areas of focus that reflect the novelty of current research and outline a future agenda for organizational studies. First, a set of papers explore changes in job roles and interactions, such as job crafting, emphasizing how employees reshape their roles to better align with personal and organizational goals (Mandhana, 2024; Nissinen *et al.*, 2024; Parrey and Kour, 2024). Second, the issue examines the factors that condition individual and interpersonal well-being and performance, providing insights into what motivates individuals and what causes harm within organizational settings (Kim and Kim, 2024; Rurkkhum and Detnakarin, 2024). Finally, the collection explores coping mechanisms, particularly the roles of metacognition and humor, showing how individuals and organizations develop strategies to manage stress and adapt to changing environments (Jain *et al.*, 2024; Leppälä and Lehtimäki, 2024). Together, these contributions enhance our understanding of organizational behavior in turbulent times and set the stage for future research focused on fostering resilience, adaptability and well-being in the face of ongoing global challenges.

### Articles

This special issue covers eight articles, all addressing the dynamics of disruption and change in different ways.

Chattopadhyay (2024) explores what motivates individuals, particularly nurses, to engage in organizational citizenship behavior and continue to serve and care during a prolonged crisis. Additionally, the paper connects organizational citizenship behavior to life satisfaction by comparing nurses' reported satisfaction levels at different periods during the recent pandemic. Based on a cross-sectional survey of 236 critical care nurses from 18 states in India, along with a longitudinal study, the paper finds that while nurses were highly engaged in organizational citizenship behavior during the Covid-19 pandemic, their life satisfaction declined a year later. This indicates that the intense professional and personal investment during the pandemic had lasting negative effects on their mental health and overall life satisfaction. The authors suggest that the pandemic acted as a shock, temporarily suppressing emotional release mechanisms, with the negative effects becoming apparent later.

Nissinen *et al.* (2024) explore school principals job crafting (balancing job demands and job resources) methods during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study is based on survey responses from 459 Finnish school principals during April and March of 2021. This was a time in Finland when teaching in class had resumed, but there were still strict regulations as the healthcare sector lacked resources for tracking the exposure of COVID-19. This task was instead made the responsibility of the school principals. With a basis in school principal's own perception of their level of servant leadership, COVID-19 related stress and work meaningfulness, two job crafting profiles are found, a) active crafters (55%) and b) average crafters (45%). The study finds that active crafters reported higher levels of perceived servant leadership, stress and meaningfulness as compared to the average crafters, indicating that active crafters leveraged both aspects of responsibility in terms of rising to the task, but also experienced higher levels of both stress and a feeling of reward in terms of meaningfulness. The study points towards an interesting dynamic between the ability to actively job-craft through experiencing but also managing stress through servant leadership and how this correlates with experiencing higher levels of meaningfulness in an extreme situation.

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Leppälä and Lehtimäki (2024) examine social resistance among a team of engineers in a Finnish R&D unit through a qualitative full member ethnography. They introduce the term “Installation Humor” a form of humor used by the team to resist controlling management practices. By creating installations in their workspaces, the engineers collectively resisted and lightly mocked new environmental, health and safety management practices imposed by a non-engineer CEO. This form of humor helped unite the workers and strengthen their collective resistance while sharing moments of humor.

Parrey and Kour (2024) provide a bibliometric analysis of the changing landscape of career adaptability, “preparedness to deal with changing work and working conditions.” They analyze 441 papers published between 2020 and 2023, considering their characteristics and interconnections. In the relatively short span of three years, these authors note an expanding range of research focus on adaptability, from predictors to one that includes well-being, job satisfaction, and, increasingly, mental health. They urge scholars to push the boundary even further, to see career adaptability as necessarily linked to a range of sustainable outcomes within our turbulent environment, not just within traditional settings but also ones that appreciate diversity.

Three papers in this special issue focus on remote work. Kim and Kim (2024) explore the connection between remote work and organizational commitment amongst millennials in South Korea. They find that millennial traits, such as appreciation of open communication, support and autonomy, make them well-suited for remote work as the reduced interactions will not harm their organizational commitment. Drawing on *Social Exchange Theory*, they theorize that given the Millennial’s traits, a shared leadership approach will best support organizational commitment with this group.

The previous paper addresses commitment, but what does remote work do to spontaneity, and how does this affect us? Mandhana (2024) uses a novel methodology which tracked participant locations to consider unplanned conversations at work, a critical vehicle by which many organizational processes take place. Using a mobile application, the study reports on 5,297 unplanned conversations, supplemented with structured observations and survey data. The results address that psychological safety positively correlates with spontaneous interactions, while time pressure and technical expertise negatively correlate. The study, thus, emphasizes the importance of psychological safety in sustainable organizations, and new challenges in promoting spontaneity as the nature of work shifts.

Rurkkhum and Detnakarin (2024) contribute to the question of “What makes us withdraw?” through a survey design of 320 employees in Thailand who were forced to work remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their data support meaningful work as mediating the relationship between perceived organizational support during remote work and employee withdrawal behavior. In other words, perceiving support from one’s organization was only significantly negatively associated with withdrawal when the employee also perceived their work as meaningful.

Finally, Jain *et al.* (2024) explores the role of metacognitive abilities and performance during remote work by evaluating its possible moderating effects on the ability to maintain boundaries, access to resources, the need for physical presence of colleagues and social support from a sample of remote workers in India. Metacognitive ability positively moderated the capacity to balance work and non-work remotely and virtual performance, though results were mixed with those requiring the physical presence of their colleagues to perform their tasks, with a positive relation with those without a strong need to be with their colleagues and a negative one with those that did. Because of these results, despite the promise of metacognition as a vehicle for supporting performance in employees in remote work, their paper suggests the relation between metacognition and employee performance is not a straightforward one and merits further research.

### Reflection and new directions

The call for papers for this special issue was themed around disruption and change, and fittingly, the development of this collection has been marked by radical transformations both within and outside of the academic community. We had originally planned to come together at the *Nordic Academy of Management Conference* in 2021, under the theme “Bringing Research Together.” However, the event was postponed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and it was not until August 2022 that we could reconvene, just as the behaviors of our “new normal” begun to resemble those of the pre-pandemic era. This return to familiar patterns was both comforting and alarming – comforting because we could reconnect in ways that had been impossible during the restrictions, and alarming because the urgent need for radical change had become even more apparent. Society and its constituent organizations remain fundamentally unsustainable, on course for ecological disaster. Moreover, the increased technological mediation of work and management has renewed interest in the effects of automation (Nazareno and Schiff, 2021), and despite substantial changes to work practices over the past few years, stress and burnout continue to rise steadily (American Psychological Association, 2023).

This special issue, therefore, reflects a broader trend of increased awareness regarding the drivers of societal malaise. Movements such as *Quiet Quitting*, *Work your Wage* and the *Great Resignation* signal a widespread reimagining of our relationship to work and to one another. If this growing awareness is to support a transition to sustainable behavior in organizations, it must be translated into concrete management action to a greater degree. The papers in this issue offer valuable insights into how such actions might be informed. While the authors themselves provide detailed commentary on their findings, we observe several overarching themes that organizations would do well to consider.

For example, organizational support is a common theme, but it must be of a certain kind, extending beyond digital connectivity to meet the human need for belonging and acceptance. This requires a shift from the current emphasis on technologically enhanced availability to a more meaningful engagement with employees’ well-being. At the same time, while it may be tempting to exert tight control in a turbulent organizational landscape, the papers point to a need for supporting the unplanned, allowing for spontaneity and even a bit of mischief if we are to successfully plot a path to sustainable change.

As we reflect on the insights presented by the authors in this issue, it becomes clear that there is an urgent need to integrate these themes into the broader theoretical frameworks of organizational behavior. The studies address the importance of understanding how meaningfulness is created and sustained within organizations, and particularly in turbulent times.

### *Future agenda*

This special issue brings to light several important directions for future research on organizational dynamics during disruptive times. The studies presented here collectively emphasize the need for a deeper understanding of how organizations and individuals adapt and respond to crises and turbulence. Our concluding recommendations are intended to guide scholars in exploring some of these critical areas further, ensuring that future studies build on the insights gained from this issue.

A recurring theme across several of the studies is the profound impact that crises have on employee well-being, mental health and career adaptability. Chattopadhyay’s (2024) findings on the decline in life satisfaction among nurses post-pandemic, combined with insights from Nissinen *et al.* (2024) on the stress experienced by school principals, highlight the necessity of conducting more longitudinal research. Such studies are critical for understanding the psychological impacts of sustained high-intensity work environments over time. Future

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studies should investigate the mechanisms through which prolonged exposure to crisis situations affects mental health, identifying interventions that organizations can implement to support their employees' recovery from stress and long-term well-being. Similarly, [Parrey and Kour's \(2024\)](#) emphasis on career adaptability further highlights the importance of tracking adaptability over time, particularly in response to economic, technological and environmental changes. By adopting a longitudinal approach, future research – tracking for example career and well-being trajectories – can uncover the strategies individuals and organizations use to tackle transitions, offering valuable insights into the factors that contribute to successful adaptability and resilience. This focus on well-being and career adaptability is important for informing the development of support mechanisms and policies designed to enhance employee resilience in difficult and evolving conditions.

The concept of job crafting, as discussed by [Nissinen \*et al.\* \(2024\)](#) and further contextualized by [Leppälä and Lehtimäki \(2024\)](#) in their discussion of resistance, is another important area for future investigation. Job crafting reflects the proactive strategies employees use to manage their roles and competencies, contributing to both individual and organizational resilience and sense of meaningfulness and purpose that employees derive from their work. Future research should examine how job crafting can be leveraged in different organizational contexts to foster this sense of meaningfulness and resilience among employees. Additionally, exploring the relationship between job crafting and leadership styles could yield important insights into how leaders can support and encourage these practices, thereby enhancing organizational adaptability and employee engagement.

A third critical area for future research lies in the dynamics of remote work, as highlighted by [Kim and Kim \(2024\)](#), [Mandhana \(2024\)](#) and [Rurkkhum and Detnakarin \(2024\)](#). These studies point to the complex interplay between technologically mediated work practices, organizational support, leadership and employee behaviors in remote work settings. As remote work continues to evolve, it is warranted to investigate the related evolution of psychological and social factors that influence the long-term success and challenges of these work arrangements. Hence, future studies could explore how different leadership approaches, such as shared leadership, and organizational support mechanisms impact remote employees' performance, experiences and well-being. Developing comprehensive frameworks that support effective remote work practices, tailored to the diverse needs and motivations of different employee groups, will be key to sustaining a productive and healthy remote work environment.

Finally, the importance of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives in understanding organizational dynamics is a recurring theme throughout this issue. The complex nature of organizational behavior, particularly in times of disruption, requires insights from various disciplines, including psychology, sociology and innovation studies. Future research should aim to integrate these perspectives to develop a more holistic understanding of how organizations and individuals adapt to crises. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts will be critical in revealing how cultural factors influence organizational responses to crises. These insights can inform the development of culturally sensitive management practices that are better suited to the diverse nature of today's workforce.

To conclude, the research presented in this issue advances our understanding of organizational behavior in turbulent times and sheds light on a trajectory for future studies. By focusing on the long-term psychological impacts of crises, the evolving roles of job crafting and leadership in nurturing more resilience, the emerging theme of remote work and the need for cross-cultural and interdisciplinary future work will contribute to better understanding the move toward more adaptable and supportive organizations. These research efforts are important in the coming years for enhancing both theoretical

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