**Confessions of a Job Crafter:
How We Can Increase the Passion Within and the Impact of Our Profession**

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Abstract

Job crafting, engaging in practices that alter our jobs for the better, has enormous potential to enliven scholars and to enhance our field's societal impact. Drawing upon a personal tale, I outline various job crafting techniques in which I have engaged and note how these practices have transformed the level of satisfaction I feel for my job, profession, and life, while also enriching the quality of my research and teaching contributions. As profoundly positive as has been my experience with job crafting, I have also encountered some significant systemic obstacles. For the tenured, such obstacles would likely be frustrating, constraining passion and undermining contributions. For the untenured, many become pitfalls that can endanger careers. I address some of the obstacles that I encountered while engaging in job crafting practices, framing them in terms of what we can do to remove them. I am optimistic that, collectively, we can dramatically diminish and even abolish the obstacles outlined here for the benefit of scholars, the field, and society.

Job crafting is an empowering concept. The key idea is that people often have the capacity to alter their jobs for the better, thereby enriching their lives, as well as their contributions to the world. Job crafting can be done through reconceptualizing work, changing the nature of tasks, and changing one's relationships (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). For example, hospital custodians might construe their work as benefitting the sick rather than merely as cleaning, undertake patient care practices in addition to cleaning tasks, and connect deeply with patients. However, obstacles to job crafting also exist, these varying by factors such as context and hierarchical level (Berg, Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2010). Wellman and Spreitzer (2010) recently proposed that academics may stand to benefit considerably from job crafting. Drawing on a personal tale, I offer conformational evidence for this proposition by recounting ways in which job crafting has been hugely beneficial to me. At the same time, I also note systemic obstacles and even pitfalls that I have encountered along the way. I suggest that we can collectively remove these job crafting obstacles and that doing so would help to enliven ourselves as scholars and enhance the beneficial impact we can have as a field.

A Job Crafter's Tale

I was born and raised in the Midwestern region of the US but increasingly found myself further from home. I conducted my doctoral work in Organizational Behavior in Boston at Harvard. It was a wonderful program emphasizing theoretical contributions. Upon graduating, I took a faculty position at London Business School. It was a very good job with terrific resources. My husband was withering, however, having taken a job well below his qualifications to enable me to accept mine. Further, we wanted to start our own family. The thought of raising kids away from my family was extraordinarily unsettling. We decided to try and move back to the US, but I felt I had little or no choice in whether we ended up geographically close to my family. It would

depend on whether a “top school” near Wisconsin made me an offer – and whether my husband could get a good job nearby, which itself, was virtually impossible given his narrow field.

Our first daughter was born just as recruiting season hit. I spent much of the first two months of her life interviewing at schools across the U.S. At that point, I could endure the process no longer and canceled remaining talks. The visits were a blur of sleep-deprivation and illness. The main memory I have is painstaking and all-consuming “liquid gold” (aka mother’s milk) management – meticulously annotating plastic bags, acquiring access to hotel freezers, and negotiating semi-private pumping accommodations in planes, airports, and unfamiliar schools! I laugh now, but that period was torture. It seemed, however, that a solution had fallen into our laps. I was offered a position at a highly-ranked school a few hours from Chicago and was ecstatic. And, miraculously, my husband landed the *one* job in his field in Chicago. We were saved!

Or were we? As we delved into the logistics of living/working arrangements, things began to unravel. Commuting from Chicago was not viable for numerous reasons. I was convinced that there had to be a solution – we were too close; we had come too far; we couldn’t be stymied by mundane issues like these! Some faculty there and I tried to conceive of every possible option. None were acceptable. Time ran out. My offer exploded – as did my vision for the perfect future.

At around the same time, my husband and I both received fantastic offers in Boston. Mine was the job of my dreams in many respects. I would benefit from superb colleagues, vast resources to carry out extensive research plans, and good entrée with practitioners through whom I hoped to make practical social contributions. Yet, all those great benefits would come at the expense of family ties. I wanted my kids to be deeply rooted in a broader family and had always told myself this would be a top priority.

I found myself paralyzed. Turning down the job in Boston was almost inconceivable to me. Its inconceivability was matched only by that of slamming the door on the opportunity to go home, perhaps the only opportunity that would ever materialize. It seemed a choice between the two most cherished pieces of myself – scholar versus mother/daughter. It was an impossible choice – I felt forced to choose which part of my heart to rip out of my chest.

The Virtues of Job Crafting

And so I first came to job crafting. Two strong mentors, Kathleen McGinn, my beloved advisor, and Jane Dutton, a treasured role model and an expert on job crafting, reassured me that I could *actively* define the terms of my professional life, including more mindfully conceptualizing what an “ideal” job meant to *me*. Taking that first job-crafting step has also liberated me in unanticipated ways to do additional job crafting. What began as cognitively-based reconceptualizing has led to changes in the structure and content of my work. The following job crafting activities have been nothing short of transformational for me.

Consciously reconceptualizing ideal work settings and workers. The most profound of my job crafting exercises has been cognitive – engaging in an ongoing process of actively construing my own work-related ideals. I began to ask myself, if proximity to family was so important to me, why was I limiting myself to only a small subset of schools, very few of which were located near my family? I had been unaware of the extent to which prestige as a professional value had seeped into my psyche. It is true that prestige is often correlated with valuable work setting qualities, such as resources and practitioner entrée. On the other hand, there are many other potentially “ideal” job dimensions that are unrelated to prestige, including location, flexibility of work structure, flexibility of teaching topics, appreciativeness of students, student values, and culture. I made an enquiry to the University of Illinois at Chicago, though they had not advertised

a position. The faculty were smart and valued research, the school afforded considerable work structure and teaching topic flexibility, and the MBA students were appreciative and cared about social issues. They generously made room for me and invited me to join them.

What seemed a crisis served as an opportunity to more mindfully reconceptualize an “ideal job.” It also served as an opportunity to actively reconceptualize my own sense of what an ideal scholar might look like. I now consciously try to ask myself, “What is my *own* ideal job?” and “What is my *own* ideal for how to be a scholar?” – and to move my job circumstances and myself toward those aspirations. I find that doing this on an ongoing basis is helpful as the dimensions of most importance to me can shift with time.

Starving the Logistical Beast. I had long heard dark tales of The Logistical Beast – the monster that says you can’t be in two places doing two things at one time. I was not personally haunted by it, though, until I had children. The Beast feeds on your guilt, preying on feelings of inadequacy and failure. Though I have still not slain this evil creature, I have managed slowly to starve it, by structuring my job to give it less to feed upon. The flexible work structure context at UIC has made this easier to do. The Beast feeds upon people in different ways, requiring tailored strategies for fending it off. In my case, two things help. First, I often work at home, where I eat lunch with my kids, keep tabs on the day’s rhythm, and offer a hug when apparent calamity strikes. Second, I’ve negotiated flexibility in my teaching schedule. We teach MBA classes in the evenings, but my department chair and the MBA office have been commendably receptive to experimenting with daytime courses. So far, so good.

Focus on passion-based research: Nurture a few great projects. Related to the first job-crafting technique, I have construed an ideal scholar as measured by quality rather than quantity of output and by social impact. This means that, for me, great projects are defined by novel or

integrative theory building that contributes meaningfully to the field and to society – i.e., they have *scope* (see Corley & Gioia, 2011). Construing ideal scholarship in this way has enabled me to change my work by focusing on fewer projects about which I am very passionate. It also helps me to starve the Logistical Beast by running in fewer circles. In addition, I believe it will lead to greater longer-term impact as I focus my efforts on topics most likely to make a difference.

Focus on passion-based teaching. Teaching was not historically something I did with passion. This has changed. Construing ideal scholarship as involving social impact has enabled me to also completely reconstrue the role of teaching in my professional life as a prime avenue for reaching society. This has led to changes in what I teach. UIC did not offer any business-and-society courses. I knew, though, that the school was open to such topics and that other faculty and many students were interested in them. Over the past year, we have built a whole new series of offerings on Social Innovation and Leadership. My course, Leading for Impact, is based on my research passions. Incidentally, this effort has also involved relationship-based job crafting. *En route* to creating the new initiative, we have established a stronger sense of community among a subset of faculty, between faculty and students, and perhaps among like-minded students as well.

These job crafting practices have made a tremendous difference in the level of satisfaction I feel for my job, profession, and life. They have enriched the lives of my family, too. Perhaps most interestingly, they have improved the quality of my research and teaching contributions by focusing me on the most important content and by augmenting my passion.

Job Crafting Obstacles and Pitfalls – And What We Can Do to Abolish Them

As profoundly positive as has been my experience with job crafting, I have also encountered some significant systemic obstacles. These emerge from three different sources – professional values, job structure rigidities, and publishing barriers. These obstacles make job

crafting more difficult. Many also endanger untenured faculty engaged in job crafting activities. As such, they likely stifle the passions of scholars and, consequently, undermine the impact of our profession. I address some of the obstacles that I encountered while engaging in the job crafting practices above, framing them in terms of what we can do to remove them.

Actively Reconceptualizing Ideal Work Settings and Workers

Although actively reconceptualizing work-related ideals has been my most profound job crafting activity, it has not been easy. The following two changes related to professional values and job structure rigidities would make it easier.

Professional values: Appreciation for numerous ideals. My experience of having worn prestige-based blinders in a job search may be idiosyncratic to me. My sense, though, is that the field holds prestige as an important value. To the extent that this is accurate, it raises a number of potential negative side effects. Beyond reduced mindfulness in choosing jobs, a focus on prestige would also increase competition in the field as more people jockey for the same small subset of jobs. Increased competition would further amplify a concern with output quantity, which in turn, would increase the strain on publishing outlets while also arguably threatening a focus on theoretical contributions. Increased competition may also undermine individuals' generosity of spirit. Such troubling trends could be countered with a professional value of appreciation for different ideals. I believe we would benefit considerably from far greater acknowledgement of and discussion around how there may be multiple types of ideal job settings – and multiple types of ideal scholars.

Job structure: Geographic flexibility. Although academics enjoy some unique freedoms, we also endure some unique and burdensome rigidities. The harsh reality is that there are very few faculty openings in any specific location with the chances of acquiring any one of them pretty

remote. Even if there weren't substantial human costs associated with relocating family across the country or globe, doing so is increasingly unfeasible because of today's dual-career realities. More and more young scholars are finding themselves without viable options for faculty jobs where they need to live. The inflexibility of the field increasingly has cruel repercussions. It is also wasteful from a talent perspective. As enlightened as we may deem academia to be, there is a real lack of accommodation for the needs of professional families. Schools can and should do more to afford greater geographic latitude. A few schools do this better than others, removing normative barriers to commuting and offering flexible teaching schedules. For example, multiple courses can be loaded up simultaneously and individual courses can be compressed into blocks or taught in fewer, longer sessions. Other alternatives may include virtual teaching, offering courses where faculty reside (e.g., in urban centers proximal to rural campuses), and reduced teaching for reduced pay.

Starving the Logistical Beast

Job crafting obstacles are often inter-related. Although other obstacles feed the Logistical Beast, inflexible tenure pace also bears some responsibility for the difficulties young scholars face.

Job structure: Pace flexibility. The fact that the tenure and childbearing clocks often coincide continues to haunt faculty, especially women. Sure, some institutions allow one to “roll back” one's tenure clock, but children don't grow up in a year. Further, time does not stand still (another of the Logistical Beast's rules). Standards applied are not necessarily the same as they would have been on the “normal” tenure clock, because evaluators often look at when one graduated and at publication dates, discounting work done further in the past. Professional service firms are working on more holistic ideas, such as the ability to ramp down the partnership track by slowing down its pace and timing. It is long overdue for *us* to lead on this vital issue.

Two changes are needed - first, greater flexibility in terms of when people heavily involved in caretaking go up for tenure and; second, clearer standards for granting merit to *all* of a person's prior work. If tenure is to be awarded based on demonstrated ability to make meaningful professional contributions, it should be awarded if and when the hurdle is surpassed. A contribution is a contribution and should not be subject to individually interpreted discount factors, as is the case now at many institutions. Without the second change, the first only creates another pitfall. It provides the *illusion* of helping, but actually imperils job crafters.

Focusing on passion-based research and teaching

I consider obstacles to passion-based research and teaching together because, at least in my experience, passion-based teaching depends upon passion-based research. The following three obstacles assume that passion is rooted in generating new ideas rather than conducting relatively pure empiricism. As others (e.g., Ashforth, 2005) have eloquently pointed out, the deck is stacked against theoretically-oriented work. This includes pure theory as well as grounded theory-building empirical work. Why? Because it faces a triple whammy of being slower to produce, facing tougher reviews, and then being subject to a more drawn-out review process. New ideas tend to be more controversial. In contrast to incremental empirical contributions, new theory challenges the status quo and often the work of reviewers (Pfeffer, 2008). New ideas also generally require further refinement through the review process itself. These characteristics of new theoretical work result in more, messier, and slower reviewer feedback. Meanwhile, sorting out the extensive and complicated feedback takes longer for both editors and authors. The following three changes can help to overcome this triple whammy predicament.

Professional values: Protect the value of theoretical quality. As the field has become more competitive, an increasing focus on quantity of output often eclipses the value of making

theoretical contributions. This is especially visible in the tenure review process. For example at many schools, internal evaluators engage in a number counting exercise of so-called “A” journals. However, such lists often include a number of journals known for rigorous empirics but not for theoretical advancement. Consequently, the best self-protection strategy for most untenured faculty members is to crank out a series of cookie-cutter studies targeted at those journals. This kind of evaluation process not only undermines the field’s theoretical contributions, but also endangers scholars focused on theoretical quality, placing them in harm’s way. They become very vulnerable to any number of factors, including the political whim of “crank it out” faculty. Again, there should be room for multiple types of ideal scholarship, but it is wrong to hold those following a quality-based ideal by the standards of those holding another.

Publication process: Stronger action editors at theoretically oriented journals. The editor is a linchpin for publishing theoretically oriented work. Others have outlined great ideas for improving the editor role. One key identified by Ashforth (2005) is for editors to take a stronger hand in accepting papers in the face of, say, a hostile reviewer, and in offering clear guidance to authors, including which reviewer remarks are crucial and not crucial to address. Although editors may have formal authority to enact their role in this way, my experience has been that they often waver in the face of professional pressures. Might our practices be strengthened to further empower associate editors and create more receptiveness to new ideas?

Publication process: Reform by-invitation journals. Our field needs access to more high quality theoretically-oriented outlets. Likely in response to the triple whammy predicament of theoretically-oriented pieces, a significant proportion of the most influential theory-oriented outlets are not journals *per se*, but annals run in a by-invitation format. Rather than taming the jungle, these outlets offer a passageway around it. Unfortunately, the passageway is a rather

hidden one in practice because invitees tend to be either senior scholars or those socially networked to the editors. An author can send “unsolicited” manuscripts, but they are unlikely to be published. Those that have not been solicited can be back-burnered for some time and perhaps never read. Meanwhile, one can squander great expanses of valuable pre-tenure time waiting for feedback while the paper languishes in a twilight zone. It would help tremendously if these outlets brought on additional editors to better represent the field’s breadth and allowed a reasonable portion of the monographs to be submission-based rather than invitation-based. Alternatively, perhaps we need new outlets.

Conclusions

I have personally experienced the transformative potential of job crafting. Job crafting has enlivened me, increasing my work and life satisfaction. It has also enlivened my scholarly and non-scholarly contributions. I am certain that others and the field at large would benefit from greater job crafting as well.

Although a zealous job crafting advocate, I have also experienced numerous job crafting obstacles. For the tenured, such obstacles would likely be frustrating, constraining passion and undermining contributions. For the untenured, many become pitfalls that endanger careers.

I am convinced that, collectively, we can greatly ameliorate and even abolish each of the obstacles outlined here. Doing so may be facilitated by utilizing the concept of job crafting itself and moving it up a level – to *profession* crafting. We are management scholars, after all! We know a thing or two about professions and a lot about management. In some formalized capacity, let’s consciously take stock of what we want for our profession. Then let’s make it happen!

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