

## **Job crafting and responsible leadership in project management**

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### **Abstract**

Responsible leadership (RL) is a leadership approach that entails ethical and strategic behavior dimensions to correspond to the changing leadership demands in the business environment. Ethical and moral conduct for the team members, stakeholder consideration and well-being, and long-term business perspective are at the heart of responsible leadership. In the current complex and dynamic working environment, project managers are required not only to lead the team but conduct leadership behavior that concerns a wider audience. Job crafting refers to the self-initiated changes that employees conduct to optimize their job demands and resources to correspond their personal work goals (Tims et al. 2012). Individuals who proactively craft their job to fit better their personal strengths and preferences experience job satisfaction and are productive.

This study aims to explore the connection between job crafting and responsible leadership among project management university students. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of job crafting (Tims et al., 2012) and responsible leadership (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020), we conducted a survey with 183 university students from four European universities who responded to an e-survey. The survey measured job crafting using the Job Crafting Scale (Tims et al., 2012) and responsible leadership using the Responsible Leadership Scale (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020).

In our analysis, we created sum variables based on the four dimensions of responsible leadership and the items of the job crafting scale. The reliability of these sum variables was tested using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded sufficiently high values to justify their use in further analysis. We then examined the correlations between these variables.

Our findings revealed that all four dimensions of responsible leadership were positively correlated with approach-type job crafting factors, but not with avoidance-type job crafting

factors. Specifically, approach-type job crafting, which includes increasing structural job resources, increasing social job resources, and increasing challenging job demands, was statistically significantly related to the four dimensions of responsible leadership: moral person, moral manager, multistakeholder consideration, and sustainable growth focus. In contrast, avoidance-type job crafting was not statistically significantly related to any dimension of responsible leadership, except for a minor correlation with the "I have learned" score related to the Moral Manager dimension.

The results suggest that students who engage in approach-type job crafting perceive responsible leadership and its dimensions as crucial elements for effective project management. This study contributes to the understanding of how proactive job crafting behaviors can enhance perceptions of responsible leadership among future project managers. These insights can inform educational strategies and leadership development programs aimed at fostering responsible leadership qualities in project management students.

Keywords: job crafting, responsible leadership, project management, university students, approach-type job crafting, avoidance-type job crafting, leadership development.

## **1. Introduction**

Project-based work has become a prevalent way of organizing operations in various sectors, ranging from business to public health and education (Arto et al., 2011; Bhide, 2023; Karppi et al., 2022). Project management as a profession necessitates a variety of skills and competencies to navigate the complexities and dynamic environments inherent in project teams (Alipour et al., 2017; Hoegl et al., 2011). As projects have become more conventional way of working, the expectations for projects in renewing and solving wider societal problems have expanded (Whyte et al., 2022). Consequently, this has evolved new requirements for project managers and their leadership actions. Responsible leadership, that entails ethical and strategic behavior dimensions to correspond to the changing demands in the business environment, is an important perspective for project leadership. Responsible project leadership is crucial for the team members' and stakeholders' well-being and performance, and it has an impact on long-term business perspective (Maak & Pless, 2006; Agarwal & Bhal, 2020).

Simultaneously, job crafting, where employees proactively modify their tasks, social relationships, and perceptions to better align with their strengths and interests, has been shown to enhance job satisfaction, engagement, and productivity (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Tims et al., 2012). Job crafting can be approached through various strategies, such as increasing structural

and social job resources and seeking more challenging tasks or avoiding stressful aspects of work (Bruning & Campion, 2018; Hu et al., 2020). Given that job crafting is known to enhance employee and team engagement and productivity, key factors for project success, it is crucial to understand whether responsible leadership can further stimulate such proactive behaviors (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Tims et al., 2012). On the other hand, also project managers are actors who craft their work. The creation of responsible leadership practices could require project managers to apply this proactive approach to their own work, and thus responsible leadership practices could benefit from adopting a job crafting approach.

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the connection between job crafting and responsible leadership among project management university students. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of job crafting (Tims et al., 2012) and responsible leadership (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020) we address the research question: how the perceived importance of responsible leadership skills relates with resource-based job crafting factors among project management university students. This quantitative study was conducted within four countries; Spain, Austria, Latvia and Finland among higher education university students who studied project management as a major subject or as a part of other degree programs.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

### **Responsible leadership in learning/teaching project leadership**

Due to the expansions of projects in contemporary working life, project management as a profession has matured, and the requirements on decent project management have widened. This means that managing the technical tasks is only a part of project managers' responsibilities, and expectations for leadership actions to cover longstanding strategic goals have emerged. (Whyte et al. 2022) Besides that, in a light of responsible leadership, project managers are expected to ensure the ethical conduct of teams, and they should build consider well-being of stakeholders and show concern for conservation of resources (Agarwal & Bhal 2020). Against these requirements, plain technical project management education yields to correspond the current needs of practice. It is suggested that besides technical skills, project managers require education on critical thinking, interpersonal and leadership skills (Ramazani & Jergeas, 2015). Project managers soft skills, such as emotional intelligence and trustworthiness has been emphasized lately in project management research (Castro et al., 2022).

Responsible leadership is an ethical and strategic leadership behavior that accounts for leadership ethics. The ethical considerations have been claimed to be in the heart of leadership (Ciulla, 2006). Maak & Pless (2006) define RL as “a relational and ethical phenomenon, which occurs in social processes of interaction with those who affect or are affected by leadership and have a stake in the purpose and vision of the leadership relationship”. In this conception RL is an inherently

relational and moral phenomenon that extends beyond traditional leader-follower dynamics. It involves building enduring, mutually beneficial relationships with a wide array of stakeholders. It is characterized by a specific mindset that shifts the focus from self-centered and economist point This signifies a transition from a solely performance-based conception of business success to an appreciation of the outcomes that must be attained in an ethical manner (Ciulla, 2006). Following Agarwal & Bhal (2020) RL includes dimensions of moral person, moral manager, multistakeholder consideration and sustainable growth focus. The first dimension, moral person, refers to the leader him/herself and the efforts of showing responsible behavior towards others, whereas moral manager entails leaders' influencing others to behave and act ethically in their attempts to reach goals. Multistakeholder consideration refers to leaders' endeavors to build up sustainable stakeholder relationships, and sustainable growth demonstrates how leaders' pursue sustainable growth with longstanding vision. (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020) Responsible leadership is linked to positive outcomes like enhanced employee engagement, better stakeholder evaluations, and overall organizational effectiveness (Voegtlin et al., 2021).

Integrating responsible leadership into management education is important. Management education has an impact as it shapes the functional and ethical frameworks within which businesses are created, developed, managed and evaluated (Smit, 2013). Management education plays a crucial role in developing responsible leaders by integrating principles of sustainability, ethics, and social responsibility into the curriculum (Gomes & Marques 2023). The PRME initiative by the UN Global Compact encourages business schools to balance economic goals with sustainability objectives, preparing future leaders to address global challenges (Storey & Ibrahim 2025). Management education can equip today's and future leaders with the skills needed to lead for a sustainable future (Muff et al. 2020).

### **Job Crafting in learning project leadership**

Within the resource-based job crafting model, job crafting refers to proactive behavior where employees customize their job demands and resources to better align with their needs, strengths and preferences (Tims & Bakker, 2010; Tims et al., 2012). While there is a wealth of research on job crafting in general, it has scarce empirical evidence within project management literature. However, there are some linkages how job crafting is related to value creation perspective on project management, and how it contributes to project success and project practitioners' career satisfaction (McKevitt et al., 2022).

According to previous research, job crafting not only increases individual well-being and motivation at work (Hakanen et al., 2017) but is also crucial for organisational flexibility and effectiveness (Lee & Lee, 2018; Tims et al., 2015). More specifically, when crafting their jobs,

employees influence the scope and nature of their tasks or the extent and nature of their social relationships at work (Petrou et al., 2012; Tims and Bakker, 2010; Tims et al., 2012). By enabling and encouraging job crafting, organisations can empower employees to redesign their jobs (Demerouti, 2014; Hyrkkänen et al., 2022, Kim & Beehr, 2019) and thereby, attain several positive outcomes such as work engagement (Bakker et al., 2012, 2016; Demerouti et al., 2015; Harju et al., 2016; Vogt et al., 2016), person-job fit (Lu et al., 2014; Tims et al., 2016), organisational commitment (Ghitulescu, 2007), as well as increased job performance and satisfaction (Leana et al., 2009; Tims et al., 2013a, 2013b).

In the dynamic and often uncertain landscape of project-based work, success hinges not only on technical execution but also on the adaptability and engagement of team members. Job crafting is an emerging strategy that may support both individual and project-level outcomes. Especially approach-oriented job crafting, which includes seeking resources and challenges, has shown promise in enhancing project success (McKevitt et al., 2022). Approach crafting consists of active efforts toward problem solving and improvement-focused goals, such as seeking opportunities to learn and challenge oneself which are essential features of project management (McKevitt et al., 2022). Within resource-based theory, approach job crafting aligns with the dimensions of **increasing structural job resources, increasing social resources and increasing challenging job demands** (Bipp & Demerouti, 2015; Bruning & Campion, 2018; Petrou, et a., 2015; Tims et al., 2012; Zhang & Parker, 2019).

Studies indicate that approach crafting, where employees proactively seek to make their work more stimulating and positive, is strongly linked to increased work engagement and improved performance. Employees who proactively seek challenges experience higher intrinsic motivation and energy levels, which can significantly impact project outcomes (Bakker, et al., 2022; Bruning & Campion, 2018).

Since the approach-type of job crafting is related to the active structuring of one's job, we assume that it is also positively related to the perceived importance of four different dimensions of responsible leadership. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H 1: All the three dimensions of the approach-type of job crafting are positively related to the perceived importance of all four dimensions of responsible leadership.

Employees can also apply avoidance-type of job crafting – a form of job crafting where employees attempt to reduce or eliminate aspects of their work they find stressful, overwhelming, or misaligned with their preferences (Bipp & Demerouti, 2015; Bruning & Campion, 2018). In resource-based job crafting this type of job crafting includes the activity of **decreasing hindering job demands** where employees reduce cognitive and emotional demands of their work (Tims et al., 2012). While this strategy may offer short-term relief and temporarily diminish the stressful

aspects of the job, it does not decrease hindrance demands and the source of stress (Harju et al., 2021). This might be the reason why **avoidance crafting** has been associated with more negative attitudes (Petrou et al., 2015), more exhaustion (Petrou et al., 2015) and linked negatively to employee well-being (Lichtenthaler & Fischbach, 2019; Rudolph Rudolph et al., 2017) and engagement (Petrou et al., 2012.; Petrou, et al., 2018).

Since the avoidance-type of job crafting is related to the withdrawal behaviour with aspects of one's job, we assume that it is also negatively related to the felt importance of the four different dimensions of responsible leadership. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H 2: The dimension of avoidance-type of job crafting is negatively related to the perceived importance of all four dimensions of responsible leadership.

## **Method**

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of job crafting (Tims et al., 2012) and responsible leadership (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020), we conducted a e-survey amongst university students from four European universities (UPV from Spain, FHWN from Austria, RTU from Latvia and TUAS from Finland) studying Project Management. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and respondents were not given any incentives to participate. The anonymity of the data was assured and emphasized throughout the process.

Job crafting was measured using the Job Crafting Scale (Tims et al., 2012), which was modified and validated for university students by Hyrkkänen et al. (2018). Responsible leadership was assessed using the Responsible Leadership Scale (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020).

## **Repondents**

The survey was sent to 565 university students, of whom 183 bachelor and master level university students responded to the e-survey (response rate 57 %). From respondents 61% were men and 36% women. The option "other gender" or "do not want to answer" was selected by 0.3% of respondents. The majority of respondents, 67%, belonged to the 20–29 age group. The responses represented the participating HEIs as follows: UPV Spain 44 % of responses, FHWN Austria 26 % of the responses, TUAS Finland 22 % of responses, RTU Latvia 2 % of the responses and other universities 6 % of the responses. Majority of the respondents (67 %) were first- or second-year students.

## Measures

Job crafting was measured using the Job Crafting Scale (Tims et al., 2012), which has been modified and validated for university students' academic work (Hyrkkänen et al., 2018). The scale includes four dimensions:

- *Increasing structural job resources*, where students enhance their job resources by developing working methods and influencing the content of their tasks, was assessed with four items (Hyrkkänen et al., 2018; Tims et al., 2012).
- *Increasing social job resources*, where students seek social support, supervisory coaching, or feedback, was assessed with four items (Hyrkkänen et al., 2018; Tims et al., 2012).
- *Increasing challenging job demands*, where students voluntarily take on new responsibilities and aim for personal growth and achievement, was assessed with four items (Hyrkkänen et al., 2018; Tims et al., 2012).
- *Decreasing hindering job demands*, where students reduce the cognitive and emotional demands of their work, was assessed with five items (Hyrkkänen et al., 2018; Tims et al., 2012).

The perceived importance of responsible leadership was measured using the Responsible Leadership Scale (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020). This scale includes four dimensions: *moral person* (six items), *moral manager* (five items), *multistakeholder consideration* (five items), and *sustainable growth focus* (four items) (see Appendix 1).

## Analysis

Four summary variables were formed according to the items of the four dimensions of responsible leadership (Agarwal & Bahl, 2020). Also, four summary variables based on items of the four dimensions of job crafting (Tims et al., 2012) were formed. The reliabilities of these summary variables were tested with Cronbach's alpha, which yielded sufficiently high values to justify their use in further analysis.

Since the data is cross-sectional in nature and each respondent is an individual observation unit without a grouping structure, the assumption of independence was considered to be fulfilled.

The assumption of a normal distribution was checked by the Shapiro-Wilk test and Q-Q plots. Since some of the summary variables deviated from the normal distribution, Spearman's rank correlation was used to assess the relationship between the four summary variables of shared leadership and the four summary variables of job crafting (Cooper et al., 2023).

## Results

Our findings revealed that all four dimensions of responsible leadership correlated positively with approach-type job crafting factors, but not with avoidance-type job crafting factors (Table 1). Specifically, all the three approach-type dimensions of job crafting, increasing structural job resources, increasing social job resources, and increasing challenging job demands, were statistically significantly related to the four dimensions of responsible leadership: moral person, moral manager, multi stakeholder consideration, and sustainable growth focus. Thus H 1 was accepted.

**Table 1. Correlations between the felt importance of responsible Leadership factors and Job Crafting factors**

	1.	2	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Moral Person	1							
2. Moral Manager	.59**	1						
3. Multi Stakeholder Consideration	.59**	.64**	1					
4. Sustainable Growth Focus	.56**	.63**	.64**	1				
5. Increasing Structural Job Resources	.21**	.32**	.22**	.27**	1			
6. Increasing Social Job Resources	.25**	.32**	.24**	.37**	.47**	1		
7. Increasing Challenging Job Demands	.17*	.30**	.18*	.24**	.54**	.50**	1	
8. Decreasing Hinderling Job Demands	.06	.10	.12	.08	.16*	.13	.14	1

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

N 175, Spearman correlations (Spearman's rho)

In contrast, avoidance-type job crafting was not statistically significantly related to any dimension of responsible leadership. Thus H 2 was rejected.

## Discussion

In this study we explored the connection between job crafting and responsible leadership among project management university students. We found support for that the felt importance of responsible leadership is positively related to the approach type of job crating. Students who actively engage in crafting their studies perceive responsible leadership skills/contents more important than their colleagues who belong to the avoidance type of job crafting. The results suggest that students who engage in approach-type job crafting perceive responsible leadership and its dimensions as crucial elements for effective project management.

This has important implications for project management education. Engaged students consider contents and the development of skills in the field of responsible leadership as important. The more engaged students are the more they see the necessity of acquiring responsible leadership

skills. Project management education can respond to these expectations and integrate related contents in the curricula. Responsible leadership can work as a guiding vision and inform students in which direction to craft their (future) jobs. Project management education provides the necessary learning opportunities to develop the respective knowledge, skills and attitudes. This also supports the core mission of the PRME network for contributing to a sustainable world, where business schools are called upon to prepare future leaders for their jobs and to equip them with the mindsets and skills needed to address global challenges. Additionally, management schools may position themselves as attractive players in the educational market when integrating responsible leadership into their project management curricula. Students with an approach-type of job crafting are more likely to deliberately choose the educational institution that equips them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to climb the career ladder. Offering according studies will make educational institutions more attractive than their competitors.

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