

Decent Work

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Decent work (DW) has emerged as a growing paradigm for all, entailing fundamental principles and rights at work which can pervade all human resource management (HRM) practices. While studies on DW are generally examined on macro levels, such as social, economic, legal, and political, the rising emphasis to realize the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No. 8 of the UN and highlight the importance of quality of employment.

Keywords: decent work (DW) ; employee performance ; work–family conflict (WFC) ; family–work conflict (FWC)

1. Introduction

At the turn of the twenty-first century, dating back to the ILO's history within the United Nations (UN) as of 1919, decent work (DW) has emerged as a growing paradigm for all people, entailing fundamental principles and rights at work which can pervade all human resource management practices. Securing decent work for all alleviates inequalities, increases people's purchasing power, enhances social protection, and gives rise to more inclusive and sustainable economic development. DW, at this point, can be proposed as an 'employee-centred approach' ^[1] that provides employees with physically and interpersonally safe working conditions, access to health care, adequate compensation, adequate workload and working time ^[2], opportunities to learn and gain professional positions, satisfaction through career development processes ^{[2][3][4][5]}, and the facilitation of goal accomplishments (e.g., social support, autonomy, and task significance) ^[6]. A hundred years ahead in 2019, DW has been declared to be one of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (U.N.) focusing on the importance of quality of employment, safe and secure working environments, and social protection for all.

Work is considered a central aspect of people's lives, which drives them to make it a fulfilling and productive activity. In today's fierce competition, employees, in particular white-collar workers, are generally pushed to work harder and show high performances in the context of digitalization and Industry 4.0, which can put them under serious pressure, giving rise to negative work-related outcomes and the deterioration of their health and well-being. This draws attention to the fact that employees should be provided with a decent working context and that the importance of quality of employment and social protection should not be overlooked.

As a matter of fact, every job that people hold is surrounded by both job resources and job demands. Job resources refer to those physical, psychological, organizational, and social aspects of the job that can be exemplified as job autonomy, feedback, access to social support, a high-quality supervisor relationship ^[7], adequate working time and workload distribution, opportunities for personal and professional development as well as the provision of adequate remuneration, health, well-being, and security conditions ^{[2][3][4]}. Given the increased competition of modern times, higher levels of job demands accompanied by high work pressure, work overload, and other job stressors, i.e., job insecurity, work can turn into an exhausting experience. In cases in which the job demands exceed the job resources, these exceeding demands can hinder job resources, thus creating detrimental employee outcomes, such as low performance, intention to leave ^{[8][9]} ^[10], and also health-impairing effects, e.g., acute fatigue and exhaustion ^[11]. Given the inevitability of high job demands in the current work environment, the idea of increasing job resources can be further acknowledged as buffering the negative outcomes of job demands. These arguments, in line with the literature ^{[12][13]}, leads to propose that the DW construct might well fit into the job demand–resources (JD–R) framework, which has been used in scholarly research to explain how working conditions influence employee behaviour, e.g., absenteeism, performance, and client satisfaction ^{[14][15][16]}. Central to the JD–R model is that adequate amount of resources can buffer the negative outcomes of job demands ^{[8][9][10]} ^[11]. Hence, it is proposed that the availability of DW conditions in the workplace should be interpreted as the 'job resources' an employee utilizes in the workplace. The unavailability of decent working conditions can be associated with adverse job demands, while securing such conditions can help buffer the negative effects of job demands on employee outcomes ^[12].

Given DW was originally developed to examine its availability at a societal level ^[17], it has been criticized for its lack of focus on work life experiences at the individual level ^[18]. Nevertheless, there exists some recent empirical research on DW, which found significant associations with some employee-related outcomes, such as work motivation and psychological capital ^{[2][4][19]}, well-being ^{[17][20]}, work engagement ^[3], and employee trust ^{[19][21]}. By relying on the social justice aspect of decent work at a macro (societal) level, herein, it is to contribute to fill in the gap regarding the testability of decent work as a set of practices at the individual level and the applicability of social justice in the context of employees. Therefore, the research is novel as it explores whether the availability of DW plays an important role in two plausible outcomes at the employee level: 'employee performance', as proposed by Ferraro et al. ^{[2][4]}, and 'intention to leave', as held by Arnoux-Nicolas et al. ^[22]. According to the JD–R Model, an adequate amount of job resources—DW conditions—can buffer the negative outcomes of job demands, thus leading to higher employee performance and a reduced intention to leave ^{[8][9][10]}.

The relationship of DW practices with performance and intention to leave may not be a direct one, as there may be other contextual factors that can alter the strength, level, and presence of these relationships. Increased competition and new technologies have changed work demands, i.e., the need to manage higher complexity, generate new knowledge, increase skill variety, and intensify work effort ^[23]. As a consequence, individuals have started to take on more and different roles, each bearing new responsibilities and expectations ^[24]. However, people have limited personal resources (e.g., time and energy), which makes it difficult for them to participate and meet the expectations of all their roles. The result is an increase in work–family conflict (WFC) and family–work conflict (FWC), the impact of which is to investigate in terms of the DW employee-level outcomes. While WFC addresses inter-role conflicts, whereby demands from the work domain can interfere with the family role requirements ^[25], FWC arises when family responsibilities affect one's job demands ^[26]. It is also crucial to understand and address white-collar workers' perceptions about DW, which has so far generally been studied among blue-collar workers ^[27].

2. Job Demands–Resources (JD–R) Model

The JD–R model proposes that all working environments and job characteristics can be classified into two different categories, namely job demands and job resources. Job demands involve those factors, such as work overload, role ambiguity ^[28], role conflict, and role stress ^[7], that put physical, social, psychological, and/or organizational pressure and strain on individuals which compels them to exert physical, psychological, and/or cognitive effort ^[29]. Job demands are divided into the dimensions of challenge and hindrance. Challenge demands can be exemplified as work load, time pressure, and cognitive processing requirements, which require a lot of effort but pave the way for goal achievement. In contrast, hindrance demands are obstructive and include job insecurity, organizational constraints, role ambiguity, interpersonal conflict, administrative hassles, rather inadequate resources ^[30], work overload, and excessive working hours ^[31], thereby preventing good employee morale, well-being, and job performance. Job resources refer to those factors that help reduce job demands, particularly alleviating the negative effects of hindrance demands and the associated physical, psychological, and cognitive costs in order to facilitate goal accomplishment (e.g., autonomy and task significance) ^[12] and also to allow for more personal learning and development ^{[12][32]}. The JD–R model proposes that the interaction between job demands and job resources displays itself in a way that job resources may buffer the negative outcomes of job demands, such as strain, burnout, and poor performance ^{[12][31]}.

Previous studies have considered the JD–R model highly important in an organizational context as it enables professionals and organizations to recognize the factors related to motivation, performance, and employee well-being. One such study has found the role of job resources in the prevention of exhaustion ^[33]. Xanthopoulou et al. ^[34] have also found that employees provided with sufficient resources in their work environment are able to perform their tasks successfully, facilitating their work engagement. Bakker and Demerouti ^[14] also argue that job resources (i.e., autonomy, social support, fulfilling work, and performance) become particularly important and useful when the job demands are highly challenging.

3. Decent Work Construct

Dating back to the ILO's history within the United Nations (UN) since 1919 ^[35], the "decent work" (DW) concept has thus been evolving for more than a century, arriving at its current framework and definition as a consequence of a series of conferences, declarations, treaties and so on ^[36]. The concept formed the basis for raising awareness of working conditions, social justice, and human rights ^[37]. The official introduction of the DW construct was proposed by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in the 87th session of the International Labor Conference in 1999 as "productive work in which rights are protected, which generates an adequate income, with adequate social protection" ^[38] (p. 13).

Ever since recent decades, the DW concept has further increased in importance given today's globalized dynamic workplace contexts [2][4], increased employee responsibilities, [21] and accelerated competition in the workplace. While this changing trend has enabled employees to exercise more autonomy, equipped them for higher productivity, and engendered greater commitment, it has, however, at the same time, put them under further pressure in terms of employer demands, such as setting unrealistic and unachievable goals, excessive responsibilities in job descriptions, and excessive working hours [21]. This can lead to multiple negative outcomes, such as job dissatisfaction and poor work performance, as well as reduced care for the health and well-being of employees [39][40]. These changes have further drawn attention to the DW concept, which in particular has recently been put forward as one of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (U.N.) in 2019, encompassing the importance of quality of employment and social protection. SDG No. 8 aims to "promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all", in which workers have access to "safe and secure working environments" [41].

Taking the ILO documents [42][43][44][45] and the substantive elements explained in the Decent Work Agenda as the foundation, Ferraro, Pais, dos Santos, and Moreira [4] developed a Decent Work Questionnaire (DWQ) as a measurement instrument at the individual worker level and identified a number of factors or dimensions from workers' subjective perceptions of the presence of DW conditions in their current job. They came up with seven dimensions of DW, as presented in the table below (**Table 1**).

Table 1. Decent work dimensions and descriptions.

DW Dimensions	Descriptions
Fundamental Principles and Values at Work	Justice, dignity, freedom, fair treatment at work, acceptance (without discrimination), clarity of norms, trust, solidarity, participation, and mental health comprise the core of the concept of DW and its foundations.
Adequate Working Time and Workload	A decent balance between personal and work life is essential. The efforts made for work, deadlines, shifts, and schedules should be adequate.
Fulfilling and Productive Work	Perception that work has some meaning, contributes to personal and professional development, and creates value for the individual and multiple stakeholders at large.
Meaningful remuneration for the exercise of citizenship	Perception that the remuneration received for work is fair and allows individuals and their families a life with dignity and autonomy, enhancing their well-being.
Social Protection	Perceptions or expectations of workers as to whether they and their family can be socially protected by public or private insurance in case of illness, unemployment, or retirement through a system of social security or that they can be repaid for committed efforts at work in the long run.
Opportunities	Workers' perceptions of the existence of opportunities for their employability and entrepreneurial activities and their perceptions of their degree of optimism for better futures and careers with regard to professional positions, assignments, challenges, learning, income, and benefits.
Health and Safety	Perception of being protected from risks to physical and psychological health at work and of having safe environmental conditions at the workplace.

Note: Based on Ferraro, Pais, dos Santos and Moreira, [4] and ILO [42].

4. Work–Family Conflict (WFC) and Family–Work Conflict (FWC)

Work and family are two of the important domains of employees in organizational settings and they might not always be compatible with one another, creating conflicts that give rise to negative outcomes, such as organizational dissatisfaction, psychological distress, lower job performance and so on [25][46]. WFC takes place when matters at work (severe competition, long and/or inflexible working hours, demanding managers and so on) affects one's ability to meet the demands associated with the family context (care of elderly parents, kids, household duties, domestic spouse and so on). On the other hand, FWC occurs when issues at work clash with family responsibility [24][25]. Previous studies have examined and discussed WFC and FWC (i.e., [47][48]). For instance, FWC was found to drive employees' intention to leave their jobs [49], whereas WFC was negatively related with job performance [48][50].

5. Decent Work and Employee Performance

Several scholarly studies have examined the relationship between DW and employee outcomes, such as employee motivation ^{[51][52]}, well-being, and work engagement ^{[13][53]}, which bear implications for achieving superior performance-related results and coping with challenges in the workplace ^[13]. At the micro level, a DW environment can be created by organisational efforts to implement employee well-being-oriented HRM practices (e.g., jobs with appropriate workload, role clarity, and employee control, as well as information sharing, employment security, and supportive management), which enable employees to work under good employment conditions and benefit from human capital development opportunities ^[54]. As many of these practices are in line with the DW principles, employees' perception of DW can be enhanced by organisational efforts to improve their HRM practices ^[55]. An HRM approach that focuses on well-being-oriented practices can help enhance employee performance ^[54]. In this respect, other scholarly research has provided evidence that employee-centred practices with adequate compensation, appropriate working conditions, workplace safety and security, and access to the healthcare, as well as a balance between work and private time enable individuals to direct their attention more to their role performance ^[20]. Hence, it is considered that DW plays an important role in enhancing employees' job performance.

6. Decent Work and Intention to Leave

Intention to leave or turnover intention refers to an individual's perceived inclination of staying with or leaving the organisation ^[56]. The literature portrays that the more inferior the working conditions and the more unsatisfactory the remuneration ^[57], the more likely that the employees will consider leaving their organisation ^{[51][22]}. Furthermore, as it may reduce employees' job satisfaction, the lack of congruence in goals and values of the organisation can be an antecedent to employees' turnover intentions ^[5]. In a similar vein, a negative relationship was found between decent work and intention to leave ^[58]. Employees' positive perceptions of access to decent working conditions have impacted their turnover intentions ^[59]. The dimensions of DW mentioned in the table above are used to state the forthcoming hypotheses of the study.

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