

# Work-Related Flow in Career Sustainability

Subjects: **Social Work**

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Originated during the 1970s by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the theory of work-related flow has the following features: (1) the goals pursued are clear; (2) each action taken results in instantaneous feedback; (3) the skills required are equal to the challenges presented; (4) awareness and action for how to proceed are integrated; (5) consciousness is focused while distractions are ignored; (6) failure is not considered an option; (7) self-consciousness is non-existent; (8) time awareness is distorted; and (9) the engaged activity is the end in itself. According to research findings, it is the optimal work-related experience to sustain careers.

work-related flow

Csikszentmihalyi

career sustainability

## History

Work-related flow is a theory associated with career sustainability <sup>[1]</sup> pioneered by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1934–2021 <sup>[2]</sup>) that was developed based on an analysis of those experiences judged as enjoyable by people involved in various activities he described as “play-forms” related to artistic endeavors (dance; music composition), athletic pursuits (basketball; rock climbing), and games (chess) <sup>[3]</sup>. Although the constant was that the activity was enjoyable, the focus of the theory, however, was not the judgment of experience. Instead, it was the conditions under which challenging activities are sustainable. According to Csikszentmihalyi, “flow makes us feel better in the moment, enabling us to experience the remarkable potential of the body and mind fully functioning in harmony. But what makes flow an even more significant tool is its ability to improve the quality of life in the long run” <sup>[4]</sup> (p. 63). This concentration by Csikszentmihalyi on a continuing process, in contrast to a time-dependent judgment, presents why work-related flow theory aims at career sustainability.

A theory recognized in contemporary psychology as one of the most significant <sup>[5]</sup> for over four decades, flow has directed a vast amount <sup>[6]</sup> of research ranging in many disciplines <sup>[7]</sup>. What identifies flow regarding an activity is that it is a process directed to a goal in meeting challenges guided by a person’s unique interests. Flow is optimal for experiences that are work related <sup>[8]</sup>. To be optimal, the experience throughout the process depends on several elements: (1) the goals pursued are clear; (2) each action taken results in instantaneous feedback; (3) the skills required are equal to the challenges presented; (4) awareness and action for how to proceed are integrated; (5) consciousness is focused while distractions are ignored; (6) failure is not considered an option; (7) self-consciousness is non-existent; (8) awareness of time is distorted; and (9) the engaged activity is the end in itself <sup>[9]</sup>. Flow theory has been identified as the center of Positive Psychology, concentrating on the pursuits selected by people when they are neither oppressed nor suffering <sup>[10]</sup> (p. 3). Work-related flow became particularly important in 1990 after the publication of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* <sup>[11]</sup> by Csikszentmihalyi. There were 23

languages that *Flow* had been translated into by 2021 when Csikszentmihalyi died. *Flow* remains a primary reason why Csikszentmihalyi is a leader among psychologists cited in several fields [12]. A reason for this high rate of citation for Csikszentmihalyi's publications may be that the theory of flow is reliable, has been validated [13], and except for some refinement [14], is identical to as it was first developed [15]. This assessment of Csikszentmihalyi's influence has been noted elsewhere [16].

Bakker gathered the most prominent definitions of flow in general in his 2008 publication [17] and summarized it as having three elements: total immersion in an activity (absorption), enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation. As such, flow can exist outside work-related experiences in playful activities, as Csikszentmihalyi initially identified [3]. Within work-related situations, absorption refers to employees' complete concentration and immersion in their work, with time passing quickly without distractions. Enjoyment is the assessment when employees judge their flow experience. Intrinsic motivation means employees perform their work-related activity with inherent pleasure and satisfaction, permitting them to be continuously interested in and fascinated by their work. Yet, Bakker defined work-related flow as a short-term peak experience, differing from Csikszentmihalyi, who studied it as a continuing experience relevant to career sustainability. This interpretation of worked-related flow by Bakker [18] is based on the Ryan and Deci understanding of self-determination theory [19], one that represents an alternative explication that has been referenced by several authors as their basis of understanding flow [6][20][21], but not by Csikszentmihalyi.

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