



# Job Autonomy and Employee Well-Being: The Roles of Sense of Work Meaning and Self-efficacy

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**Abstract:** In recent years, companies have been paying high attention to employee well-being, and its impact on employees has been confirmed by a large number of studies. As the keyword of happiness appears more and more frequently, we can truly feel that happiness is closely related to struggle. According to self-determination theory, the mechanism of the influence of job autonomy on employee well-being is explored, and the mediating role of the sense of job meaning between the two is verified. Considering the influence of employees' own characteristics, self-efficacy was introduced as a moderating variable to further explore the moderating role of self-efficacy between job autonomy and employee well-being. According to the literature review and theoretical analysis, the theoretical model of the study was derived, the research hypothesis was proposed, and the hypothesis was tested by empirical research. A total of 323 valid questionnaires were collected and screened from Chinese employees. The study scales used were validated to have high reliability and validity to ensure the reliability of the study measures. Statistical analysis was used to justify and test the research hypotheses. The results show that job autonomy has a significant effect on employee well-being. Furthermore, Sense of job meaning mediates the relationship between job autonomy and employee well-being. Finally, self-efficacy positively regulates the relationship between job autonomy and employee well-being, that is, high self-efficacy enhances the effect of job autonomy on employee well-being. Combined with the research findings, corresponding countermeasures and suggestions are proposed on how to improve employee well-being in enterprises.

**Keywords:** Job Autonomy, Employee Well-Being, Sense of Meaning at Work, Self-efficacy

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## 1. Introduction

China's economic growth has left the era of GDP-only in recent years, with more emphasis on quality and people's well-being [1]. As an important part of people's lives, work brings value to employees and organizations, and it fosters a feeling, a sense of meaning at work. Work makes employees more passionate, joyful, and energetic at the workplace to achieve transcendence [2] and can have a direct impact on employee well-being. According to the "Work Happiness Index" survey report in China, however, only 9.70% of the respondents had a high sense of work well-being. This phenomenon is due to the deviation between employee needs and enterprise management. In the traditional corporate

employment relationship, the employee and the organization are in an economic benefit exchange relationship, but with the development of society and the change in values, the focus of people's lives has shifted. With two parallel spheres of work and life, quality of life and spirituality are usually given priority [3], and this shift has had an impact on the management of companies. Entrepreneurs in the 5th HRM Forum have realized that high salaries are not enough to attract and retain new age employees, but to truly understand their needs and enhance their well-being.

According to existing research, job characteristics offer a new perspective on the study of employee well-being. The

decisive role of job characteristics on employee well-being has been repeatedly emphasized in a large number of organizational stress theory studies [4], where Boehm and Lyubomirsky suggested that employee well-being is related to the degree of job autonomy [5]. And a sense of meaningful work can also be a good variable to study when it comes to the research question of employee well-being. Drucker tells the story of three stonemasons in his book *The Practice of Management*. Stonemason one thinks he is knocking stones to support his family. Stonemason two thinks he is being the best stonemason he can be. Stonemason three thinks he is involved in building a cathedral. The three stonemasons each gave different meanings to the same elements of their work, working with different mindsets, and it is clear that there will be differences in their happiness. Robbins confirmed that the sense of meaning at work plays a significant role in the overall well-being of employees [6]. Hackman and Oldham suggested that the meaning of work can mediate between job characteristics and employee job outcomes [7].

Existing research further suggests that self-efficacy is a comprehensive judgment of one's abilities in the work environment from one's own perspective and affects how people feel, think and behave, and that the level of self-efficacy enhances or hinders motivational factors [8]. To sum up, from the perspective of self-determination theory, this study discusses the impact mechanism of job autonomy on employees' well-being based on the regulatory role of self-efficacy and the intermediary role of job significance. It is hoped that this research will play a positive role in improving employees' well-being and provide a new perspective for enterprise management. Figure 1 depicts the proposed research model of the current study.

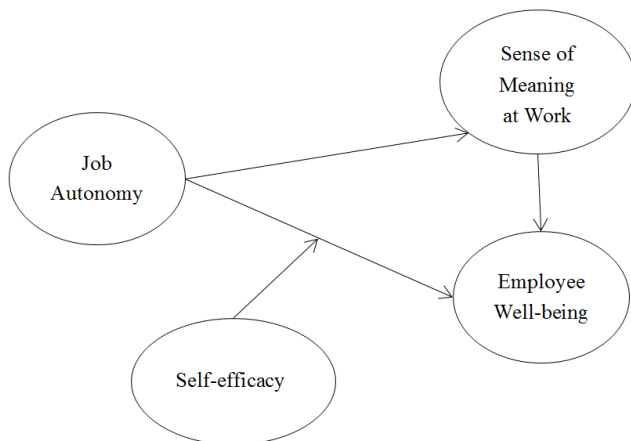


Figure 1. Research Model.

## 2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

### 2.1. Job Autonomy and Employee Well-being

Regarding job autonomy, Breugh argues that it refers to the freedom that individuals are allowed at work [9], that is, the control that employees have over the methods, processes,

time and place of work. Diener defines workplace well-being as a composite of how employees rate their work and life status [10]. Employee well-being is a competent feeling of employees based on cognitive mechanisms for events or behaviors that occur at work [11]. And regarding the research topic of job autonomy and employee well-being, some scholars have done prospective studies and found that job characteristics variables are often used as the main antecedent variables affecting well-being [12]. Boehm and Lyubomirsky suggested that employee well-being is significantly and positively related to the degree of job autonomy [13]. He Ding and Enhai Yu believes that employees with higher job autonomy are more likely to experience higher levels of job satisfaction and psychological well-being [14].

Job autonomy plays a vital role in employee well-being, which can be directly or indirectly affected by job autonomy. Based on self-determination theory, the impact of job autonomy is subtle, especially for employees with low basic salaries, such as those in the sales category who need to continuously optimize their business level, self-driven and efficient to accomplish or even exceed their own ability to work on their own goals, and increase job satisfaction through the competence recognition and extra income it generates thus gaining job happiness. However, the lack of job autonomy does not have a marginal effect on job satisfaction and employee happiness. For example, in the case of an assembly line operator, the initial job satisfaction and employee well-being of a stable and easy to perform job will have the opposite effect as the same processes are performed every day to complete repetitive tasks. This is the reason that with the passage of time, the original happiness of employees will gradually be no sense of accomplishment, boring, numb work will be worn out. On the basis of above arguments, we propose the following:

H1: Job autonomy has a positive predictive effect on employee well-being.

### 2.2. Mediating Role of a Sense of Meaning at Work

Employees' sense of meaningful work comes from the psychological satisfaction that comes from social acceptance [15]. Rosso argue that it usually refers to the subjective experience of work that is personally meaningful to the employee [16]. Hoogervorst, on the other hand, sees work meaning as a workplace characteristic that satisfies and fulfills employees' general needs or desires for work [17].

Job autonomy not only stimulates internal motivation, makes employees think about their abilities and skills and contribute meaningfully to their work by reaching personal achievements, thus having the opportunity to gain a higher sense of meaning at work. In a study conducted by Reeves, it was found that those who felt more meaningful at work were more likely to work, had less work-family conflict, and were more likely to feel a sense of well-being [18]. According to self-determination theory, a sense of meaningful work can have a positive impact on employee well-being, both in terms of psychological satisfaction and in terms of value.

Oldham proposed that the meaning of work could mediate between job characteristics and employee outcomes [7]. Based on existing empirical studies it can be demonstrated that the sense of meaning at work can be studied as a mediating variable. So, job autonomy influences employees' sense of meaning at work that in turn impacts employee well-being. On the basis of above arguments, we propose the following:

H2: A sense of meaning at work mediates the relationship between job autonomy and employee well-being.

### 2.3. Moderating Role of Self-Efficacy

Bandura believes that self-efficacy is a subjective judgment and confidence in an individual's ability to do a job and the degree to which he or she is likely to achieve it [19]. It can be understood that individuals determine whether what he or she is about to do is feasible through the perception of their self-efficacy, and if it is confirmed to be feasible, he or she will make full efforts to accomplish the goal and take effective actions to solve the problem. For instance, when employees encounter difficulties or obstacles at work, a high sense of self-efficacy can give them a strong belief and make them more inclined to solve problems positively. Self-efficacy perceptions reflect a sense of control over the environment and can help employees better deal with the challenges posed by job autonomy.

Yan Liu, a Chinese scholar, has verified the positive relationship between job autonomy and self-efficacy using a sample of 35 groups from 13 enterprises in Hangzhou. There is also growing evidence that optimistic self-efficacy is required for human achievement and positive well-being [8]. This is attributed to the fact that society is full of obstacles, failures, adversities, frustrations and inequalities, and people experience negative emotions such as self-doubt after some failures or setbacks, and self-efficacy can help people recover quickly from different emotions. A positive employee attitude is a spiritual inspiration that helps employees to navigate their environment effectively and makes it easier for them to achieve a sense of well-being. Therefore, it is reasonable to propose:

H3: Self-efficacy positively moderates the relationship between job autonomy and employee well-being, that is, high self-efficacy increases the effect of job autonomy on employee well-being.

## 3. Methods

### 3.1. Sample and Data Collection

The study used a questionnaire-based survey method to distribute 378 questionnaires, from which 327 were returned. After excluding cases with missing values, we collated 323 questionnaires for the final analysis, with a response rate of 85.4%. In the questionnaire, 50.8% were male, 65.6% had a bachelor's degree, 52% were aged 20-30, 57.2% were married employees and 78.3% had been in the division for

less than 10 years. Considering ethical considerations, respondents were given full confidence about the anonymity of their responses.

### 3.2. Measurement of Variables

The scales used in this study were taken from well-established foreign scales and all foreign scales were "translated-back-translated" to ensure the reliability of the scales. The questionnaire included four measurement perspectives (job autonomy, employee well-being, sense of meaning at work, self-efficacy). Respondents can tick the relevant checkboxes with the five-point Likert scale, which ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

**Job autonomy.** The 24-item task characteristics section of the Job Design Questionnaire developed by Morgeson and Humphrey was used, including the five dimensions of job autonomy, skill variety, task completeness, job importance and job feedback [20]. In the present study, the scale of job autonomy was selected as the measure of job autonomy, containing nine questions, such as "The work I do allows me to decide my own schedule". The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was recorded as 0.906.

**Employee well-being.** The eight-item Personal Well-being Index Inventory (PWI) developed by Cummins in 2003 was used [21], which evaluates an individual's level of well-being in eight areas: standard of living, health, personal achievements, interpersonal relationships, safety, social participation, future security and religious beliefs, for example, "I am satisfied with my interpersonal relationships". The scale has been validated for reliability and validity in the Chinese population, and the question on "religious beliefs" has been removed in the Chinese context. At the same time, the questions on family relationships, work-study status and social status were added through the expert method, resulting in a 10-item happiness scale. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.934.

**Sense of meaning at work.** The Sense of Meaning at Work Scale developed by Steger in 2012 was used [22], which includes 10 items, such as "Knowing exactly what makes my work meaningful". The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.890.

**Self-efficacy.** A self-efficacy scale developed by Schwarzer in 1997 was used [23], consisting of 10 items such as "I can cope confidently and effectively with anything that comes my way". The Cronbach's alpha was 0.902.

## 4. Data Analysis and Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables. Job autonomy is found to positively and significantly correlate with employee well-being ( $r = 0.136$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and sense of meaning at work ( $r = 0.302$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Sense of meaning at work is positively correlated with employee well-being ( $r = 0.375$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

Table 1. Mean, SD, and intercorrelations.

No.	Variables	Mean (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Sense of Meaning at Work	4.82 (0.80)	1						
2	Self-efficacy	3.90 (0.66)	0.469**	1					
3	Employee Well-being	4.69 (0.97)	0.375**	0.358**	1				
4	Job Autonomy	3.59 (0.79)	0.302**	0.494**	0.136*	1			
5	Plan autonomy	3.63 (0.91)	0.260**	0.419**	0.102	0.926**	1		
6	Decision autonomy	3.44 (0.93)	0.240**	0.458**	0.124*	0.939**	0.818**	1	
7	Method autonomy	3.69 (0.76)	0.341**	0.485**	0.153**	0.876**	0.702**	0.737**	1

Abbreviation: Job autonomy, employee well-being, sense of meaning at work, self-efficacy.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

#### 4.2. Mediation Analysis

In this study, the hypothesis is verified by hierarchical regression analysis. It can be seen from Table 2 that job autonomy significantly affected employee well-being ( $\beta=0.111$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). The results endorsed our hypothesis (H1) that job autonomy has a positive predictive effect on employee well-being.

The mediating role of sense of job meaning was tested according to the mediation test revised by Zhonglin Wen and Baojuan Ye [24]. As shown in Table 2, the regression coefficient of job autonomy on employee well-being was 0.111

and significant at the 0.05 level. The regression coefficient between job autonomy and meaningful work is 0.290, which is significant at the level of 0.01. The regression coefficient between meaningful work and employee well-being is 0.308, which is significant at the level of 0.01, indicating that the indirect effects is significant. The regression coefficient of job autonomy on employee well-being is 0.022, and it is not significant at the 0.05 level, which proves that job meaningfulness has a fully mediating role between job autonomy and employee well-being. The results endorsed our hypothesis (H2) that a sense of meaning at work mediates the relationship between job autonomy and employee well-being.

Table 2. Mediating the sense of meaning of work.

Variables	sense of meaning at work			Job autonomy			Job autonomy		
	$\beta$	t	p	$\beta$	t	p	$\beta$	t	p
constant	3.376**	16.688	0	3.066**	14.321	0	2.088**	7.425	0
employee well-being	0.308**	7.28	0	0.111*	2.476	0.014	0.022	0.466	0.642
sense of meaning at work							0.290**	5.113	0
R <sup>2</sup>	0.141			0.019			0.092		
$\Delta R^2$	0.138			0.016			0.086		
F	F(1,324)=52.994			F(1,324)=6.130			F(2,323)=16.376		
	p=0.000			p=0.014			p=0.000		

Abbreviation: Job autonomy, employee well-being, sense of meaning at work.

#### 4.3. Moderation Analysis

From Table 3, the regression coefficient value of job autonomy is -0.819 ( $t=-2.516$ ,  $p=0.012<0.05$ ) and the regression coefficient value of job autonomy and self-efficacy

is 0.195 ( $t=2.374$ ,  $p=0.018<0.05$ ), implying that self-efficacy positively and significantly moderates the relationship between job autonomy and employee well-being and the effect is significant.

Table 3. Moderating of self-efficacy.

Variables	employee well-being			sense of meaning at work		
	$\beta$	t	p	$\beta$	t	p
constant	5.353	4.642	0.000**	3.234	3.597	0.000**
self-efficacy	-0.128	-0.421	0.674	-0.119	-0.467	0.641
job autonomy	-0.819	-2.516	0.012*	0.314	1.322	0.187
self-efficacy×job autonomy	0.195*	2.374	0.018*	0.055	0.861	0.39
R <sup>2</sup>	0.145			0.228		
F	F(3,322)=18.208, p=0.000			F(3,322)=31.750, p=0.000		

Abbreviation: Job autonomy, employee well-being, efficacy.

To further explore the trend of the effect of job autonomy on employee well-being at different levels of self-efficacy. We divided self-efficacy into high and low level bands, and

plotted the effect of the moderating role of self-efficacy between job autonomy and employee well-being, as shown in Figure 2.

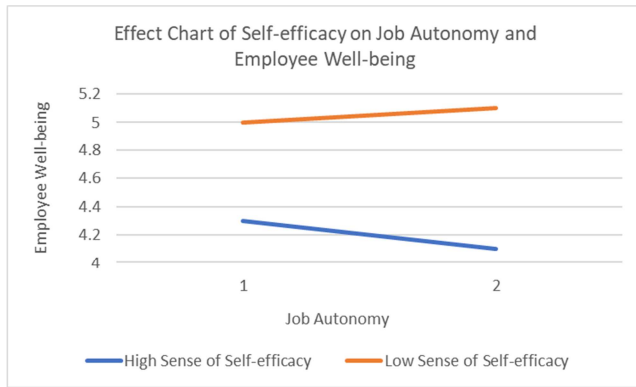


Figure 2. Adjustment Effects.

Summarizing the analysis, it can be seen that job autonomy and self-efficacy have a significant effect on employee well-being, and the moderating relationship between self-efficacy in job autonomy and employee well-being shows a high facilitation and low inhibition. The results endorsed our hypothesis (H3).

## 5. Conclusion and Discussion

### 5.1. Conclusion

Based on self-determination theory, this study constructed a mediating role model, through which the following research conclusions were drawn. a. Job autonomy has a significant effect on employee well-being. b. Sense of job meaning mediates between job autonomy and employee well-being. c. Self-efficacy positively regulates the relationship between job autonomy and employee well-being, that is, high self-efficacy enhances the effect of job autonomy on employee well-being. The structural model is shown in Figure 3.

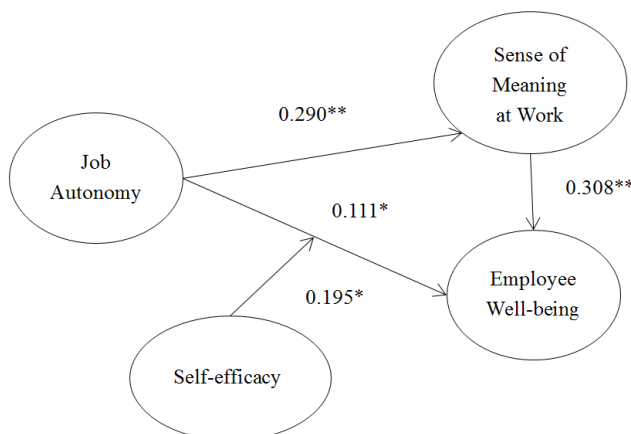


Figure 3. Structural Model.

### 5.2. Practical Implications

Organizational leaders rack their brains for different strategies to increase employee motivation and happiness, but some top-down approaches to job design don't always work as well as expected [25]. High turnover rate and low efficiency this condition is usually seen in employees with low happiness,

which is mainly reflected on job burnout, mental depression, and low job satisfaction [26]. There are some practical implications to report in this study. First of all, through the external work environment factor of job autonomy and the internal psychological factor of sense of work meaning to explore the influence mechanism of employee well-being, the research results can play a guiding meaning for employee happiness work. In addition, from the consideration of the employment cost of enterprises, enhancing employee happiness can effectively improve the efficiency and effectiveness of employees, reduce the willingness of employees to leave, greatly save the employment cost of enterprises, and also have a certain reference role for the reform of the compensation system.

### 5.3. Management Implications

#### 5.3.1. Implementation of Work Autonomy

The implementation of work autonomy is crucial, many companies put forward work autonomy, but really can be implemented to the staff only method autonomy and plan autonomy, decision-making autonomy is usually not deeply reflected, and therefore employees can not feel the true meaning of work autonomy, so work autonomy of this work characteristics in the implementation of do not float on the surface. During the implementation of work autonomy, it is also necessary to synchronize the implementation of strict management assessment methods, and the performance indicators corresponding to the achievement of the work content should be clearly defined as well as to ensure fairness and impartiality. In addition, although the autonomy of employees' methods should be ensured, they should also be supervised to avoid unscrupulous means to achieve the goal and violate the law to cause vicious competition.

#### 5.3.2. The Right Cultivation of a Sense of Meaning at Work

From the perspective of people management, the search for meaningful work helps employees to achieve happiness and organizational performance. However, not everyone believes that their work is meaningful. People who have a sense of meaning at work have strong internal motivation and a sense of effectiveness, while people who lack a sense of meaning at work cannot be forced to feel this way, but need to help them find the original meaning of their work. To help employees develop a sense of meaning at work, we need to start with motivation and understand what his motivation is for choosing this job, whether it is because he loves the job, loves the challenges it brings or because it is higher than the salary level of his peers. By giving him the opportunity and possibility to achieve his goals, the company can enhance his intrinsic motivation to engage in his current professional behavior. At the same time, we should encourage employees to be more innovative and think more, provide space for trial and error, give patient guidance instead of blaming in the face of failure, help employees to build self-confidence to find their own value, and enhance the sense of meaning in the work at the same time can also enhance self-efficacy.

### 5.3.3. Effective Promotion of Self-Efficacy

Research has demonstrated that higher self-efficacy can positively influence the relationship between job autonomy and employee well-being. However, self-efficacy belongs to the individual's perception of self-efficacy, and how can we help employees improve their self-efficacy through external forces? First of all, the company should create a positive work environment, give more praise and commendation to employees at the right time, and abandon the bad culture of exclusion and contempt, which will only erase employees' own confidence in their work and devalue their own sense of value. Second, provide employees with a wealth of training opportunities, the growth of skills so that employees are more comfortable in dealing with the work, the ability to improve the sense of self-efficacy to help increase.

### 5.4. Limitations and Prospects

This study integrates job autonomy, employee well-being, sense of meaning at work, and self-efficacy. Although some conclusions have been drawn, there are still some shortcomings in this study due to limitations in manpower, material resources, and time. First, since work and life are now closely intertwined, the findings of this study would be more fleshed out if the impact on employee happiness could be explored in conjunction with the family influences of employees. Therefore, while this study enriches the previous studies, it is necessary to follow up with an in-depth exploration of the influence of employees' family factors on achieving employee well-being. In addition, due to time and cost constraints and the impact of the epidemic, the survey in this study was mainly conducted online, and there was a lack of face-to-face communication with the questionnaire fillers, which may affect the authenticity of the questionnaire or misunderstand the options filled in the questionnaire, resulting in bias in the questionnaire data. Therefore, in the future, if feasible, the scope of the questionnaire can be precisely limited to a certain industry, and the survey can be distributed nationwide in multiple regions.

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