Stretch Yourself: Benefits and Burdens of Job Crafting that Goes Beyond the Job

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STRETCH YOURSELF:
BENEFITS AND BURDENS OF JOB CRAFTING THAT GOES BEYOND THE JOB

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ABSTRACT

As employees cannot always readily stretch their competencies and professional identity on the job through regular job crafting, we ask the question: are there alternative ways of crafting inside organizations through which people can stretch themselves? Using grounded theory methods, we step into the shoes of federal employees active in Open Opportunities, a digital market for temporary assignments in the U.S. federal government. We find that employees use such temporary assignments to craft a liminal space in which they can explore new skills, establish new professional ties, and claim new professional identities unavailable in their full-time jobs. However, due to its visibility, this way of crafting can also generate substantial supervisory pressures resisting it. These pressures may induce an image cost, and trigger increased frustration, stress, and strain in people's jobs. As we describe this new job crafting pattern, we pay attention to both its benefits and burdens, and the impact thereof on people's efforts to stretch themselves at work. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our study and its consequences for future research on job crafting, professional identity development, and the future of work.

Keywords: Career issues; Intra-organizational networks; Social identity theory, identity and categorization; Skill acquisition; Empowerment; Job Characteristics and design

Emma is a federal worker who is frustrated with the rigidity of her job. After fifteen years of work in the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, she is tied to her organization. She likes the job security and pension but struggles to be motivated. Emma's boss provides little help to challenge Emma and does not approve of her ideas to bring changes to her work. One day, Emma receives a message from her friend Jocelyn. Her friend speaks about a new initiative called Open Opportunities (Open Opps), allowing federal workers to practice new skills while working on temporary assignments in other departments. Motivated to stretch herself beyond her current job, Emma signs up. There is no paperwork involved; a simple approval from her boss suffices to get started. Soon after, Emma learns about a user experience design assignment posted by Greg, for the Department of Veterans Affairs. Emma now collaborates with Greg daily, in addition to her regular job.

As the above example illustrates, Open Opps was created to allow federal employees to break out of their daily jobs and to help colleagues from across the U.S. government with temporary assignments that they find meaningful. The idea of Open Opps' creators was to build a market of work in which employees could develop meaning and practice skills while getting ad hoc jobs done. Today, Open Opps allows federal employees to sign up to its digital marketplace (https://openopps.usajobs.gov), browse a list of assignments posted by fellow federal workers, and apply to them as they see fit. In this unique setting, we discovered how employees craft through temporary assignments in Open Opps, alongside their full-time jobs.

Academic work recognizes that stretching one's competencies and professional identity beyond the contours of a given job has become increasingly important (Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018; Fuller, Wallenstein, Raman, & de Chalendar, 2019). These ambitions can be realized through job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), which includes "the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work" (p. 179). For instance, employees may move from existing competencies and identities to new ones

(O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006) by adding elements of work not originally in the formal job description or changing the scope, number, and nature of social relationships within their jobs (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzesniewski, 2013; Bruning & Campion, 2018; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Zhang & Parker, 2018).

However, job crafting is not always readily available for every employee. As Wrzesniewski & Dutton (2001) explain, when people's jobs are explicitly defined and controlled, they may see less opportunity to modify the task, relational, or cognitive boundaries of their jobs. Moreover, employees may be confronted with rigid job descriptions and tight managerial control, which may make crafting beyond the immediate objectives of a job difficult (Bruning & Campion, 2018; Obodaru, 2012). To experiment with competencies or identities that do not directly fit within such objectives, employees often keep their crafting invisible to their supervisors, which further risks to reduce its significance and scope (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). These limitations may restrict the exploration of new competencies and identities beyond a given job (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010) and may cause people to experience a sense of stagnation in their daily work (Allen, Peltokorpi, & Rubenstein, 2016; Stengård, Bernhard-Oettel, Berntson, Leineweber, & Aronsson, 2016; Verbruggen & De Vos, 2019).

Still, possibilities exist for workers to explore new competencies and professional identities outside the organization, such as through multiple jobs (Campion, Caza, & Moss, 2020; Caza, Moss, & Vough, 2018; Ibarra, 2003; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007), volunteering (Rodell, 2013), side-hustles (Sessions, Nahrgang, Vaulont, Williams, & Bartels, 2020), or a sabbatical leave (Gaziel, 1995). However, while such endeavors outside of the organization can provide people new experience and a fresh perspective (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Sehgal, 2017), these options are not readily available to everyone. They are also not a panacea to those who want to stretch their competencies and identities while remaining active within their current

organization. As such, the question arises: are there alternative ways of crafting inside organizations by which people can stretch themselves?

We shed new light on this question, through a qualitative study of employees active in Open Opps, a digital platform in the U.S. federal government that enables existing employees to take on temporary assignments alongside their full-time jobs. We first describe our study context and provide more information about the purpose of Open Opps, what people use it for, and the extent to which it has been used in the U.S. federal government. We then explore how employees craft through temporary work assignments in Open Opps. These temporary assignments serve as a liminal space (Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016) for them to craft new skills, networks, and identities unavailable in their regular jobs. We also reveal the burdens of crafting through temporary work assignments inside the organization, such as supervisory pushback and increased levels of frustration, stress, and strain in people's full-time jobs. We highlight the implications of our findings on extant theorizing on job crafting, professional identity development, and the future of work.

DATA AND METHODS

Research Context

The concept of Open Opps was born within the General Services Administration (GSA) of the U.S. federal government in January 2013 and aimed to enable individual employees to step out of their routine, learn new skills, and pursue exciting work that cuts across the silos of government. It allowed working on discrete government-wide assignments, which employees could perform for a maximum of 20 percent of their time. While Open Opps assignments take various forms and shapes, they share a common characteristic, namely that people engage in temporary work experiences while maintaining their full-time jobs. As Table 1 indicates, these work experiences focus on competencies that are appealing to a wide range of employees, such

as user experience design, qualitative research, social media communication, web development, and graphic design.

Insert Table 1 about here

By empowering individual employees with a wide variety of backgrounds (see Table 2) to work on government-wide assignments, Open Opps also aimed at helping agencies gain interagency insights and provide for the meaningful development of employees without the costs of travel or training. By leveraging skills and talent from across the U.S. federal government, it also intended to promote a cooperative and cost-effective approach to innovation and problem-solving. Moreover, individual departments would benefit from Open Opps because employees bring new and innovative ideas back to their departments, thereby bridging silos and creating a network of innovators.

Insert Table 2 about here

In Open Opps' pilot stage in 2013, employees from over 50 government agencies participated, completing over 100 Open Opps assignments. While Open Opps initially aimed to offer only digital-themed assignments to support the Digital Services Innovation Center within GSA, its early successes quickly fueled the decision to include more types of work. Due to this change in focus, however, a new home base had to be found. After a year of search, the platform moved from GSA to USAJobs within the Office of Personnel Management in October 2017 and became hosted on https://openopps.usajobs.gov. By January 2020, employees had submitted nearly 3,000 applications, 1,456 individuals had participated in Open Opps, and 1,168 individual assignment engagements had been completed (see Table 3).

Insert Table 3 about here

Data Collection

We gathered data via inductive qualitative interviews (Charmaz, 2006; Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1997) with 33 federal employees active in Open Opps. Spanning a period of two years (May 2018 to March 2020), our interviewing allowed us to capture interviewees' past and current experiences. However, our research did not progress linearly. Back in 2018, we started our research without being driven by particular theories or hypotheses, but with the educated expectation that studying Open Opps' technological design, its most visible aspect, would be worthwhile. Yet, as we probed deeper into interviewees' experiences, we found that the context of Open Opps revealed a new job crafting pattern that drew our attention. We observed how people tried to stretch their competencies and identities in Open Opps, as an alternative to crafting on the job. Therefore, we re-focused our research question to understand the benefits and burdens of this way of crafting and how it might aid people in stretching themselves beyond their jobs.

We conducted 54 semi-structured interviews, spread over three different interview rounds (see Appendix A for an overview of the interview protocol), that we did with a snowball sample of 33 federal employees active in Open Opps. We interviewed people who had taken on the role of assignment creator or participant. Some of these individuals formerly or currently played a key role in the growth and management of Open Opps, which also provided us insight into how Open Opps had been set up and designed. As the interviewees worked in various locations in the U.S., we performed the majority of interviews by video call and audio-recorded these with permission. E-mail and social media correspondence (primarily LinkedIn) allowed us to stay in touch with interviewees throughout the observational period. Altogether, our

empirical exploration resulted in approximately 36 hours of audio recordings. As platform data did not allow us to gain a systematic view of what happened to Open Opps participants, we also synthesized this information from our interviews. Table 4 provides insight into the interview data, subject characteristics, and observable career outcomes attributable to participating in Open Opps.

Insert Table 4 about here

Additionally, we collected rich data from a variety of sources to complement interview findings (Stake, 2000). These included data from the Open Opps platform, newsletters, data on GitHub, articles and blog posts on social media, information from interviewees' LinkedIn profiles, government web pages, videos, blog posts on government media, strategic documentation, internal working documents, and presentations. Table 5 provides an overview.

Insert Table 5 about here

Data Analysis

We fully transcribed the interviews and checked them for accuracy by re-listening to the audio recordings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We coded the interview transcripts and complementary material following the conventions of grounded theory (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Strauss & Corbin, 1997). Thereby, we discerned first-order concepts through an inductive process in which we continuously compared and contrasted the interview findings and complementary data sources (Charmaz, 2006). By integrating and grouping the emergent codes, we identified more abstract second-order themes that we classified along the dimensions

of benefits and burdens to the use of Open Opps. This coding structure is reflected in our

organizing figure (see Figure 1), which helped us in structuring our thinking (see Pratt, 2009).

Insert Figure 1 about here

THE BENEFITS OF CRAFTING THROUGH OPEN OPPORTUNITIES

By and large, we identified three benefits that crafting in Open Opps provided: (1)

exploring new skills; (2) establishing new professional ties; and (3) claiming new professional

identities unavailable in people's regular jobs. First, Open Opps enabled interviewees to step

out of their routine and explore new skills unavailable to them in their regular jobs. For

instance, interviewee #27 explained how working on Open Opps assignments outside of her

job enabled her to stretch her expertise by experimenting with artificial intelligence and data

analysis for matching patients to clinical trials; experience inaccessible to her in her job as an

analyst in the U.S. Navy:

> It's very different than what I do day-to-day. Right now, I feel the need to add something
>
> to my daily work; to give me another reason to go to work, to broaden my perspective and
>
> my experience. (#27)

Interviewees mentioned how taking on Open Opps assignments outside of their jobs enabled

them to trial new skills areas that were previously unavailable to them. For example,

interviewee #23, a full-time communications specialist, explained how Open Opps had enabled

her to gain experience with user experience design, an interest that she was unable to pursue in

her job. As she described, her Open Opps assignments:

> honed my skillset in the field of design thinking and truly thinking about user experience
>
> and customer experience. I don't do design work, but with this project I did. It was very
>
> interesting working through color theory and space to think about how design is tied into

the thought processes and the subconscious nature of how people think and how people perceive things. It gave me that fresh change. (#23)

Similarly, interviewee #28, a procurement analyst, explained how she used Open Opps to expose herself to different work experiences and challenges, including assignments on strategic communication and workforce development. As she described, taking on assignments outside of her job pushed her to:

regularly put myself outside my comfort level to make sure that I don't get comfortable, unwilling to do things. I do that so that I can maintain resiliency and adaptability. But I also do that because it helps broaden my knowledge. That's how I stretch myself: I learn, I explore. To me, Open Opps provides an opportunity to participate in things without being shut down by the standard status quo; the culture of "No." (#28)

Second, Open Opps allowed interviewees to establish new professional contacts across government, outside of the day-to-day work environment. Interviewee #25, for example, explained this benefit:

[Open Opps] has been really helpful for me in my growth with my career because now [that I am] getting into management, it's more important who you know, and the opinion people have of you. The experience I got through Open Opps in meeting different managers, working with different agencies, gave me a taste of that. (#25)

The ties that people built through Open Opps were not limited to such career-related networking. We observed how interviewees assimilated into new workplace communities: virtual communities of peers that further enabled people to step outside of their routine and experiment with new types of work. For example, interviewee #23 explained:

All these incredibly talented people that were on these projects that I worked on; they challenged me; they helped me grow. It's safe experimentation, a great way of dipping your

toe in the water on something else to make sure that you're continuously improving

[yourself]. (#23)

Interviewee #16, a public affairs specialist, added:

The team I have for the user experience [assignment], we found our tribe, we found like-

minded people…Right now, that's where I have to be; it gives me an outlet to be creative

and to be able to push [into user experience design] and have some successes that I may

not have in my regular job. (#16)

Third, interviewees further described how their learning and networking enabled them to claim

new identities unavailable to them in their regular jobs. For instance, interviewee #33, a senior

advisor, explained how taking on Open Opps assignments enabled her to take on the identity

of an internal innovation consultant, for which she did not have the leeway in her daily job:

I am bored [in my job]. I am currently a senior advisor, and I'd like to position myself in a

way that I can do more internal [innovation] consultancy types of work…I am utilizing

Open Opps to identify developmental opportunities to build my acumen in human-centered

design, in assessment, and change management because I am constantly called upon for

problem-solving special assignments. (#33)

Similarly, interviewee #3, a content strategist and plain language writer, explained how taking

on Open Opps assignments had enabled her to become a part-time "user experience researcher"

and how this made her feel:

The biggest thing [of taking on Open Opps assignments] is your opportunity to stretch

yourself. [Being a part-time user experience researcher] is refreshing, [it] refuels you. It's

nice to move in with something, get something done. That quick camaraderie. To grow

your own skills… Working with other people, whose titles are user experience researcher,

user experience designer, that has been great. I feel like now I chat with people about stuff

related to these topics. (#3)

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We further observed how interviewees bundled their Open Opps experiences into self-reflective and broadly formulated identity badges (Grant, Berg, & Cable, 2014), and displayed these in their Open Opps and social media profiles. Examples are the identity badges of "innovator" (#16 & 33), "problem solver" (#2, 3, & 33), "leader" (#8, 14, 22, 25, & 32), or "change agent" (#5, 6, 7, 8, 9, & 23). Interviewee #13, for instance, explained how such a broader identity badge complemented his fixed-job identity:

> I'm a leader as well as a collaborator in terms of seeking solutions for my customers. My current job does not fully align with this description. I don't have that leadership ability right now. But the nice thing is I can then go to Open Opps. I'm an Open Opps project creator, and I was able to lead through those tasks and get that accomplishment. It gives me a well-rounded aspect of how I view myself [as a] professional. I'm a leader and collaborator. (#13)

Notably, these identity badges show that people's new identities were not unstructured and not disconnected from their organization. By bundling their various experiments therein, people found a way to structure their learning and experimentation and ground it in the broader purpose of innovating organizational practices and services. As Interviewee #7 further explained:

> I want to be a change agent, and I also want to meet and interact with people from across government so I can learn from them… [I participate in Open Opps to] learn and to become the change [I] wish to see in the world. (#7)

THE BURDENS OF CRAFTING THROUGH OPEN OPPORTUNITIES

While Open Opps provides federal employees with the opportunity to craft around the restrictions of their jobs, we discovered that there is a considerable burden associated with doing so. In contrast to crafting within a job, which often remains unnoticed by supervisors (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), taking on Open Opps assignments creates higher visibility.

This visibility, in turn, can generate more substantial supervisory pressures resisting this type of job crafting. We saw these pressures play out in three different ways: (1) difficulty to gain support for participating in Open Opps; (2) an unsupportive work environment with conflicting responsibilities during participation; and (3) resistance against individual identity claims after participating.

First, as supervisors may not understand or appreciate individuals' motives for taking on additional assignments or fear repercussions from letting their subordinates do so, gaining support to take on Open Opps assignments can be challenging. Interviewees indicated that managers across the federal government had shown "a lot of resistance at first" (#8) to letting employees partake in Open Opps. Budgetary restrictions put extra pressure on supervisors to hold on tightly to their resources, and salaries remain the exclusive responsibility of the department in which people hold their full-time jobs. These factors, in turn, made supervisors wary of initiatives like Open Opps. As interviewee #15 remarked: "Having a staff member do work for another supervisor and not have it be reimbursed is pushing the boundaries there." Interviewee #2 added: "Where you run into issues is where you've got supervisors that are very controlling or micromanaging, and they don't want their employees to be doing something different than what they tell them to do." Moreover, interviewee #3 explained that "people who are good at their jobs" have more trouble getting approval to do an Open Opps opportunity because their bosses value their time too much. She explained: "[N]obody wants you to leave because you have so much work" (#3).

As a result, several interviewees felt deprived of the opportunity to develop themselves through Open Opps and expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo of their jobs. For instance, interviewee #32 had asked permission to participate in Open Opps but did not get it because "this was a new program" of which managers in her agency were wary. She expressed her frustration:

> If anything, [managers in my agency] would prefer you to be a robot. They just want you to do what they say and get it finished. They don't care about what's the best way to do it. And they don't expand [i.e., develop] their employees…You're not supposed to say, "Hey, everyone's crashing into the ground. This doesn't make sense." [Questioning this] made me [look] inquisitive. [It] does not align with my agency's culture. (#32)

As the above example illustrates, the denial of people's requests to participate in Open Opps may involve an image cost and may cause people to experience increased frustration and strain in their full-time roles (Goode, 1960; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Interviewee #28 further described these adverse outcomes:

> I have conflicting worlds of wanting to help, wanting to be innovative, be a trendsetter, to do all these things, but [I am] not welcomed for that. I don't know if there's [another way] to describe that, other than banging your head on a wall. (#28)

Second, many an interviewee who managed to gain approval for participating in Open Opps suffered from a lack of understanding and deteriorating work relations with their direct peers and supervisors, with whom they continued to interact daily in their regular job. Interviewee #25, for example, described how she had experienced such an unsupportive work environment:

> People in my physical office all think I'm crazy for doing [assignments outside of my job]. A lot of people cannot wrap their minds around doing something for free. The fact that this is all on your own time; they're like, why? They just don't get it at all. (#25)

As a result of this lack of support and the conflicting responsibilities that come with taking on different roles outside of their jobs, interviewees occasionally suffered from heightened stress and felt over-burdened. As interviewee #20 confessed: "Sometimes, [I feel] very over-burdened and have a heavy workload. So then I just don't have the bandwidth [to participate in Open Opps]." Interviewees also expressed difficulty with juggling multiple time schedules

and competing priorities in an unsupportive work environment, which interviewee #15

described as participating in:

> whack-a-mole, which is this game where you hit the moles as they pop up, meets American
>
> Ninja Warrior, which is this TV show where people do crazy things on some course where
>
> they're running across and trying to make it to the other side. (#15)

Third, even when overcoming these challenges, interviewees did not always succeed in

transferring their new identities to their regular jobs. For example, after her Open Opps

experience, interviewee #33 had requested to become a full-time "internal [innovation]

consultant" within her department, which would allow her to "continue doing the type of work

that [she] did on Open Opps." However, she explained that the conversation with her

supervisor:

> didn't turn out well because of the lack of buy-in. I'm disappointed because I think that
>
> there is a need, but there doesn't appear to be support for that...and so I'm really stuck.
>
> (#33)

As such, the continued resistance against individual claims of purpose and identity often led to

an ongoing sense of feeling stuck (Allen et al., 2016; Stengård et al., 2016; Verbruggen & De

Vos, 2019). Most interviewees in such conditions continued to reside in the status quo of their

jobs while waiting for a suitable internal position to which they could apply. Yet some

interviewees also resigned from the government during the observational period (#7) or

explicitly expressed their intention to leave soon (#32 & 33).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Stretching one's competencies and sense of identity is difficult in rigid and controlled jobs

(Petrou, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2016; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Zhang & Parker, 2018).

In this paper, we explored how employees craft their way around these restrictions through

temporary assignments in their broader organization. We studied this way of crafting in the

context of Open Opps, a digital market for temporary assignments in the U.S. federal government.

While we expected Open Opps to help people with changing the physical and cognitive boundaries of their existing jobs (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), we also discovered a deeper cognitive aspect unique to crafting beyond a job. We found how taking on temporary assignments allowed employees to craft a liminal space (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2016) in their broader organization wherein they explored identities unavailable in their regular jobs. Examples are interviewees who became a part-time team lead or user experience designer within Open Opps. These are identities that aligned with employees' interests and goals, but that were unavailable in their full-time jobs. Employees further enacted broad identity badges (Grant et al., 2014) such as "innovator" or "problem solver" that bundled their identity trials and linked their learning and experimentation to the broader purpose of innovating organizational practices and services. By explaining how employees trial alternative identities through temporary assignments in their broader organization, we go beyond existing research that has studied such identity crafting outside the workplace (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), such as through leisure activities (Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010), volunteering (Rodell, 2013), side-jobs (Campion et al., 2020; Caza et al., 2018; Ibarra, 2003; Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007; Sessions et al., 2020), or a sabbatical leave (Gaziel, 1995).

Moreover, in contrast to crafting new identities outside the workplace, we argue that doing so within the confines of the organization may be an equally or perhaps even more effective way to stretch oneself at work. This argument builds on our observation that people's identity trials within Open Opps also enable them to learn the ins-and-outs of their organizations, establish new professional ties in other departments, and assimilate into new workplace communities. These behavioral tactics, in turn, allow people to more readily enact their new identities in their broader organization. By explaining how such new behaviors provide people

access to work identities otherwise unavailable, we thus add to a nascent stream on new forms of behavioral and identity crafting that literature has not considered before (see Zhang & Parker, 2018).

In doing so, we also contribute to other literature beyond job crafting and professional identity development. First, we contribute to research on proactivity, which has typically focused on how employees can exhibit proactivity within their current job (for example, by seeking feedback on their performance or by taking initiative; see Parker & Collins, 2010). By showing that our interviewees reinvented themselves by taking on roles outside of their current role, we highlight that employees' proactive efforts are not necessarily limited to their current role. Even though the proactivity literature recognizes that employees also exhibit proactivity towards their broader organization and even externally (Grant & Ashford, 2008), empirical research has predominantly focused on proactivity within the job. To our knowledge, our study is one of the first to explicitly examine employees' proactive efforts outside of their current roles.

Second, we also contribute to the literature on alternative work arrangements. As employees took on temporary assignments in their broader organization, many experienced greater autonomy, flexibility, and control over their careers—in analogy to the experiences of gig workers (Caza, Ashford, Reid, & McCallum, 2019). While the research community has typically treated gig work as a separate entity from regular work (Ashford et al., 2018; Cappelli & Keller, 2013; Duggan, Sherman, Carbery, & McDonnell, 2019; Kuhn & Maleki, 2017; Spreitzer, Cameron, & Garrett, 2017), we challenge this assumption. Instead, we show how gig work can align closely with traditional work and can enter even the most traditional of organizations. As employees engaged in gig labeled activities in Open Opps, they did not have to forego the protection of their organization, such as the assurance of a stable line of work and a reliable wage and pension (Caza et al., 2019; Petriglieri, Ashford, & Wrzesniewski, 2019).

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At the same time, they experienced benefits typically attributed to gig work, such as the autonomy and flexibility to craft connections to new routines, people, places, and purposeful identities (Ashford et al., 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2019).

The simulation of such alternative work arrangements inside organizations further yields significant consequences for the balance of autonomy and control in the workplace (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016). While markets like Open Opps provide greater autonomy over one's career and professional development, we also discovered that bureaucratic tensions might arise that limit this autonomy. In particular, we identified the potentially negative influence of supervisors as a restraining mechanism to the practice of crafting in markets like Open Opps and the cultivation of new competencies and identities at work. In contrast to crafting on-the-job, which mostly happens "out of the limelight of management's gaze" (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001: 184), crafting in markets like Open Opps is more visible and requires employees to obtain a license to craft. Negotiating this license with supervisors, we theorize, may come with an image cost (Ashford & Northcraft, 1992). For example, we showed how interviewees faced increased pushback when signaling that they want to take on work beyond their regular role and work unit. Even upon getting the green light to participate in Open Opps, many people suffered from a lack of understanding and deteriorating work relations with their direct peers and supervisors. These difficulties further reinforced feelings of frustration, stress, and strain in their full-time roles and functioned as an ongoing source of conflict with individual supervisors.

While our focus has been on the side of the individual employee, it becomes clear that ceding control through employees' activity in Open Opps also causes tension and stress for supervisors, who may find themselves caught between two fires. On the one hand, the lack of a clear top-down mandate may make individual supervisors wary of such new markets as they fear sanctions for letting their employees participate therein. On the other hand, employees'

cries for autonomy may grow louder as they feel supported by emerging initiatives like Open

Opps. As we have shown, denying such needs may undermine employees' work satisfaction

and may result in people quitting their jobs. Supervisors thus face the difficult task of balancing

the tensions between autonomy and control (Langfred & Rockmann, 2016), exposed by new

markets of work like Open Opps. Several open questions thus remain, which we discuss in our

future research section.

Practical Implications

Companies can learn lessons from Open Opps by creating similar markets of work. Such

markets hold potential to bring the ideas of gig work (Ashford et al., 2018; Cappelli & Keller,

2013; Duggan et al., 2020; Kuhn & Maleki, 2017; Spreitzer et al., 2017) into even the most

traditional of companies, which yields several implications for employees, supervisors, and

organizations. First, for individual employees, our findings indicate that crafting in markets

like Open Opps may be a worthwhile alternative to crafting on the job. By taking on temporary

assignments in the broader organization, we find that employees may effectively craft a safe

zone to experiment with alternative competencies and identities, and as such, escape the status

quo of their jobs. However, individual employees need to leverage the benefits of this way of

crafting and reduce the image cost thereof. For example, proactively building a positive

impression around their plans to work beyond their jobs could help employees in selling the

idea to their supervisors and in keeping continued support throughout their work.

Second, while supervisors may experience pressures to hold on to the status quo, they may

also create added value by temporarily bringing in new people and by encouraging employees

to take on assignments in other parts of the organization. For example, several interviewees

explained how Open Opps had allowed them to bring new ideas and practices to their

organization, and to build lasting connections with other departments that benefitted their daily

work. In addition to these benefits, supervisors may also take new markets like Open Opps as

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an opportunity to brush up their image and reputation, and to reprofile themselves as employee-centric leaders within their respective organizations. Therefore, we urge supervisors to keep an open mind as phenomena like Open Opps are entering the workplace and soothe their accompanying tensions by becoming advocates for such innovations.

Third, business leaders should realize that employees' crafting through temporary assignments yields clear benefits beyond the interests of the individual. These benefits include spillover effects from individual skill development and cross-boundary collaboration, such as collective learning (Shrivastava, 1983) and innovation in the workplace (Edmondson & Harvey, 2017). Our findings further indicate that realizing these benefits is no longer up to the individual employee, contrary to the assumptions in conventional approaches to job crafting (see Lazazzara, Tims & De Gennaro, 2020; Zhang & Parker, 2018). Instead, with new digital markets of work available, organizations can design organizational structures that aid employees in their crafting efforts. Therein, we urge business leaders to monitor human dynamics closely and intervene when necessary. For example, rather than leaving the decision about employees' participation up to individual supervisors, business leaders should provide a clear mandate that not only establishes that employees' participation in these new markets of work is acceptable, but that also makes it desirable.

Future Research Directions

While the findings of this article are bound to the specific sample and context of our study (Dyer, Wilkins, & Eisenhardt, 1991; Piekkari & Welch, 2018), they can be a useful frame for future studies. For instance, similar to Sessions et al. (2020) who studied paid side-hustles, future studies could ask: How does crafting through temporary assignments within the organization relate to psychological empowerment? And how does it relate to full-time work performance? Answering these questions would provide insight into the source of this

empowerment and how and why taking on temporary assignments influences affective and cognitive experiences during full-time work.

Moreover, while many of our interviewees felt empowered by their crafting in Open Opps, we also found that pushback from supervisors and the bureaucracy made them feel overly controlled, in turn triggering frustration, stress, and strain in their full-time jobs. Therefore, besides the positive impact of crafting through temporary assignments inside the organization, future research should study whether and how it may also reduce psychological empowerment and full-time work performance. As our findings suggest, the potential negative influence of supervisors is an important mechanism that requires future research. While our focus has been on the side of the individual employee, scholars may also conduct complimentary interview studies of supervisors to understand better the tensions they experience.

We also call for future studies to assess further the individual outcomes and antecedents of crafting through temporary assignments. For instance, future studies could build on our findings by quantitatively testing whether crafting beyond the job is an equally or perhaps even more effective way to explore new competencies and identities than on-the-job crafting. Thereby, scholars should also assess whether employee groups with different degrees of proactivity (Parker & Collins, 2010), work orientation (Mitchell, Ortiz, & Mitchell, 1987), and job performance (Iaffaldano & Muchinsky, 1985; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001) experience the outcomes of this way of crafting differently. For instance, scholars have found that proactive employees are only appreciated when they have a history of being a high performer (De Stobbeleir, Ashford, & de Luque, 2010). Extrapolated to Open Opps, the image of top performers might benefit from crafting through temporary assignments, while the image of average performers might suffer. As individuals and organizations may be unaware of such differing image costs and benefits, these dynamics are an important area for future research.

Moreover, as we opted for an individual-centered perspective, our research does not allow us to make claims on the level of the organization. However, as more employees use Open Opps to craft around the restrictions of their jobs, and as organizations adopt similar digital infrastructures that stimulate such behavior, we call for future studies to take an organizational view to this way of crafting. Such a perspective would assess its outcomes beyond the individual level. For instance, future studies may apply methods such as organizational network analysis (Cross, Rebele, & Grant, 2016) to map the new career and collaboration flows that stem from this new phenomenon, and their outcomes on the level of the organization. For example, one such outcome is the creation of Digital.gov, a government-wide community that aims "to transform how government learns, builds, delivers, and measures digital services in the 21st century" (Digital.gov, 2020). It does so by providing "people in the federal government with the tools, methods, practices, and policy guidance they need to deliver effective and accessible digital services." Through Open Opps assignments, Digital.gov mobilized hundreds of federal employees on topics such as storytelling, virtual collaboration, and data science. These people then contributed to building the site's resources, allowing it to become the go-to place for digital transformation resources and training in the U.S. federal government. Therefore, a promising line of inquiry awaits on the organizational consequences of employees' activity in markets like Open Opps. Such research would provide us with a better understanding of both the benefits and burdens of the emerging phenomena that herald the future of work.

TABLES AND FIGURES

TABLE 1

Top 10 assignment themes on Open Opportunities

Assignment themes	Theme occurrence in assignment postings (in absolute figures) [a, b]
1. User experience / interface design	71
2. Research and qualitative analysis	64
3. Digital / social media communication	64
4. Coding / web development	61
5. Data analysis and visualization	60
6. Writing and editing	55
7. Digital application testing	45
8. Training and facilitation	45
9. Graphic design	40
10. Contracting	35

[a] Excluding agency-internal assignments

[b] Date of record: January 1, 2020

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TABLE 2

Sample demographics of Open Opportunities users

Metrics	Percentage of total users [a]
Professional orientation	
Program and project management	16%
Media and communication	14%
Information technology	13%
Research	9%
Community and social services	6%
Arts and design	6%
Miscellaneous (< 5% of total users per category)	36%
Seniority	
Mid-level position	56%
Entry-level position	25%
Top-level supervisory position	14%
Unknown	5%

[a] Based on a 2014 census of Open Opps users

TABLE 3

Program-wide summary statistics for Open Opportunities

Metric	Count (in absolute figures) [a, b]
Current number of open assignments	63
Current number of assignments in progress	32
Total assignments posted	730
Total assignments completed [c]	473
Total assignments canceled	139
Total individual applications submitted	2926
Total candidates accepted [c]	1456
Total individual assignment engagements completed [c]	1168
Discussion posts	546

[a] Excluding agency-internal assignments
[b] Date of record: January 1, 2020
[c] Note: Some assignments recruit multiple participants

TABLE 4
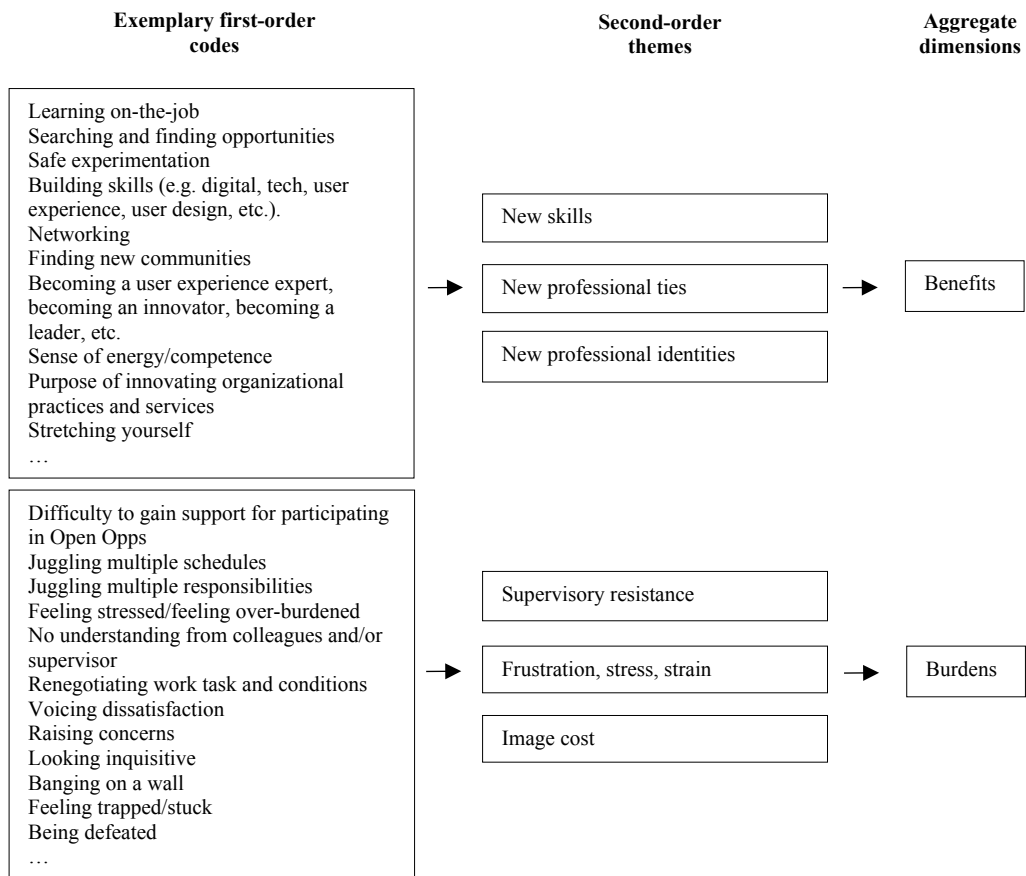**Interview data and subject characteristics**

Subject ID	Subject Type	# of inter-views	Interview duration (in mins)	Age	Education level	# of years employed as a federal employee	# of positions as a federal employee	Job change after Open Opps?
1	User, program manager & founder	6	295	63	Master	39	7	Yes
2	User	2	77	37	Master	9	5	No
3	User	1	33	41	Master	18	5	No
4	User, former program designer	2	108	51	Bachelor	3	2	No
5	User	1	34	/	Bachelor	20	7	Yes
6	User, former program manager	1	49	45	Master	15	5	No
7	User	1	54	37	Bachelor	3	2	Yes (resigned)
8	User	2	73	40	Master	15	4	Yes
9	User	3	140	42	PhD	14	5	No
10	User	1	28	38	Bachelor	5	1	No
11	User	1	35	56	Master	21	3	Yes
12	User, program manager	1	39	38	Master	15	4	No
13	User	2	112	43	Master	12	6	No
14	User	2	68	37	Master	15	4	No
15	User	1	59	33	Master	9	4	No
16	User	3	114	51	Master	15	5	Yes
17	User, co-founder	2	92	55	Bachelor	15	5	No
18	User	2	86	37	Bachelor	15	7	No
19	User	1	48	48	Master	12	8	No
20	User	2	76	44	Master	12	4	No
21	User	2	104	50	Master	22	5	Yes
22	User	1	45	36	Master	10	1	Yes
23	User	1	24	40	Master	14	8	Yes
24	User	1	24	35	Master	13	7	No
25	User	2	54	31	Bachelor	5	2	Yes
26	User	1	38	35	Master	1	1	No
27	User	1	26	/	MBA	9	1	No
28	User	1	47	44	Master	16	12	No
29	User	1	27	52	MBA	10	1	No
30	User	1	26	41	Secondary education	7	4	Yes
31	User	1	43	48	MBA	13	3	Yes
32	User	2	31	35	Master	18	8	No
33	User	2	68	/	Master	15	3	No
Total		**54**	**2177**					

TABLE 5

Complementary data sources

Observation type	Description
Platform data	4781 user profiles; approx. 730 completed assignments; 95 open or ongoing assignments (Date of record: January 1, 2020; not including agency-internal opportunities)
Newsletters	254 weekly newsletters
GitHub	39 wiki pages; 5184 commits; 16 branches; 208 releases; 57 contributors; 222 issues
Social media	18 articles on GovLoop; information from LinkedIn profiles
Official web pages	26 official web pages
Videos	14 videos (total recording minutes: 69)
Blog posts	11 blog posts
Other	Strategic documentation (9); internal working documents (7); interview transcripts (3); pitch deck (1)

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FIGURE 1

DATA STRUCTURE

Exemplary first-order codes	**Second-order themes**	**Aggregate dimensions**

Learning on-the-job
Searching and finding opportunities
Safe experimentation
Building skills (e.g. digital, tech, user experience, user design, etc.).
Networking
Finding new communities
Becoming a user experience expert, becoming an innovator, becoming a leader, etc.
Sense of energy/competence
Purpose of innovating organizational practices and services
Stretching yourself
…

New skills

New professional ties → Benefits

New professional identities

Difficulty to gain support for participating in Open Opps
Juggling multiple schedules
Juggling multiple responsibilities
Feeling stressed/feeling over-burdened
No understanding from colleagues and/or supervisor
Renegotiating work task and conditions
Voicing dissatisfaction
Raising concerns
Looking inquisitive
Banging on a wall
Feeling trapped/stuck
Being defeated
…

Supervisory resistance

Frustration, stress, strain → Burdens

Image cost

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APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Original questions asked of early interviewees (and later all interviewees):

- Tell me about your work. What is your role? What work do you do?
- Can you tell me about your career trajectory up to participating in Open Opps?
- What drove you to participate in Open Opps?
- Which projects did you want, and why?
- When did you start using Open Opps?
  - In how many projects did you participate?
  - On what type of projects did you work?
- What does your workday/week/month look like? Have your daily work practices changed since you started using Open Opps?
- How do you feel about participating in Open Opps so far? Can you describe the good side, the bad side, any difficulties you have experienced? Can you explain how you dealt with those experiences?

In a second interview round, we asked about people's use of the Open Opps program and their interaction with the platform. We expanded our interview sample and went back to the original interviewees, to ask:

- What does the Open Opps platform enable you to do?
  - Exemplary sub-questions:
    - What did the profiling features enable you to do?
    - What did the search features enable you to do?
- Where there things Open Opps enabled you to do that you couldn't do before?
- Were there things you expected to be able to do that didn't work out?
- How have you heard about Open Opps?
- How does your organization think about Open Opps?
- How did your supervisor feel about your participation in Open Opps?
- Do you interact with colleagues in Open Opps? Can you describe your experience?
- Did you look at alternatives to using Open Opps?

As earlier interviews uncovered that federal employees used Open Opps as a new mechanism to stretch their competencies and identites, we added additional questions on how they did so in a third interview round. We expanded our interviewee sample and went back to earlier interviewees to ask:

- How would you describe yourself? To help guide your answer, please think as follows: I am a_____. For me, this means _____.
- Which roles have you taken on in Open Opps?
- How do your Open Opps roles relate to your self-description?
- Did you expect Open Opps to impact your job/career?
- How do you see Open Opps in your job/career? Please describe your experience.
- How have you experienced working on projects in parallel to your regular job?
- Do you often work with the same people, with different people, or alone in Open Opps?
- If you had to use a metaphor to describe your career, what would it be? Why that metaphor? And how do you see Open Opps therein? To help guide your answer, please think as follows: Currently, my career is like a _____ because _____

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