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Accumulative Job Demands and Support for Strength Use: Fine-Tuning the Job Demands-Resources Model Using Conservation of Resources Theory

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Abstract
Absenteeism associated with accumulated job demands is a ubiquitous problem. We build on prior research on the benefits of counteracting job demands with resources by focusing on a still untapped resource for buffering job demands—that of strengths use. We test the idea that employees who are actively encouraged to utilize their personal strengths on the job are better positioned to cope with job demands. Based on conservation of resources (COR) theory, we hypothesized that job demands can accumulate and together have an exacerbating effect on company registered absenteeism. In addition, using job demands-resources theory, we hypothesized that perceived organizational support for strengths use can buffer the impact of separate and combined job demands (workload and emotional demands) on absenteeism. Our sample consisted of 832 employees from 96 departments (response rate = 40.3%) of a Dutch mental health care organization. Results of multilevel analyses indicated that high levels of workload strengthen the positive relationship between emotional demands and absenteeism and that support for strength use interacted with workload and emotional job demands in the predicted way. Moreover, workload, emotional job demands, and strengths use interacted to predict absenteeism. Strengths use support reduced the level of absenteeism of employees who experienced both high workload and high emotional demands. We conclude that providing strengths use support to employees offers organizations a tool to reduce absenteeism, even when it is difficult to redesign job demands.

Keywords
strengths use support, JD-R model, job demands, job resources, absenteeism

Disciplines
Training and Development

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RESEARCH REPORT

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Absenteeism associated with accumulated job demands is a ubiquitous problem. We build on prior research on the benefits of counteracting job demands with resources by focusing on a still untapped resource for buffering job demands—that of strengths use. We test the idea that employees who are actively encouraged to utilize their personal strengths on the job are better positioned to cope with job demands. Based on conservation of resources (COR) theory, we hypothesized that job demands can accumulate and together have an exacerbating effect on company registered absenteeism. In addition, using job demands-resources theory, we hypothesized that perceived organizational support for strengths use can buffer the impact of separate and combined job demands (workload and emotional demands) on absenteeism. Our sample consisted of 832 employees from 96 departments (response rate = 40.3%) of a Dutch mental health care organization. Results of multilevel analyses indicated that high levels of workload strengthen the positive relationship between emotional demands and absenteeism and that support for strength use interacted with workload and emotional job demands in the predicted way. Moreover, workload, emotional job demands, and strengths use interacted to predict absenteeism. Strengths use support reduced the level of absenteeism of employees who experienced both high workload and high emotional demands. We conclude that providing strengths use support to employees offers organizations a tool to reduce absenteeism, even when it is difficult to redesign job demands.

Keywords: strengths use support, JD-R model, job demands, job resources, absenteeism

Employee absenteeism is a major problem that costs U.S. organizations more than $48 billion in lost

employee productivity each year (Davis, Collins, Doty, Ho, & Holmgren, 2005). According to the job

demands-resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001), much of

absenteeism can be explained by an overload of job demands—the physical, psychological, social, or

organizational aspects of the job requiring constant physical and psychological effort—that exhaust

employees' cognitive and physical resources and therefore cause health problems (Bakker, Demerouti,

de Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003; Michie & Williams, 2003; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009). Although

one might expect that employees may suffer from greater strain when exposed to a combination of

different types of job demands, this has surprisingly not yet been examined. Conservation of resources

(COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001) suggests that the loss of energetic resources that is caused by dealing with

one job demand may lessen one's ability to cope with another job demand, thereby leading to a loss

spiral. This means that employees who experience high job demands in one domain may deplete their

resources while trying to cope with these demands, thereby making them less effective at coping with

another job demand.

      According to the JD-R model, it is important to examine the negative impact of job demands

within the context of existing job resources—the physical, psychological, social, or organizational

aspects of the job that facilitate the achievement of work goals and stimulate personal growth, learning,

and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007)—which can help to counteract the strain associated with

job demands (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Although the buffering

of job resources has been found in a number of studies, the support for this effect is not overwhelming

(Bakker et al., 2005; Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, &

Xanthopoulou, 2007; De Lange, Taris, Kompier, Houtman, & Bongers, 2003; Hakanen, Bakker, &

Demerouti, 2005). This may be because some job resources, especially those that focus on improving

employees' deficits such as through targeted social support (Fenlason & Beehr, 1994; Halbesleben,

2006), performance feedback (Venables & Fairclough, 2009), and employee training (Luthans, 2002),

may not offer coping mechanisms that are consistently effective across work situations. Thus, research

on alternative forms of job resources that may offer more consistent relief for employees faced with a

multitude of job demands is sorely needed.

The first aim of this study is to introduce a new job resource that we expect to be well suited for

facilitating enduring, intrinsic motivation that will weaken the positive relationship between job

demands and absenteeism: perceived organizational support for strengths use, or employees' beliefs

concerning the extent to which their employer actively supports them in applying their personal

strengths at work (Keenan & Mostert, 2013; van Woerkom, Els, Mostert, Rothmann, & Bakker, 2013).

Strengths use support differs from skill utilization (Leiter, 1990) in that it does not refer to the

application of acquired skills, but to the use of personal strengths that are energizing to the user (Linley

& Harrington, 2006) and allow people to perform at their personal best (Wood et al., 2011). Although

strengths are trait-like (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), how strengths are used is dependent upon context,

values, interests and other strengths (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011). This implies that an

individual's ability to apply a particular strength depends on whether the context allows for it.

Past research shows that strengths use leads to reduced stress, greater self-esteem, and higher

levels of well-being (Wood et al., 2011), and to higher levels of work engagement and well-being at work

(Harzer & Ruch, 2012a, 2012b; Keenan & Mostert, 2013; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015). However, it is

still unknown how strengths use support is related to absenteeism and whether it is powerful enough to

weaken the relationship between combined job demands and absenteeism. A second aim of this study is

therefore to investigate to what extent strengths use support may act as a job resource that mitigates

the relationship between absenteeism and (the combination of) workload and emotional demands.

This article makes three main contributions. First, we extend research on the JD-R model by drawing on COR theory to propose that a combination of job demands may be positively related to absenteeism. Although previous studies have addressed the main effects of various job demands on health-related outcomes and the interaction between job demands and resources, the interactive relationship between different types of job demands and health has, to our knowledge, never been studied. Second, we introduce strengths use support to the JD-R literature as a job resource that may offer more enduring benefits for employees. Earlier studies have provided some, but not overwhelming support for the buffering effect of job resources. Strengths use support might represent a new job resource that is better suited for diminishing the relationship between job demands and absenteeism by boosting feelings of self-esteem and authenticity. Third, we build on nascent research on strengths use. While previous studies have investigated the relationship of having strengths with well-being, few authors have studied the consequences of strengths use support in the context of work.

Theory and Hypotheses

Accumulating Job Demands and Absenteeism: COR Theory

The idea that job demands like workload, work pressure, and emotional demands are associated with negative outcomes such as absenteeism is well established (De Lange et al., 2003). Job demands can be of a quantitative nature (e.g., workload, referring to how much work there is to be done in given amount of time; van Veldhoven, De Jonge, Broersen, Kompier, & Meijman, 2002), or of a qualitative nature (e.g., emotional demands, referring to emotionally challenging situations, events, or circumstances at work; van Veldhoven et al., 2002). The prevalence of specific types of job demands depends on the occupational context (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). To date, the norm in JD-R research

has been to investigate the independent effects of various job demands on health-related outcomes,

and/or the interaction between a specific job demand and some job resource. The notion that different

types of job demands might interact with each other in ways that lead to more severe health

impairment has, to our knowledge, never been studied. We see this as a significant oversight, because

COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) suggests that the energetic resource losses that result from high demands in

one aspect of the job may lead to a weakening of resource reserves for confronting another type of job

demand, thereby triggering a loss spiral. According to COR theory, people strive to build, protect, and

retain the personal characteristics, conditions, and energies that enable them to cope with job

demands. When individuals are unable to do so in the face of significant job demands, the depletion of

their resources can lead to stress or emotional exhaustion (Hobfoll, 1989). To protect their psychological

and physical well-being, individuals are thought to turn to other resources that serve as indispensable

elements of their "stress resistance armamentarium" (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 312). Some of these resources

are finite in their availability (e.g., time and physical or cognitive energy; Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker,

2012); when they are utilized to cope with one job demand, individuals may be left with fewer resource

reserves to cope with another type of job demand, thereby exacerbating strain outcomes (Wright &

Cropanzano, 1998), which may cause absenteeism. Indeed, psychophysiological research has shown that

coping with one stressor requires effort that produces fatigue and depletes resources to deal effectively

with additional sources of stress (Cohen, Stokols, Evans, & Krantz, 1986), as seen in physiological

symptoms such as higher blood pressure (Evans, Allen, Tafalla, & O'Meara, 1996) higher levels of

cortisol, adrenaline and noradrenaline (McEwen & Lasley, 2003), and cardiovascular reactivity (Pardine

& Napoli, 1983). These symptoms are all suggestive of poorer health, and contribute to immune

response suppression (McEwen & Lasley, 2003) and changes in health-related behaviors (Cohen & Wills,

1985) and therefore to a greater risk of sickness absenteeism. To illustrate the loss spiral, imagine a

socio-therapist who uses her time and energy to deal with a conflict among the clients of her ward,

leading to stress and exhaustion. Her loss of resources will lead to even more stress if she

simultaneously faces a deadline to hand in a report while her energetic resources are already exhausted.

The idea that the concurrent accumulation of demands increases the chances that a specific

stressor will lead to negative outcomes is well established in the broader stress literature outside the

work domain (Lavee, McCubbin, & Olson, 1987). In a similar vein, accumulated job demands might

increase the likelihood that a particular demand will lead to strain. Because emotional demands and a

high workload have been identified as major sources of stress in the mental health care sector (Dunn &

Ritter, 1995; Edwards, Burnard, Coyle, Fothergill, & Hannigan, 2000; Mann & Cowburn, 2005), this

reasoning implies that health care workers who are simultaneously confronted with both of these high

job demands will be more likely to deplete their energetic resources, causing more strain and health

problems, as manifested in a greater tendency to call in sick (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). The fact that

the interactive negative effect of concurrent job demands on strain outcomes has not been examined

implies an underlying assumption that job demands are simply additive in their effects; however, we

hypothesize that there is an exacerbation effect such that the simultaneous experience of multiple job

demands is worse than a simple additive effect:

Hypothesis 1: High levels of workload will strengthen the positive relationship between

emotional demands and absenteeism.

The Buffering Role of Strengths Use Support: Expanding JD-R Theory

Much of human resource management is focused on identifying and resolving employee deficits

by providing training, feedback, and coaching (Buckingham, 2005; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

Although this may help employees to improve their performance, positive psychology scholars

emphasize a more balanced approach: focusing not only on trying to correct weaknesses but also on

building people's strengths (Luthans & Youssef, 2007). When organizations actively help employees to

understand that they bring unique talents and strengths to bear on their work, and that the organization

and its employees are better off when they can effectively capitalize on employee's unique strengths,

employees will be more likely to apply their strengths to their work.

Organizations may provide strengths use support by enabling employees to engage in tasks in

line with their individual strengths or by letting two or more colleagues with complementary strengths

join forces, such that they can complement each other's unique strengths (van Woerkom & Meyers,

2015). For example, in the context of mental health care, socio-therapists may go about their task of

managing the interpersonal interactions among patients in a ward by organizing group discussions or by

engaging in physical activities with their clients (outdoor activities, sports, etc.). When the organization

offers strengths use support, a therapist who has a strength in zest and bravery could choose to do

outdoor activities with the patients as a strategy that plays to her strengths, and potentially allowing

others to take care of other tasks better done by them. The idea of strengths use support is well aligned

with the diversity and inclusion literature, which emphasizes the value of integrating employees'

uniqueness into the way work is done (Nishii, 2013; Shore et al., 2011) and with the person-job fit

literature, emphasizing the relevance of congruence between an employee's skills and the demands of a

job (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Research shows that strengths use produces increases in individual well-

being and lower perceived stress (Forest et al., 2012; Quinlan, Swain, & Vella-Brodrick, 2011; Senf &

Liau, 2013; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011), and that strengths use support is related to

higher levels of work engagement and lower levels of burnout (Keenan & Mostert, 2013).

Strengths use support will be affected by organizational-level cultural norms and by the

managers who serve as the interpretive filters through which most of these norms get operationalized

(Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). The extent to which individual employees working for any manager experience support for strengths use is likely to depend on the nature of the relationship between the manager and employee, for example the level of understanding, liking, and trust (e.g., as assessed by Leader Member Exchange; Dienesch & Liden, 1986), making strengths use support an individual level concept (van Woerkom & Meyers, 2015).

Perceived organizational support for strengths use can be conceptualized as a new type of job resource in that it should help individuals to achieve their work-related goals and engage in activities that stimulate their personal growth and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Dollard & Bakker, 2010). When employees are supported to engage in tasks that capitalize on their strengths, they are more likely to be successful in achieving their work-related goals. Moreover, these goals or the way in which these goals are achieved will be more self-concordant, that is, consistent with the person's developing interests and core values (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999), making it more likely that people invest sustained effort in them, and hence attain these goals (Koestner, Lekes, Powers, & Chicoine, 2002). Strengths use support is also likely to stimulate growth and development because developing strengths comes much more easily to individuals than developing deficiencies (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Finally, we expect that strengths use support diminishes the positive relationship between job demands like high emotional demands and a high workload on the one hand, and absenteeism on the other hand. Individuals who are supported to utilize their strengths experience higher levels of self-esteem as a result of feeling valued for their unique worth and experiences; in turn, boosts to one's self-esteem help counterbalance threats to self-esteem that occur as a response to stress appraisal (Cohen & Wills, 1985) resulting from high of job demands. This will make workers more effective in coping with high job demands and therefore less likely to call in sick. Also, employees who feel supported to use their strengths can act more in accordance with their authentic selves (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) leading to

lower levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993) and higher

levels of energy, well-being and coping skills (Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne, & Ilardi, 1997), making it less

likely that the stress that is brought about by their job demands will lead to sickness absenteeism.

Furthermore, emotionally upsetting situations will cause less strain when employees feel that they can

approach these situations from their own strengths. In the previous example of the socio-therapist,

difficult situations with demanding clients will be less stressful when one can choose to deal with these

situations in line with individual strengths. Therefore, we hypothesize the following:

> *Hypothesis 2*: Support for strengths use will weaken the positive relationship between
>
> emotional demands and absenteeism.

> *Hypothesis 3:* Support for strengths use will weaken the positive relationship between workload
>
> and absenteeism.

Accumulating Job Demands and Strengths Use Support; Combining COR Theory and JD-R Theory

On the basis of COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001), we argue that the mitigating role of job resources

will prevail even when individuals experience resource losses caused by multiple job demands. One of

the assumptions of COR theory is that resources acquire saliency in the context of resource loss (Hobfoll,

2002); that is, their benefits become particularly evident when employees are in need of them. To

illustrate, Seers, McGee, Serey, and Graen (1983) found that social support was associated with job

satisfaction only for those employees who had to cope with high role conflict, but not for those who

experienced low levels of role conflict. Also, Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, and Xanthopoulou (2007)

showed that job resources are particularly impactful under highly stressful conditions. To date, a high

level of job demand has always been operationalized in terms of a single type of job demand; in the

context of multiple job demands, however, we expect that opportunities to capitalize on any potential

resource gains—like those that accrue from strengths use—will take on even greater importance. Based

on both COR and JD-R theory, we reason that especially in situations where multiple types of job

demands accumulate, and energetic resources are in greater danger of depletion (COR theory), workers

will benefit when they can play to their strengths (JD-R theory). For example, imagine if the socio-

therapist who is simultaneously faced with a looming deadline and a conflict among her clients is

supported by the organization to resolve this conflict according to her own strengths (e.g., restoring the

relationships among her clients by letting them cook a meal together), the conflict resolution will cost

her less energy, leaving her with more time and energy to finish her report before the deadline. This will

make her less vulnerable to strain and health problems, making her less likely to call in sick. Therefore,

based on the combination of COR theory and JD-R theory, we hypothesize the following:

> *Hypothesis 4:* The three-way interaction among emotional demands, workload and support for
>
> strengths use will be related to absenteeism. Specifically, support for strengths use will mitigate
>
> the positive relationship between job demands and absenteeism for people who are
>
> simultaneously confronted with a high workload and high emotional demands.

Method

Sample and Procedure

This study was conducted in a Dutch organization with approximately 2250 doctors, therapists,

and nurses who provide mental health care for people with severe, multiple and long-term psychiatric

problems. First, we informed managers about the study and asked for their participation. Second, all

employees were informed about the study on the intranet and received a questionnaire by e-mail. In

total, 832 employees (response rate of 40.3%) working in 97 different departments (e.g., ambulant child

psychiatry, youth forensic psychiatric services etc.) completed a questionnaire. The age of the

employees ranged from 19 up to 65 years, with an average of 43.6 (comparable to 42 years in the

overall Dutch mental health care population; Ott, Paardekooper, & Van der Windt, 2005). The sample

consisted of 515 women and 317 men (38.1% were male, which is slightly higher than in the population

where 32% of the employees is male; Ott et al., 2005). The number of respondents per department size

varied from 4 to 53 with an average of 17.3 per department. Of all respondents, 32.6% completed

postgraduate education, 50.8% completed a bachelor degree, and 16.6% had a lower vocational

background.

Measures

Perceived organizational support for strengths use was measured with a scale developed by

Keenan and Mostert (2013), including items such as "This organization allows me to use my talents" and

"This organization ensures that my strengths are aligned with my job tasks." Answers were provided on

a 7-point frequency scale, ranging from 1 (almost never) to 7 (almost always).

Keenan and Mostert found that the items load on one single dimension (α = .97), and that the scale is

distinct from four other commonly studied job resources (e.g., supervisory support, autonomy,

information and participation as measured with scales by van Veldhoven, Meijman, Broersen, & Fortuin,

1997). This factor structure was later confirmed in a validation study (van Woerkom et al., 2013) using

exploratory factor analysis on a sample of 241 individuals working across different industries and

confirmatory factor analysis on a separate sample of 699 respondents working across different

industries. Convergent validity was supported by medium-sized positive correlations with autonomy,

participation, colleague support, supervisory support, and work engagement, as expected.

To reduce respondent burden, we selected five of the eight items with the highest factor

loadings reported by Keenan and Mostert (2013). The internal consistency of the scale was good (α

=.94).

Workload was measured with seven items from the Dutch Questionnaire on the Experience and

Assessment of Work (Vragenlijst Beleving en Beoordeling van de Arbeid Scale; van Veldhoven et al.,

2002). This questionnaire was modeled after internationally well-known instruments like the Job

Content Questionnaire (Karasek, 1985). The items refer to quantitative workload: pace and amount of

work. Example items are "Do you have to work very fast?" and "Do you have a lot of work to do?"

Cronbach's alpha was .89.

Emotional job demands was measured with seven items from the Dutch Questionnaire on the

Experience and Assessment of Work ("VBBA" scale; van Veldhoven et al., 2002). The items refer to

emotionally challenging situations, events, or circumstances at work. Examples items are: "Do you have

contact with difficult clients or patients in your work?" and "Does your work demand a lot from you

emotionally?" Cronbach's alpha was .81. All items on emotional job demands and workload were rated

on a 4-point scale (1 = never, 4 = always). Both scales have shown good psychometric properties and

validity in previous studies (Bakker et al., 2004; Bakker, van Veldhoven, & Xanthopoulou,

2010).

Confirmatory factor analyses showed that a three-factor model with workload, emotional

demands, and perceived strengths use support loading on three separate factors (x^2 = 505.426, *df* = 149;

Comparative Fit Index [CFI] = .96, Tucker-Lewis Index [TLI] = .95, root mean square error of

approximation [RMSEA] = .06, standardized root mean square residual [SRMR] .05) fits significantly

better to the data than a two-factor model with workload and emotional demands loading on one factor

and perceived strengths support loading on a second (Δx^2 = 1333.136, df = 2, p < .001; CFI = .80, TLI =

.77, RMSEA .12, SRMR = .12), as well as a model with all three constructs loading on one factor

 (2 4732.896, df = 3, p <.001; CFI = .39, TLI = .31, RMSEA = .21, SRMR = .20).

Absenteeism was measured with the official absenteeism figures that were recorded by the

organization in the 2 months after the questionnaire had been distributed. At the 2-month mark, the

organization launched several initiatives and projects related to strengths use support which we

expected may interfere with our results. Absenteeism was measured by dividing the hours an individual

reported sick in these 2 months by the hours the individual should have worked in this period according

to his or her labor contract, multiplied by 100 (%). The average percentage of absenteeism was 4.84 (SD

= 13.69).

Analyses

Because our respondents were nested in 97 departments, we conducted multilevel hierarchical

regressions using Mplus5 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2007) such that the effects of the individual-level

variables were examined while accounting for the non-interdependence of observations within groups

(Diez-Roux, 2000)[1] We computed deviance scores (differences in the -2 log likelihood) to compare the

different models and to test their significance (Bickel, 2007). Measures of model fit for all models were

then obtained by comparing deviance scores using a chi-squared distribution table and by calculating

the approximate R^2_1 values at level 1 (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). Model 1 contains just our control

variables. In Model 2, we added the main effects of our three independent variables. In Model 3, we

included the interaction of workload and emotional demands to test Hypothesis 1. In Model 4, we

included the interaction of emotional job demands and strengths use support to test Hypothesis 2. In

Model 5, we included the interaction of workload and strengths use support to test Hypothesis 3. In

Model 6, we included the three-way interaction term to test Hypothesis 4. We grand mean-centered our

control variables and the variables that we used to compute our interaction terms before including

them in the multilevel analysis. Following the methods of Aiken and West (1991), we calculated the

simple slopes of the interaction effects one standard deviation below and above the mean to examine

the nature of the significant interactions.

Results

Table 1 reports the means, SD s, and correlations between the study variables. Correlations

were as expected with all job demands being positively and perceived strengths support being

negatively correlated with absenteeism. Table 2 reports the results of multilevel regression analyses that

were conducted to test the hypotheses. As can be seen in Model 3, the interaction term for workload

and emotional demands was positively related to absenteeism (B = 4.54, p <.01; Δx^2 = 7.61, df = 1, p

<.01). Simple slope tests indicated that the simple slope for employees with a high workload was

significant (B = 6.49, SE = 1.04, p < .001), while the slope for employees with a low workload was not (B =

1.50, SE = 1.05, ns; cf. Figure 1), confirming our first hypothesis that high levels of workload strengthen

the positive relationship between emotional demands and absenteeism.

In support of Hypothesis 2, Model 4 was significant.[2] The interaction of strengths use support

and emotional demands was negatively related to absenteeism (*B* = -1.19*, p* < .05; Δx^2 = 5.20, *df* = 1, *p*

<.05). Simple slope tests indicated that the simple slope for employees with low levels of strengths use

support was significant (B = 5.98, SE = 1.29, p < .001), while the slope for employees with high levels of

strengths use support was not (B = 1.91, SE = 1.40, ns; cf. Figure 2), indicating that a high level of

strengths use support makes the relationship between emotional demands and absenteeism

nonsignificant. In support of Hypothesis 3, the interaction term of workload and strengths use support

was negatively related to absenteeism (B= -.87, p < .05; Δx^2 = 3.97, df = 1, p <.05) in Model 5. Simple

slope tests indicated that the simple slope for employees with low levels of strengths use support was

significant (B = 2.34, SE = 1.09, p <.05), while the slope for the employees with high levels of strengths

use support was not (B = -.62, SE = 1.20, ns; cf. Figure 3). This means that workload is only positively

related to absenteeism under conditions of low strengths use support.

Finally, we hypothesized that support for strengths use would buffer the relationship between

combined job demands (emotional demands and workload) and absenteeism (Hypothesis 4). As can be

seen in Model 6, the three-way interaction term was significant (B = -2.60, p < .01; Δx^2 = 27.74, df = 4, p

< .001). Simple slope tests indicated that the simple slope for employees with high workload and high

emotional demands was significant (B= -2.14, SE = 1.70, p < .001), while the slopes for employees in the

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INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

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other conditions were nonsignificant (respectively B = -.21, SE = .25, ns; B = -.06, SE = .04, ns; B = .39, SE=

.65, ns; cf. Figure 4). This indicates that strengths use support can buffer the positive relationship

between combined job demands and absenteeism.

Discussion

The present study provides initial evidence that simultaneous experience of multiple job demands is positively related to company registered absenteeism. This is an important contribution to the JD-R theory which has been criticized for a of lack specificity in explaining how or why certain job demands exert their effects on occupational health (De Jonge, Demerouti, & Dormann, 2013). The JD-R literature has either been concerned with main effects of various job demands on health, or with the interaction between a particular job demand and resource. By uncovering some of the complex interactions among types of job demands, we answer the call for improving our understanding of how constellations of different job demands may lead to health-related outcomes (Zapf, Semmer, & Johnson, 2013). The positive relationship between combined job demands and health-related outcomes is consistent with role conflict theory (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964), which suggests that different job demands are sometimes contradictory, such that compliance with one job demand (e.g., workload) makes adherence to another job demand (e.g., emotional demands) difficult, exacerbating problems for employees. However, the implications of contradictory job demands for health related outcomes have, to our knowledge, not been investigated. Future studies should investigate whether the

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

accumulative effect of job demands is worse the more they are fundamentally in conflict with each other.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

By building on COR theory concerning the notion of loss spirals, we reasoned that high demands

in one aspect of the job may be related to losses of one's finite personal energetic resources (Ten

Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012), resulting in a weakening of resource reserves for confronting another

type of job demand, thereby bringing about a loss spiral. While the JD-R model has in recent years been

expanded to consider the buffering benefits of personal resources in addition to job resources

(Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Heuven, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2008), the former have predominantly been

conceptualized as individual difference constructs such as optimism and self-esteem. Although this

research suggests that some individuals have greater personal resources to cope with job demands than

others, such conclusions provide little in the way of actionable strategies for organizations seeking to

help employees cope better with their job demands. Our findings suggest that organizations can play an

important role in reducing strain-induced absenteeism by actively promoting the use of personal

strengths by employees. While it is true that other organizationally provided job resources have been

examined within JD-R research, such as the impact of increased social support, autonomy, and

performance feedback (Bakker et al., 2005, 2007; 2010), we expect that strengths use support offers

more universal benefits across jobs and types of job demands than these other, more narrowly defined

job resources. This is because more narrowly defined job resources may be effective only when they are

specifically aligned with the particular job demands faced by an employee (De Jonge & Dormann, 2006),

but may actually produce a reverse buffering effect in others. For instance, even though social support

may be a matching resource for a nurse who has just experienced an incident with an aggressive patient,

previous studies have indicated that when the content of the social support focuses on the negative

rather than positive aspects of the work (e.g., how difficult the patients are) it might be hurtful rather

than helpful (Fenlason & Beehr, 1994). Because the use of one's strengths at work is intrinsically

energizing (Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Wood et al., 2011), we expect strengths use support to be a

more universal job resource. Future research in different organizational contexts is needed to provide

further support for this argument.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Our results also contribute to the literature on strengths use that previously focused on more

general relationships between strengths use and well-being (Harzer & Ruch, 2012a, 2012b), by showing

that strengths use helps people to cope with job demands. Our results suggest that providing strengths

use support is not just negatively related to absenteeism, but may even reduce the positive relationship

between multiple job demands and absenteeism.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations should be considered when interpreting our results. One is that we only

included the absenteeism figures in the two months after the questionnaire was distributed.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Unfortunately, including absenteeism figures over a longer period of time was impossible, since the

organization decided to implement various strengths-based practices after our data collection, which

would have distorted our analysis. A second limitation is that although we collected our survey data

before the absence data, this methodology cannot rule out a reverse causality. However, the causal

relation between job demands and absenteeism is firmly established in the literature (De Lange et al.,

2003). A third limitation is that even though our results suggest that the depletion of transient personal

resources may explain the relationship between combined job demands and health-related outcomes,

we did not actually measure volatile personal resources. Longitudinal research, including measures for structural and volatile personal resources and the duration of one's exposure to different job demands is needed to further investigate the interactions among different types of demands and the possibility of reverse causation between health and the evaluation of job demands. A fourth limitation is that we conducted our study among a specific group of employees, namely mental health care workers. Future studies are needed to investigate whether our results can be generalized to different sectors in which different types of job demands might be salient.

Although this research is grounded within prior work on the JD-R model, our specific focus on strengths use support as a job resource provides a theoretical link between JD-R research and burgeoning work on inclusion in organizations. The premise underlying work on inclusion is that when organizations and their leaders cultivate climates within which employees are valued for their unique perspectives and strengths, and their unique perspectives and strengths are leveraged to improve decision making, diverse employees who may have previously suffered from lower levels of voice, inclusion, and engagement are likely to experience increased well-being and performance (Nishii, 2013; Shore et al., 2011). We expect that one of the mechanisms through which the positive benefits of inclusive climates emerge is through enhanced support for individual strengths use and urge future research to examine the interrelationships among inclusive leadership and strengths use support on the one hand, and well-being, turnover, and performance on the other.

Practical Implications

By providing evidence for the buffering role of organizational strengths support this paper offers organizations a clear tool for competitive advantage, because it implies that absenteeism can be

reduced, even when it is difficult to reduce job demands (Bakker et al., 2005). Whereas many practices

aiming to reduce absenteeism run the risk of causing sickness presenteeism (Claes, 2014), strengths use

support does not seem to entail that danger. Our analysis indicates that strengths use support can

reduce the absenteeism of employees who experience both high workload and high emotional demands

from 11.36% to 4.07%, indicating that a large amount of the costs related to absenteeism can be saved.

Strengths use support can be offered by making sure that training, development, appraisal and reward

are not only based on the employees' deficits but also on their strengths. A next step could be to allow

employees to maximize the use of their strengths, for instance, through task allocation or

complementary partnering (Linley & Harrington, 2006). Our findings indicate that such an approach may

pay itself back in the form of more healthy employees who will be more often present at work.

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Table 1

Means, SDs, and Correlations Between the Study Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Gender (1 = *male*, 2 = *female*)	—	—						
2. Age (years)	42.61	10.97	−.17**					
3. Educational level	—	—	.03	−.03				
4. Workload	2.46	.55	−.05	.13**	.21**			
5. Emotional demands	2.28	.47	−.14**	.04	.10**	.21**		
6. Strengths use support	4.83	1.71	−.09	.08*	.05	.04	−.06	
7. Absenteeism	4.84	13.69	−.01	.04	.02	.08**	.15**	−.10**

Table 2

Multilevel Regression Analyses Predicting Employee Absenteeism From the Interactions Among Workload, Emotional Demands, and Strengths Use Support

	Absenteeism											
	1		2		3		4		5		6	
Variable	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Constant	4.94***	.54	4.72***	.49	4.47***	.46	4.66***	.49	4.75***	.49	4.40***	.49
Gender	.66	1.08	1.15	.96	1.13	.96	1.13	.96	1.04	.96	1.16	.95
Age	.06	.05	.08	.04	.07	.04	.07	.04	.07	.04	.06	.04
Educational level	.33	.79	−.11	.67	−.12	.66	−.07	.66	.04	.67	.01	.66
Workload			1.03	.87	1.01	.86	1.03	.87	.86	.87	.92	.86
Emotional demands			4.12***	1.01	3.99***	1.01	3.94***	1.01	4.09***	1.01	4.16***	1.01
Strengths use support			−.67*	.27	−.66*	.27	−.69*	.27	−.72**	.27	−.50	.27
Workload × Emotional Demands					4.54**	1.66					4.51**	1.66
Emotional Demands × Strengths Use Support							−1.19*	.52			−1.26*	.54
Workload × Strengths Use Support									−.87*	.44	−.67	.48
Workload × Emotional Demands × Strengths Use Support											−2.60**	.80
Group level												
Variance random intercept	5.52	5.27	2.17	4.05	1.80	3.86	2.15	3.97	2.18	4.06	1.53	3.64
−2log likelihood	6,711.35ᵃ		6,427.47		6,419.86		6,422.27		6,423.50		6,399.73	
Deviance change (Δχ²)ᵃ	2.17		283.88***		7.61**		5.20*		3.97*		27.74***	
R_I^2 (approx.)	.01		.11		.12		.12		.12		.14	

Note. N = 832, 97 departments. Reported values for each model are estimates of the effect, comparable to unstandardized regression coefficients in standard multiple regression. Results of analyses without the control variables age, gender and educational level were not substantially different. The R_I^2 *(approx.)* was calculated by substracting the residual variance of the complex model from the residual variance in the empty model, divided by the residual variance in the empty model.
ᵃ To calculate the deviance change the first model is compared to an empty model, with department as only predictor (df = 3). Comparison between Model 1 and Model 2: df = 3, comparison between Model 2 and Model 3: df = 1, comparison between Models 2 and 4: df = 1, comparison between Models 2 and 5: df = 1, comparison between Models 2 and 6: df = 4.
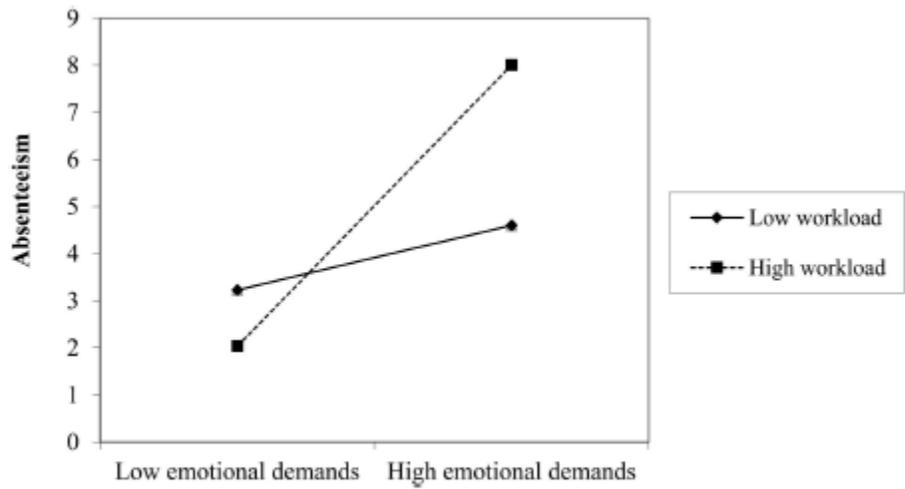* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Figure 1. Plot of the two-way interaction effect of workload and emotional demands on absenteeism.
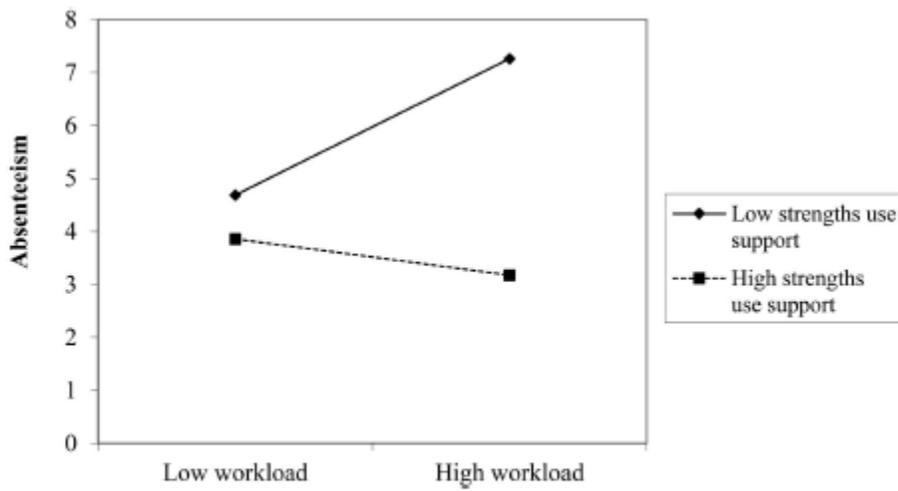

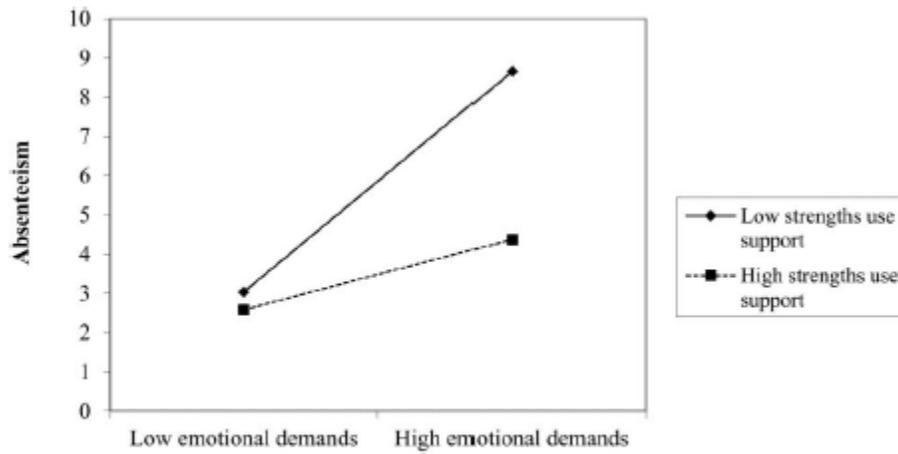*Figure 3.* Plot of the two-way interaction effect of strengths use support and workload on absenteeism.

Figure 2. Plot of the two-way interaction effect of strengths use support and emotional demands on absenteeism.
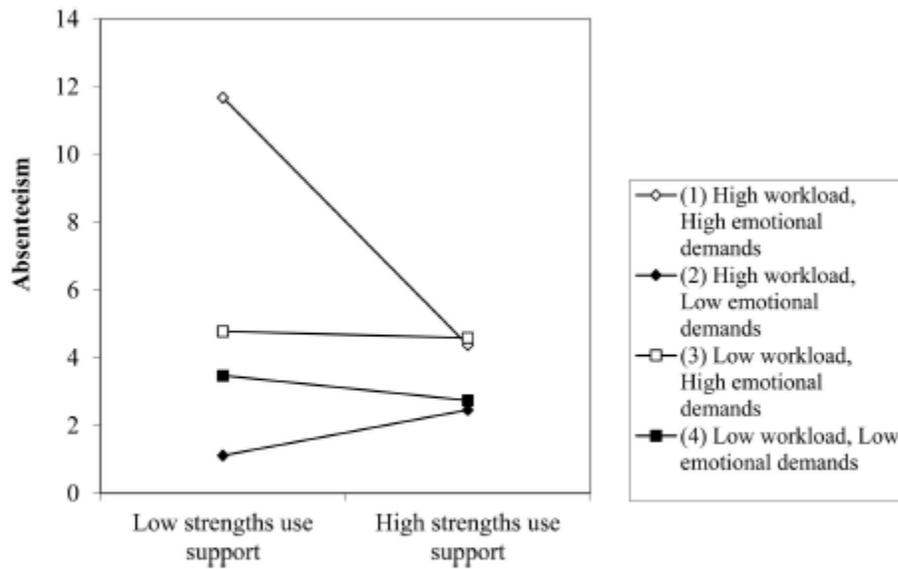

Figure 4. Plot of the three-way interaction effect between strengths use support, workload, and emotional demands on absenteeism.