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Does Coworker Support Buffer the Impact of Work Interruptions on Well-being?

by

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Abstract

Although being interrupted by a colleague at work is often a negative experience, in this study I ask the question of whether the impact of the interruption depends on the relationship you have with that coworker. This is important because coworker support may protect employees from the negative effects of work interruptions on employee well-being. In this study, I administered a survey to investigate the role of coworker support in the relationship between general work interruption and job satisfaction. Using an experimental vignette method, 181 participants (college students) were presented with scenarios with a fictional co-worker that presented either high or low levels of coworker interruption crossed with high or low levels of coworker support and then self-reported perceptions of coworker satisfaction. No main effect of general work interruption was found on job satisfaction. There were significant positive main effects of coworker support on job satisfaction and coworker satisfaction; however, I detected no interactions between work interruptions and coworker support, as expected. These findings fail to support the idea that work interruptions are harmful to employees' well-being, and subsequently, that any harm from interruptions would be buffered by coworker support. Nonetheless, these results emphasize the importance of coworker support for employee well-being and present some interesting directions for future research.

Keywords: work interruption, coworker interruption, job satisfaction, coworker satisfaction, coworker support
Does Coworker Support Buffer the Impact of Work Interruptions on Well-being?

Work interruption is a common phenomenon in modern workplaces. Employees are overwhelmed by interruptions from electronic communication like phone calls, emails, and texts (Grandhi et al., 2015; Gupta et al., 2013; Jackson et al., 2003). Coworkers may interrupt each other unexpectedly to seek help, provide new information, or socialize; supervisors often pop in unexpectedly to check on ongoing tasks or assign new tasks (Mark et al., 2005; Perlow, 1999). The fact that work interruptions have a detrimental effect on employees' well-being and performance seems to be accepted by mainstream research (Puranik et al., 2020). For example, previous literature showed that work interruptions will lead to a longer time for the resumption and completion of the interrupted task, more errors, and lower performance (Altmann et al., 2007). Work interruption can also result in high time pressure and irritation (Baethge et al., 2013). Moreover, some have shown that work interruptions can result in emotional exhaustion via the depletion of self-regulation resources (Lin et al., 2013). Since it negatively impacts performance and well-being outcomes, it is necessary to develop better protection to buffer the negative effects of work interruptions.

In the workplace, social interactions with coworkers are ubiquitous to most employees, but may also a double-edged sword for employees' well-being (Lincoln, 2000). Coworkers can be an interrupter and also a supportive resource for their fellow employees. Therefore, it is valuable to investigate whether coworker support can protect employees' well-being from the impacts of work interruptions.

The first aim of the article is to examine the main effect of general work interruption on job satisfaction and the moderation effect of coworker support in this relationship. Following the past literature (Keller et al., 2020; Pachler et al., 2018; Stocker et al., 2019) and drawing on the
job demands-resources theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), this paper regarded work interruption as a stressor and investigated whether coworker support as a job resource can counteract the negative effects of interruptions on job satisfaction. There are mixed findings on whether coworker support can play a buffering role on job outcomes under stress (Ducharme et al., 2000; Sloan, 2012). This research expects to clarify the role of coworker support in the context of work interruptions and expand the current theory. Thus, a frequency approach (referring to the number of work interruptions experienced) was adopted to explore the joint effects of work interruptions and coworker support on job satisfaction. In other words, this study is trying to argue that coworker support as a resource can buffer the negative effects from general work interruptions on job satisfaction, whether they result from coworkers, supervisors or clients. The general theoretical model is shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Model 1: The moderation model with general work interruption, coworker support and job satisfaction

Second, this research aims to investigate the social exchange balancing coworker support and coworker interruption with the more specific outcome of coworker satisfaction. Based on previous studies, work interruptions are often a result of other people, like co-workers, so dynamic social interactions are unavoidable. However, in the past research and experimental
studies on work interruptions, the nature of the relationship between the interupter and the target has been ignored, even though social exchange theory might suggest that different relationships might trigger different responses when interrupted by co-workers who are seen as more or less supportive colleagues. Thus, this study aims to manipulate both the frequency of coworker interruptions and the amount of coworker support experimentally to argue that the interaction of these two variables can lead to changes in coworker satisfaction. In the section that follows, I present theory and evidence to support these predictions, displayed in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Model 2: The moderation model with coworker interruption, coworker support and coworker satisfaction**

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**Theoretical Framework and Hypothesis Development**

*Work Interruption and Well-Being in JD-R Theory*

Work interruptions are defined as an unexpected suspension of the behavioral performance of, and/or attentional focus from, an ongoing work task (Puranik et al., 2020). Work interruptions come from a variety of sources, which can be different based on channel (e.g., face to face or via zoom), interrupters, and workplaces. A knowledge worker is more likely to be interrupted by email and instant messages, whereas manufactory workers are more likely to be interrupted by the failure of equipment. People often work alongside others (physically or
virtually), therefore they are also likely to be interrupted by other people, including their coworkers, supervisors, and consumers.

Job-demand resources theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) helps to explain why work interruptions, although common, may harm employee outcomes. Job demands are the requirements of a job in psychological, physical, social, or organizational aspects, which are related to certain physical or/and psychological costs and efforts. They are also unique predictors of the health-impairment process, with increased job demands negatively predicting employees' well-being and burnout. Being interrupted, although inevitable, can be regarded as one of the psychological, physical, or social demands in the workplace, thereby leading to stress and strain build-up, negatively influencing the well-being of employees. Thus, work interruptions are generally considered harmful for psychological well-being (Pachler et al., 2018; Keller et al., 2020; Stocker et al., 2019).

How do work interruptions detrimentally affect well-being? As a stressor, work interruptions can trigger a series of cognitive and physiological reactions, namely strain, that influence employees' well-being (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). There are at least three reasons why work interruptions are described as stressors. First, work interruptions impede the goal achievement of employees, resulting in emotional strain (Sonnenstag et al., 2018; Zijlstra et al., 1999). Employees who are interrupted by external stimuli will suspend their primary tasks and focus on the next activity. Unfinished jobs might even influence individuals during non-work time through rumination, which in turn hampers psychological recovery (Geurts & Sonnenstag, 2006). Second, when a secondary task occurs to interrupt employees, they need to divide their attention source to deal with two tasks instead of the original one. This is harmful because the high working memory load required to multi-task is negatively related to job performance.
because attentional resources are limited (Gupta et al., 2013; Tan & Richardson, 2011). Third, according to the compensatory model (Hockey, 1997), individuals will use different strategies to adapt to the environmental stressor (e.g. work interruption) in order to maintain high performance. Thus, being interrupted by a secondary task, employees need to increase work effort to compensate for the additional task, which will lead to the depletion of resources and fatigue (Pachler et al., 2018; Segerstrom & Nes, 2007). The more effort individuals spend, the more strain they experience, and the less satisfied they are with their jobs.

In sum, past literature suggests that the mid-term and long-term consequences of work interruption on well-being are negative (Keller et al., 2020). Job satisfaction, as an indicator of well-being, reflects employees’ satisfaction with their work environment. Therefore, people interrupted frequently may have low satisfaction with their job. Consistent with past literature, I argue that employees who are interrupted frequently will have lower levels of job satisfaction than those who are interrupted less frequently.

**Hypothesis 1:** General work interruption will be negatively associated with job satisfaction.

Moving beyond the past literature, however, I want to discover whether coworkers, as a distinct source of work interruptions, may be unique in their impact on employee outcomes. Previous literature proposed that there are differences in responses toward interruptions coming from supervisors and coworkers. In contrast to coworkers, employees will be pressured to respond more quickly to instant messages from supervisors compared to coworkers (Gupta et al., 2013). Hershcovis and Barling (2010) also posited that supervisors are more powerful than coworkers because they cannot only affect employees’ access to organizational resources and belongingness perceptions, but they are also capable of producing more stress than coworkers.
because of their ability to increase job demands (e.g., assignments, workload, hours). Moreover, job satisfaction is a multidimensional psychological response to one’s job, and coworker satisfaction is one of the five important facets of general job satisfaction (Smith et al., 1969). Thus, coworker interruption may also predict coworker satisfaction negatively, in a more specific way than general work interruptions negatively predict general job satisfaction. This more specific theorizing helps to isolate the unique effects of coworker interruptions on work outcomes. Thus, I expect that employees who are interrupted frequently by coworkers will have a lower level of coworker satisfaction than those whose coworkers interrupt them less frequently.

**Hypothesis 2:** Coworker interruption will be negatively associated with coworker satisfaction.

**Coworker Support and Well-being**

Job resources in the JD-R model are regarded as the psychological, physical, social, or organizational aspects of the job that can facilitate the achievement of work goals and reduce job demand (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Employees with more resources are better able to handle their job demands. Coworker support has been theorized as an important job resource that may influence job satisfaction through its reduction of strain. In particular, coworkers provide instrumental support by helping employees solve problems in the workplace and reducing workload and job-related anxiety, thereby facilitating well-being via alleviating strain (Puranik et al., 2021; Spehar et al., 2016). Additionally, coworkers’ expressive support may provide employees with emotional reassurance and a perception of belongingness, both of which are positively related to employees' job satisfaction (Puranik et al., 2021; Spehar et al., 2016).

Past literature illustrates that there is a significant positive main effect of coworker support on employees' well-being (e.g., Bakker et al., 2006; Ducharme & Martin 2000; McCann
et al., 1997). Coworkers can provide various forms of support like simply conveying personal information, or providing instrumental and emotional support. Such helping behaviors from coworkers are beneficial to employees' well-being. Following this previous research, I argue that coworker support can positively predict job satisfaction. Additionally, because of the multi-faceted nature of job satisfaction (Smith et al., 1969), coworker support may be expected to positively predict coworker satisfaction—a dimension of overall job satisfaction that is specific to one’s (un)favorable attitudes about their coworkers.

**Hypothesis 3:** Coworker support is positively associated with general job satisfaction.

**Hypothesis 4:** Coworker support is positively associated with coworker satisfaction.

**Coworker Support as a Moderator**

So far, we have discussed the potential for coworkers to be a nuisance, through interruptions that increase job demand, but also an asset, by providing support that increases job resources. Here I resolve these seemingly competing perspectives by noting the buffering role that coworker support may play on the relationship between interruptions and job satisfaction. According to the conservation of resources theory, people want to gain more resources and fear losing resources. They will invest their resources to where they can be maximally utilized. (Hobfoll, 2001). Employees also invest their resources to gain resources from others (Hobfoll, 1989). Halbesleben et al. (2015) also found that coworker support is positively related to the investment in organizational citizen behaviors. If individuals receive more resources, they may then invest more resources into their jobs to gain more returns in the future. Hobfoll (1989) claimed that if employees confronted the loss of resources, they would experience anxiety and distress. Thus, people who receive a high level of coworker support may be willing to reciprocate because they want to gain more in the future or do not want to lose resources.
Coworker support as a resource plays an important role in the daily workplace (Parris, 2003). People who have a positive relationship with coworkers can gain more resources like assistance from colleagues, emotional support, and job performance (Hobfoll, 2002; Ng & Sorensen, 2008; Sliter et al., 2012). However, there are some mixed findings of whether coworker support can buffer the negative effects of stressors (Beehr et al., 2000; Ducharme et al., 2000; Rousseau et al., 2009; Sloan, 2012). On the one hand, Ducharme et al. (2000) found that there is a main effect of coworker support on job satisfaction, but no buffer effect with unrewarding work on job satisfaction. On the other hand, Sloan (2012) illustrated that coworker support can buffer the effects of unfair treatment on well-being; employees with a high level of coworker support will feel less injustice when treated less fairly. Additionally, Ang et al. (2017) found that expressive social support from family and friends buffers the impact of care-related work interruptions on caregivers’ depressive symptoms.

If I follow the past literature and treat work interruption as a stressor, coworker support may therefore buffer the negative effect of work interruptions on job satisfaction. Overall, I argue that coworker support is positively related to job satisfaction (Hypothesis 3), and thus can buffer the impact of general work interruptions on job satisfaction.

**Hypothesis 5:** Coworker support moderates the relationship between general work interruption and job satisfaction, with high support weakening the negative relationship.

**Social Exchange Theory as an Explanatory Mechanism**

An important contribution of this study is to investigate whether the effectiveness of coworker support as a buffer for the harmful effects of coworker interruptions depends on the nature of the relationship between the employee and their coworker. Reciprocity as a transactional pattern of interdependent exchanges is an important rule in social exchange theory.
Blau (1964) and Emerson (1976) believed that social exchange can engender obligation, gratitude, and trust (Emerson, 1976). If an individual offers a favor the receiver should respond in kind out of obligation or gratitude. However, failing to respond in a similar way may lead to negative outcomes. Based on the Effort Reward Imbalance Model, such an imbalance in social exchange and reciprocity between two colleagues in the workplace will result in stress (Siegrist, 2002). Too much effort in relation to too few rewards is thought to trigger negative emotions and physiological stress responses, whereas a more balanced social exchange will engender positive emotions.

Puranik et al. (2020) stated that few papers focus on work interruption from the interrupters’ perspective. In other words, it is not clear why people interrupt others. In workplaces, employees may interrupt their coworkers because of transmitting task-related information, seeking help, and wanting to have conversations unrelated to work while on the job. For example, Rivera (2014) conducted an inductive study and found that nurses would interrupt others when they needed help. Peng et al. (2018) found that receiving favors triggers gratitude and indebtedness in people, resulting in those receiving favors establish closer relationships with or repay favors to the individual who helped them. Thus, if employees experience a high level of coworker support, they may treat work interruptions from coworkers as returns or investments. If they are interrupted by coworkers who give them a high level of support, they may repay the favor which in turn reduces their indebtedness. Even if the interrupters are not seeking help, employees may treat the interruption as a way to develop a high-quality relationship. During the interruption, peoples’ small-talk with their coworkers may be a way to establish deeper connections. Thus, the interaction between coworkers may replenish the cost of resources. For example, Johnson and Lanaj (2014) found that exhibiting interpersonal justice behaviors were
associated with an increase in actors' subsequent regulatory resources because they represent rewarding positive interactions for actors. In this way, employees' satisfaction may not decrease if the interruption comes from a coworker whom they consider to be more supportive, relative to a coworker who does not display such high support. However, if there is an imbalance between coworker support and coworker interruption (too little coworker support in relation to too many coworker interruptions), the negative relationship between coworker interruption and coworker satisfaction will remain (or perhaps even be strengthened).

Overall, I expect that high coworker support can weaken the detrimental effects of coworker interruptions on coworker satisfaction. The coworker satisfaction of employees with high-level coworker support may be higher than the coworker satisfaction of employees with low-level coworker support when they experience frequent work interruptions from coworkers. In this study, coworker support and work interruptions are manipulated experimentally to examine the interactive effects of these variables and to test the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 6:** Coworker support moderates the relationship between coworker interruption and coworker satisfaction. Coworker satisfaction is highest when coworker support is high and coworker interruptions are low; coworker satisfaction is lowest when coworker support is low and coworker interruptions are high.

In sum, the purpose of this study is to examine whether coworker support can buffer the adverse effects from work interruption on employees’ well-being. We evaluated this research question in two different ways. First, we asked participants about their own general work experiences with work interruption, coworker support, and job satisfaction, which can examine whether coworker support as a job resource can moderate the impact of general work interruption (e.g., interruption from supervisors, clients, or coworkers) on job satisfaction.
Hypotheses 1, 3, and 5 are based on employees’ own experiences and test Model 1 (Figure 1). Second, we experimentally manipulated coworker support and coworker interruption frequency to examine the interactive impact of these two variables on coworker satisfaction. This allowed me to test the more specific outcome of the social exchange between coworker interruption and coworker support. Hypotheses 2, 4, and 6 are based on the experimental manipulation and test Model 2 (Figure 2).

**Method**

**Participants and procedure**

Participants were recruited via the psychology subject pool at the University at Albany, SUNY and were rewarded with extra credit for their participation. There were 258 participants initially, however, 76 of them were removed from the sample because they failed to pass the manipulation check \((n = 1)\), did not complete the questionnaire \((n = 52)\) or did not have a job \((n = 23)\), which was a study prerequisite. Thus, 181 participants were retained for analysis. The final sample was 27.3% male, 71% female, and 1.6% other. The average age was 19.13 years \((SD = 2.65)\). A power analysis for a two-way ANOVA, used to test study hypotheses, revealed a necessary sample size of 162 \((f = 0.40, \alpha = .05, \text{power} = .95, \text{number of groups} = 4, \text{number of measurements} = 3)\).

Participants completed a Qualtrics survey which included six measures. They first filled out a demographic survey, then they were asked to finish the general work interruption, coworker support and job satisfaction measures that asked them to assess their current job (hence the requirement to be currently employed). Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions where they read a vignette scenario describing interactions between them and a hypothetical coworker (see scripts in Appendix A). The four conditions represent a 2 x 2
experimental design fully crossing coworker support with work interruptions: 1) High coworker interruption-high worker support, 2) high coworker interruption-low coworker support, 3) low coworker interruption-high coworker support, and 4) low coworker interruption-low coworker support. Coworker support was manipulated by presenting the participant with three examples in the vignette that characterized their relationship. In the high coworker support condition, the coworker offers the employee assistance, provides advice to the employee, and demonstrates care for the well-being of the employee. In the low coworker support condition, the coworker rejects to offer the employee assistance, refuses to give advice to the employee, and ignores the well-being of the employee. To manipulate the frequency of coworker interruptions, the participant was told in the vignette that they were interrupted by her/his coworker eight to ten times per day in the high work interruption condition or only one time per day in the low interruption condition. Examples of these types of interruptions were provided (see Appendix A for the detailed scripts). After reading the scenario, they were asked to report their perceptions of coworker interruptions, coworker support, and coworker satisfaction.

**Measures**

*General work interruptions.* General work interruptions (i.e., at their own job) were assessed by one item that is taken from the Organizational Constraints scale by Spector and Jex (1998). “How often do you find it difficult or impossible to do your job because of interruptions by other people?” Participants answered the item on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

*Experimental coworker interruptions.* Coworker interruption assessing perceptions of interruptions targeting the experimental vignette was measured by the 5-item work interruption scale developed by Parke et al. (2018) that was adapted to focus on coworker interruptions. Items
are “I was interrupted by coworkers seeking information from me;” “I was interrupted by coworkers seeking my help;” “I was interrupted by coworkers who provided me work-related updates or information;” “I was interrupted by coworkers who gave or assigned a new task to me;” “I was interrupted by coworkers for non-work-related matters (e.g., socializing).” Participants answered the items on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and the reliability was acceptable, $\alpha = 0.70$.

**Coworker support.** General coworker support was measured from three items that are taken from the perceived organizational support measure of Eisenberger et al. (1986) but adapted to be worded in terms of coworker support. Responses ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Items were “My coworker was willing to offer assistance to help me perform my job to the best of my ability”, “Help is available from the coworker when I have a problem” and “My coworker really cares about my well-being”. The reliability was good, $\alpha = 0.85$.

**Experimental coworker support.** The participants’ perceptions of coworker support after receiving the manipulation was also assessed by the perceived organizational support measure (Eisenberger et al., 1986), with items adapted: “This coworker is willing to offer assistance to help me perform my job to the best of my ability”, “Help is available from this coworker when I have a problem”, and “This coworker really cares about my well-being”. Responses ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The reliability was excellent, $\alpha = 0.98$.

**General job satisfaction.** General satisfaction with participants’ own jobs was assessed with a single item by Semmer, Baillod, and Ruch (1990): “How satisfied are you with your work in general?”. Responses ranged from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied).

**Experimental coworker satisfaction.** The measure of satisfaction with coworkers presented after the experimental vignette was one item adapted from Semmer, Baillod, and Ruch (1990):
“How satisfied are you with your coworkers in general?” Responses ranged from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied).

**Statistical analysis**

Hierarchical regression analysis was performed to assess the effects of general work interruption and general coworker support on general job satisfaction for their own jobs. In Model 1, I regressed job satisfaction on general work interruption (Hypothesis 1) and coworker support (Hypothesis 3). In Model 2, I added the interaction of general work interruption and coworker support to test Hypothesis 5. Two-way ANOVA analysis was applied to test the main effects of coworker interruption (Hypothesis 2) and coworker support (Hypothesis 4) on coworker satisfaction, and their interactive effect, as well (Hypothesis 6). Assumptions were tested before conducting the two-way ANOVA, however, normality and homogeneity assumptions were violated (largely due to unequal variances between the groups on the coworker satisfaction variable), so the Games-Howell correction was adopted when interpreting results. Figures 3 and 4 show that the experimental manipulations of coworker interruption and coworker support were successful.

**Results**

Table 1 reports correlations among demographic information and all study variables. As anticipated, there was a negative correlation between general work interruption and general job satisfaction \( (r = -0.22, p < .01) \), and a positive correlation between general coworker support and general job satisfaction \( (r = 0.44, p < .01) \). Estimates of experimentally manipulated coworker support were very strongly positively correlated with experimental coworker satisfaction \( (r = 0.94, p < .01) \) after the vignettes. This result may indicate construct overlap between the coworker support and coworker satisfaction scales that may warrant caution when interpreting these results.
as measuring separate things. This possibility is discussed further in the limitations section below. Surprisingly, however, there was no significant relationship between experimental coworker interruption and coworker satisfaction \((r = -.14, p = .053)\).

First, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test hypothesized main effects of general work interruption, general coworker support, and their interaction on general job satisfaction presented in Figure 1 (Model 1). These results, presented in Table 2, tested the relationships expected in Figure 1 that targeted individuals’ own jobs, not the experimentally manipulated vignettes. Hypothesis 1 was not supported, as I found no significant main effect of general work interruption on job satisfaction \((\beta = .11, p = .722)\). The results did show that coworker support is significantly associated with job satisfaction \((\beta = .57, p = .002)\), supporting Hypothesis 3. However, no moderation effect of coworker support on the relationship between work interruption and job satisfaction was found \((\beta = -.31, p = .361)\), thus Hypothesis 5 was not supported.

The second set of analyses evaluated the hypotheses presented in Figure 2 to assess the variables that were experimentally manipulated in four conditions represented in the vignette scenarios (Model 2). A two-way ANOVA analysis was conducted to test the main effects of experimental coworker interruption (high or low), experimental coworker support (high or low), and the interaction of the two by assessing the group differences on experimental coworker satisfaction. As shown in Table 3, there was no main effect of interruption on coworker satisfaction, \(F(1, 178) = 0.59, p = .443, \eta_p^2 = .003\), so Hypothesis 2 was not supported. In support of Hypothesis 4, there was a significant, strong main effect of coworker support predicting coworker satisfaction, \(F(1, 178) = 295.34, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .66\). Yet, Hypothesis 6, the
moderation effect of coworker support on the relationship between coworker interruptions and coworker satisfaction, was not supported, $F(1, 178) = 0.12, p = .735, \eta^2_p = .001$.

**Discussion**

Employees bothered by daily hassles and demands of their jobs, including work interruptions experience negative strain outcomes like exhaustion, job-related anxiety, and health complaints (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Job strain outcomes in turn negatively impact well-being on the job, or job satisfaction. I drew from job demands-resources, conservation of resources, and social exchange theories to examine whether coworker support as a resource can counteract the negative effects of coworker interruptions, as a stressor, on job satisfaction. However, based on the results of the current study it is not clear whether coworker support can buffer the negative effect of coworker interruptions on job satisfaction.

Work interruptions often occur from person to person, which means that social interactions are unavoidable, and yet we know relatively little about the social dynamics of work interruptions. Past research shows that the hierarchical level of interrupters could change the perception of interruptions (Gupta et al., 2013). However, in this research study I examined a possible interaction between coworker interruption and coworker support, predicting the social exchange in this relationship may impact coworker satisfaction. Put more simply, a coworker interrupting you may be less annoying if you like that coworker and want to maintain a good relationship with them.

Unfortunately, although the results of this study supported some of my hypothesized relationships, this general idea of an interaction between work interruptions and coworkers support was not supported—neither for participants’ own jobs nor for an experimental manipulation. One potential reason is that although coworker support is beneficial to the job
satisfaction and can buffer the strain from unfair treatment, it is unable to buffer the negative effects of other stressors (Ducharme et al., 2000; Sloan, 2012). Additionally, some researchers found that coworker support can intensify the impact from stressor (daily workload) on daily negative affect because the reception of coworker support can signal ones’ inferiority (Trottier et al., 2019). However, neither the intensifier nor buffer role of coworker support were detected in this study.

The results of this study also found no main effects of work interruptions on satisfaction (either for the general self-reports or experimental manipulations), which is inconsistent with previous research (Baethge et al., 2013; Keller et al., 2020; Pachler et al., 2018). One possible reason is that the potential for interruptions to signal belongingness was not considered by this research. It is true that most researchers focus on the negative effects of work interruptions on well-being and job performance (Puranik et al., 2020). However, the positive effects of work interruptions are getting more attention from scholars. A dual mechanism linkage—self-regulatory depletion (negative) and belongingness need fulfillment (positive)—was found between work interruption and satisfaction in a recent study (Puranik et al., 2021). These authors argued that the belongingness employees experience from work interruptions can undo the self-regulatory resource depletion caused by work interruption. When employees were interrupted by coworkers because of seeking information, updating tasks, or even for nonwork-related socializing, their belongingness need may be fulfilled, which buffers the resources lost by work interruption and its subsequent negative effect on job satisfaction.

Nonetheless, the main effects of coworker support on job satisfaction, in both the general self-report for participants’ own jobs and the experimentally manipulated vignettes, were supported, which are consistent with the past literature (Ducharme et al., 2000; Sloan, 2012;
Zacher et al., 2014). These results show a strong prediction of coworker support on coworker satisfaction and job satisfaction, more broadly, reinforcing the power of coworker support as a resource. Thus, although the hypothesized interaction between coworker support and work interruption was not found, the results still reinforced the idea that coworker support is a strong job resource that can influence well-being outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations, although they differ slightly for the self-reported general hypotheses (model tested in Figure 1) and the experimental vignette approach (model tested in Figure 2). First, limitations of the general self-report part of the study include the possibility of common method bias because all variables were self-reported. However, the idea that one could objectively measure the frequency of work interruptions is difficult to implement in the field and would fail to capture the targets' perceptions of work interruptions, making it unsuited to examine the attitudinal results of interruptions (Puranik et al., 2020). Additionally, this portion of the study design was cross-sectional (independent and dependent variables measured simultaneously), which means it is hard to draw a conclusion about the causal relationships in the hypothesized model. It is possible that the accumulation of work interruptions could impact negatively job satisfaction. In the future, researchers using self-report methods should implement longitudinal studies to test whether there is a causal relationship between work interruption and job satisfaction in the long run.

Second, some of the limitations of the observational/self-report part of the study regarding causal inference were addressed by the second part with the experimental vignettes. In this part, we experimentally controlled the independent variables (interruptions and coworker support) and utilized random assignment between conditions. Yet, this portion of the experiment
had its own weaknesses, too. For example, although the manipulation checks showed that the vignettes were successful in manipulating the independent variables, the use of vignettes means that the study could be more realistic in the future. Additionally, the large standard deviations in the low coworker support and low coworker interruption groups indicates that there was a disagreement among the participants about how interrupting and rude this coworker was. Thus, alternative methods of manipulation and perhaps individual differences could be explored in the future.

Thirdly, some of the limitations of the study were shared between the correlational and experimental portions of this study. Some of the constructs were assessed with popular single-item measures used for assessment of interruptions and satisfaction, which did not allow me to assess internal consistency reliability of the measures. Although short items can increase the respondent rate of participation, future studies can use multi-item measures to compare the differences of this current study.

Finally, one thing should be noticed that the correlation between experimental coworker support and coworker satisfaction is very high ($r = .94, p < .01$). This may mean that these two constructs were so similar that participants cannot distinguish between them. Future research should figure out why it was hard to distinguish coworker satisfaction and coworker support, perhaps by using alternative or multiple measurement methods. This issue could also be related to the strength of the experimental manipulation for coworker support, so this issue may be less of a concern in an observational study where vignettes are not used.

In other areas for future research, the experimental portion of the study used the episodic approach to describe the contents of coworker interruption (e.g., interrupted by coworkers seeking my help, interrupted by coworkers seeking non-work socializing), but the differences in
interruption purpose were not examined further. Future studies can explore the impact of different types of work interruptions on job outcomes. For example, work interruption may be divided by the goal of interrupters like help-seeking interruptions, emotion-seeking interruptions, goal-obstruction interruptions, and goal-facility interruptions. Whether people appraise the interruption as a hindrance or challenge may depend on situational factors or the goal orientation of the targets (Ma et al., 2021). Performance prove goal orientation (PPGO) refers to a desire to show one's ability and get positive judgments from others. When coworkers or supervisors interrupt targets because of seeking help, people high in PPGO may feel that desire of demonstrating their competence is fulfilled or it is a chance to gain social approval. Employees high in performance avoidance goal orientation, by contrast, may tend to make hindrance appraisals, therefore they may believe work interruptions are a hindrance stressor. Thus, individual differences in motivational orientations may be interesting to consider in future research.

Finally, most research in this area focuses on the negative effects of work interruptions. Future studies can explore in what condition work interruptions will be beneficial to employees, or will not impact employees (Puranik et al., 2021). For example, work interruptions that include small talk may be a good way to help newcomers to socialize with each other and seek social acceptance.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This research shows that work interruption may not always be detrimental to employees' job satisfaction. This has important theoretical implications. The bright side of work interruption should be dug into in-depth in future research. Jett and George (2004) believed there are four types of work interruptions: intrusion, distraction, discrepancy, and breaks. Each of them may
have unique negative and positive outcomes for the targets who are interrupted. For example, being interrupted by coworkers, supervisors or clients may bring valuable feedback which can help targets to achieve their work goals but may also influence employees' job involvement and bring anxiety for time-sensitive tasks.

In terms of practical implications, these results suggest that managers and organizations should maximize the benefits and minimize the shortcomings of work interruptions. Additionally, the essential importance of coworker support is verified again by this paper as a benefit to job attitudes. Organizations should take measures to encourage coworker support. They could build a supportive and trustful climate to establish a positive reciprocal gain spiral of helping behavior between employees and coworkers (Halbesleben et al., 2015). Additionally, helping behavior can be included in the organizational rewarding system because monetary rewards are effective ways to influence employee performance (Shaw et al., 2015). A consistent climate of trust can also be developed by building trust between supervisors and subordinates first, which encourages subordinates to trust each other (Lau et al., 2008).

**Conclusion**

Although this paper did not replicate the negative effects of work interruption on job satisfaction, it contributed to the theory that work interruption is not always deleterious to employees’ well-being, challenging previous research. Additionally, although I failed to find a buffering effect of coworker support on the relationship between work interruptions and job satisfaction (likely in part because there was no significant relationship to moderate), the positive effects of coworker support on job satisfaction were reinforced by our results, suggesting the importance of building this resource for employee’s well-being.
References


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### Table 1

*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of all Study Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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<th>12</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
<td>19.13</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Tenure</td>
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<td>1.73</td>
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<td>0.46**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Workhours</td>
<td>19.79</td>
<td>10.49</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Degree of Remote Work</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>-0.15*</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Degree of Team-based Work</td>
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<td>1.04</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.09</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>-0.22**</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. General job interruption</td>
<td>2.19</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.18*</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>8. General coworker support</td>
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<td>-0.12</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.11</td>
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<td>9. General job satisfaction</td>
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<td>1.00</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.13</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.22**</td>
<td>0.44**</td>
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<td>10. Experimental coworker interruption</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.19**</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>11. Experimental coworker support</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>1.70</td>
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<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.98</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Experimental coworker satisfaction</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.94**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. N = 181. Gender: 1 = Male, 2 = Female, 3 = Non-binary/third gender, 4 = prefer not to say. Tenure was scored by years. Work hours was number of hours per week. Degree of Remote work: 1 = No, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Yes. Degree of Team-based work: 1 = No team-based work to 5 = My work is entirely team-based. *p < .05, **p < .01.*
Table 2

Regressions Results Predicting General Job Satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.83</td>
<td>.81</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>.025</td>
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<td>[0.23, 3.43]</td>
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<tr>
<td>General job interruption</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.722</td>
<td>[-0.59, 0.84]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General coworker support</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>[0.23, 0.98]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General interruption*support</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.31</td>
<td>-.92</td>
<td>.361</td>
<td>[-0.25, 0.09]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

*Two-Way ANOVA Results Testing for Group Differences in Experimental Variables*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>η_p^2</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Experimental coworker interruption</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.443</td>
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<td>Experimental coworker support</td>
<td>295.34</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>348.75</td>
<td>&lt; .001**</td>
<td>.662</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interruption*support</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.735</td>
<td>.001</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.  **p < .01.
**Figure 3**

*Experimental Perception of Coworker Interruption*

![Bar Chart](chart.png)

*Note.* Error bars represent standard error of the mean.
Figure 4

*Experimental Perception of Coworker Support*
Figure 5

Experimental Perception of Coworker Satisfaction by Condition

![Bar chart showing Coworker Satisfaction by Condition]

Note. LI_LS, LI_HS, HI_LS and HI_HS represent Low Interruption and Low Coworker Support, Low Interruption and High Coworker Support, High Interruption and Low Coworker Support, and High Interruption and High Coworker Support respectively.
Appendix A

Scenarios

Condition 1: High coworker support and high coworker interruption

Imagine that you are a data analyst, who works in an office with a team of your coworkers nearby. You and your coworker Molly are currently working on a time-sensitive project for an important client. You have invested several weeks of your time on this project, sometimes staying in the office past work hours to complete your work to meet the upcoming deadline.

Although working on this project has been stressing you out, your coworker Molly frequently asks if you need help with your assignments. In addition, she makes sure that you're not getting too stressed out from your work by offering emotional support and encouragement. Here are three examples of your interactions with Molly throughout your work on this project:

1. You: Molly, my laptop just stopped working for some reason but I have to email an important update to the client. Could I use yours? It’ll just take a minute.
   Molly (scrolling through her social media feed): Of course. Here you go, take your time.

2. You are suffering from a headache in the middle of the workday and have to put your head down for a couple minutes. (This coworker really cares about my well-being)
   Molly: Are you ok? Do you need help?
   You: No, I’ve got a headache.
   Molly: If you need it, I have some ibuprofen. It will help with the headache.
   You: Thank you, that would be great.
   Molly: You should probably take the afternoon off. You’ve got to take care of your health first.
3. You: Molly, I have been stuck on this same analysis for an hour and not made much progress. The same error message keeps popping up. Could you help me figure out how to handle this? Molly: Sure. Let me see…You need to first clean these data in Excel before inputting them into the statistics software. That will help you avoid the error message that keeps popping up so that you can complete the analysis.

Now that you know a bit about your coworker Molly and your relationship with her, we are going to share some examples of when Molly has interrupted you at work. Work interruptions are defined as an unexpected suspension of the performance of, and/or attentional focus on an ongoing work task. On average, your coworker Molly interrupts you 8-10 times per day. Here are some examples of the last four times Molly interrupted you while working on your data analyses and report write-up for this project.

1. You are at your desk working on cleaning your dataset in Excel. Molly walks up and asks a question.

Molly: Hey, do you know the phone number of the expert that the supervisor wants us to contact?

You (to Molly): Yes, I wrote it on the memo. Here you are.

You (to self): Where was I on this dataset? Er…I don’t remember. Let me check it again from the beginning.

2. After having completed the data cleaning data, you are now uploading your dataset to the statistics software. Molly approaches again to give you a new task.

Molly: The client has a new request for the final report, they want us to adjust the analysis to account for unit price and store location.

You: Got it! Thank you. I will factor that into my analysis.
3. After having successfully uploaded the data you are now working on the analysis in the statistics software program. Molly approaches again and informs you:

Molly: Hey, just a heads up, the manager wants to have a meeting with both of us tomorrow morning at 10AM to check our status on the final report.

You: Ok, thanks for letting me know.

4. You have been working on analyzing data for a couple hours now and you find something wrong with the results, so you are digging into the problem. Molly interrupts you and asks:

Molly: What is the name of the restaurant that you went to with Gina last weekend?

You: Er, I’m not sure I remember. Something like Shiny Rainbow? It was on Central Ave.

Molly: Okay, I’ll look it up. What dishes did you have?

You: Hotpot, pork, bubble tea…It was really good.

Molly: Sounds great. I’m planning to try it out on Sunday. My friends in town and loves Chinese food, so I wanted to try something new.

**Condition 2: Low coworker support and low coworker interruption**

Imagine that you are a data analyst, who works in an office with a team of your coworkers nearby. You and your coworker Molly are currently working on a time-sensitive project for an important client. You have invested several weeks of your time on this project, sometimes staying in the office past work hours to complete your work to meet the upcoming deadline.

Although working on this project has been stressing you out, your coworker Molly seldom asks if you need help with your assignments. In addition, she doesn’t seem to care if you're getting too stressed out from your work on the project. Here are three examples of your interactions with Molly throughout your work on this project:
1. You: Molly, my laptop just stopped working for some reason but I have to email an important update to the client. Could I use yours?

Molly (scrolling through her social media feed): No, sorry. I’m using it.

2. You are suffering from a headache in the middle of the workday and have to put your head down for a couple of minutes. Your coworker, Molly, sees your head down but does not say anything.

You: I’ve got a headache. Do you happen to have any ibuprofen?

Molly: Maybe, but headaches are normal, so you just need to accept it and not be so delicate. I doubt the ibuprofen would help anyway.

You: Yeah, maybe.

Molly: You should probably get back to work. You’ve got to take care of your work first.

3. You: Molly, I have been stuck on this same analysis for an hour and have not made much progress. The same error message keeps popping up. Could you help me figure out how to handle this?

Molly: No, I can’t. I’m pretty busy.

You: Well, have you ever seen this error message before?

Molly: I said I’m busy. Maybe you could ask someone else.

Now that you know a bit about your coworker Molly and your relationship with her, we are going to share some examples of when Molly has interrupted you at work. Work interruptions are defined as an unexpected suspension of the performance of, and/or attentional focus on an ongoing work task. On average, your coworker Molly interrupts you 1 time per day. Here is an example of the last time Molly interrupted you while working on your data analyses and report write-up for this project.
1. You have been working on analyzing data for a couple of hours now and you find something wrong with the results, so you are digging into the problem. Molly interrupts you and asks:

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**Condition 3: High coworker support and low coworker interruption**

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