

Applying Affect in the Workplace

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Workplace affectivity, though historically unstudied in the field of I/O Psychology, has undergone massive breakthroughs in recent years through the aptly coined ““affective revolution”” (Hulin & Judge, 2009). Though job satisfaction has been heavily researched and regarded throughout the years, affect has been continually overlooked until recently. New findings challenge the status quo and well-accepted belief that only positive affect is integral to an innovative and productive work environment. Throughout the history of I/O Psychology and Organizational Communications, it has been widely (and incontrovertibly) accepted that positive affectivity yields the most fruitful work and most expansive thinking. Indeed, many are aware of the common misconceptions regarding creativity; that you can be either a suffering artist or be an extremely positive individual to be creative. However, recent studies have been combatting this conception of creativity. There appears to be more fluidity in affect and creativity, and the positive and negative affect both have a more complex relevance to creativity than we may have initially thought. The true complexity of negative affectivity has been seen through many research studies and conclusions in the past few decades has shown that though “negative affect and creativity do not seem to be related in a direct, simple and consistent fashion” (Cropanzano, R., et al., 2003), it has shown vested benefits in the workplace. As such, a deep dive must be done into affectivity to better understand how it functions in the workplace.

Affect can be understood as something that “helps the brain to make external sensations meaningful, aiding perception in a very basic way” (Barrett, L. F., & Bliss-Moreau, E., 2009); affectivity is the cognition through which an individual develops a general disposition towards something. Affectivity is also known to be deeply connected to emotion and emotion-processing habits, which is why the study of affect has been integral to understanding broader theories on job enrichment and job satisfaction. Daily emotional functioning and long term perceptions can

be traced back to the foundations of one's affectivity. It has also been found that affect is deeply impacted by job experiences, as detailed by the Affective Event Theory (AET), as theorized by Weiss and Cropanzano in their 1996 study. Affect is deeply integrated with work experiences, and it can be said that one's affect is contingent on how they felt at their workplace or how their work made them feel as a whole.

As such, we find that affect and workplace dynamics cannot be considered wholly separate; they are both entities that impact each other in either negative or positive feedback loops. Events that impact affect could be as small as someone cutting you off in traffic or as severe as receiving a strike from your boss at work. Affect can be immensely swayed by most any mundane event in one's life, which highlights the significance of its study. Another important aspect of affect is the fact that, both in public perception as well as in research, affect is divided into two different and rigid categories; negative affect and positive affect. Positive affect is often seen as the most integral to workplace creativity. Negative affect is often seen as something that hinders innovative work in an organization. Many have considered positive affect to be more beneficial to a workplace than negative affect is, which is not true. Recent studies have shown that "negative affect and creativity do not seem to be related in a direct, simple and consistent fashion" (Cropanzano, R., et al., 2003). Negative affect and positive affect are interrelated in nuanced and complex ways, and both are seen to enhance different aspects of performance and creativity within the workplace (Martin, L. L. et al., 1993, Anderson, S., & Rodin, J., 1989).

For example, "negative mood will lead to cautiousness and promote tighter, systematic, and analytic processing strategies" (Anderson and Rodin, 1989), while, on the other hand, with positive affectivity, individuals are more likely to recall a wealth of information (Isen, Daubman,

& Nowicki, 1987). The benefits brought by negative and positive affect may differ, but both serve a vested role in the workplace. These findings may challenge us to look at affect differently; instead of actively seeking to decrease or diminish negative affect, we should try to see it as healthy and a counterpart to positive affect. While positive affect may aid an employee in certain aspects of creativity, negative affect can aid them in others.

Research has also shown that “emotional exhaustion” (Halbesleben, J. R., et al., 2014) often leads to surprisingly beneficial outcomes. Employees who experience negative or draining emotions are more likely to support their peers. This is an example of a beneficial application of negative affect or emotion in the workplace. An employee’s negative affect, reversely, can benefit the emotional balance and well-being of the workplace. This is a finding that rivals the commonly held perception that only positive affectivity can induce productivity. However, finding can also arouse concerns of morality and ethicality when considering its application to the workplace.

But how can organizations maximize their employee’s affect (both positive and negative) without raising ethical concerns or without actively trying to bring about a negative affect? This is an inherent question that must be answered considering the fact that most companies seek to maximize their productivity and output. But what is the most efficient and ethically proper way to utilize negative affectivity in a way that maximizes every employee’s ability? These are the questions that we will be tackling this paper through an analysis of studies and research that have been conducted regarding affect organizations.

This leads us to the primary question of this paper: How can we maximize the effects of negative affect in the workplace without inducing or perpetuating negative affect within employees? How can we use the benefits of negative affect without actively inducing negative

affect in employees? This is the prime question that organizations may face when they consider findings such as these.

The first step of productively applying negative affect to the workplace is by changing our thought process on negative affect. Changing our cognition of negative affect is integral to properly applying it in innovative endeavors. With a defensive perception of negative affect, it will be very difficult to truly enact productive applications of affect altogether. To truly understand the mindset of the employee, organizations would greatly benefit from understanding negative affect as much as they understand positive affect (Garmendia, 2021). Positive emotions and affect are deeply promoted within organizations, but companies often fail to consider the active role negative affect may play in the work philosophy of many employees. Denying negative affect is a common mistake committed by organizations; many researchers and Organizational Communications Specialists specify methods through which negative affect can be decreased at a company.

However, one must question how conducive it is to deny negative affect in a ‘healthy workplace’. Toxic positivity has been shown to “negatively impact overall job satisfaction and are often subtle, hidden, or demonstrate human biases” (Bhat, Hosseini, Hassan, Bennett, & Li, 2021) and remains present throughout organizations in implicit ways. Instead of devising methods of allowing employees to work productively through their negative affect, organizations essentially encourage them to “avoid or suppress negative emotions” (Davis). This creates a stifling environment for many employees, and can create tense, inauthentic dynamics between them and their coworkers. It can also harm their productivity and creative thinking processes as they mentally strained as it is.

To truly appreciate negative affect as well as the benefits it brings to productivity, organizations must begin to understand that affect can be seen like a coin- it has two sides. Each side is different, and may tell you different things about the coin, but both sides are significant nonetheless. They can also supplement one another and help identify one another. By acknowledging that negative affect exists, and is okay for employees to experience, companies develop an emotionally safe environment in which workers can feel free to express their emotions. In addition, they would feel safer to complete their work to the best of their ability and utilize the mindframe afforded to them by their affect in that moment.

To further our understanding of negative affect, further research of its role in the workplace must be done. It would be advisable for companies to design nuanced intervention programs through which employees can learn to acknowledge negative affect and understand its benefits. By being able to discern when their affect is negative, they can feel less apprehensive about their performance due to their mood. They can also ask for space, time, and distance from coworkers, which would improve workplace rapport immensely (Hackman, 2002). This type of intervention, naturally, would arise out of further grounded research and would be supplemented by monitoring, assistance, and communication. By recognizing the validity and experience of negative affect, the workplace would then develop a sense of psychological safety for employees; they would not feel the need to falsify their affect and could focus on their work.

Negative affect can be more intrinsic to workplace dynamics and productivity than we had thought initially. However, through the recent research, we find that negative affect is just as relevant as positive affect in the dispersal of creativity and innovative thinking. As such, through changing our thought processes of negative affect and designing an intervention or environment

through which negative affect can be managed, we may find that organizations may flourish due to negative affect.

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