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**To cite this article:** Angelika Lau & Sophia C. Aguirre Reid (24 Feb 2026): How Work Autonomy Enhances Adaptive Performance: The Sequential Role of Job Crafting Towards Strengths and Demands–Abilities Fit in Times of Crisis, Journal of Change Management, DOI: [10.1080/14697017.2026.2631400](https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2026.2631400)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/14697017.2026.2631400>



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Published online: 24 Feb 2026.



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# How Work Autonomy Enhances Adaptive Performance: The Sequential Role of Job Crafting Towards Strengths and Demands–Abilities Fit in Times of Crisis

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## ABSTRACT

To address the societal challenge of building resilient work systems, organisations increasingly depend on employees' adaptive performance, a key competence of the modern workforce. This study explored how distinct forms of autonomy (work scheduling, work criteria and work method autonomy) are translated into adaptive performance during crises by introducing job crafting towards strengths and demands–abilities (DA) fit as dual sequentially mediating mechanisms. Drawing on data from 1,259 employees and employing structural equation modelling, we found that work method and work criteria autonomy, but not work scheduling autonomy, significantly enhance adaptive performance through this sequential pathway. These findings advance the change management literature by demonstrating how work design can be strategically leveraged to support employees' effective adaptation under crisis conditions. We also extend the job demands–resources theory and enrich work design research with a more nuanced understanding of work autonomy. For practitioners, the results offer actionable insights: targeted enhancement of work method and work criteria autonomy can foster proactive, strengths-based job crafting and improve DA fit, thereby sustaining adaptive performance and contributing to resilient work systems amid sudden and unanticipated changes.

## MAD statement

This study aims to *make a difference* (MAD) by systematically demonstrating conceptual boundaries in the adaptation literature and revealing how distinct forms of work autonomy enable employees to achieve adaptive performance during crises. By introducing job crafting towards personal strengths and demands–abilities fit as dual mediating mechanisms, we extend existing theories and enrich work design research. For practitioners, our findings highlight concrete levers for fostering employee resilience. More broadly, our study contributes to the societal challenge of establishing resilient work systems aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals on promoting sustainable economic growth,

## KEYWORDS

Adaptive performance; Work autonomy; Person–job fit; Job crafting towards strengths; Sudden and unanticipated change; Job redesign

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productive employment and decent work by providing both theoretical advancement and practical guidance.

## 1. Introduction

Today's economy is characterised by multifaceted crises, such as pandemics, geopolitical conflicts and disruptive technologies (e.g. Hartley et al., 2024). Such events unfold with little warning, create persistent uncertainty and disrupt established routines, with little or no time for preparation. For instance, the Covid-19 pandemic imposed sudden and unanticipated changes that profoundly affected organisations and their employees worldwide (e.g. Sarkar & Clegg, 2021). Owing to multifaceted crises, interest has grown among businesses in understanding and promoting organisational resilience (Kim et al., 2024) by depending on employees' adaptive performance (Jundt & Shoss, 2023). Adaptive performance refers to employees' ability to adapt quickly and easily under conditions of inherent uncertainty and ambiguity, as well as the speed and appropriateness with which individuals respond to crisis situations (Charbonnier-Voirin & Roussel, 2012; Pulakos et al., 2000). Given that employees' adaptive performance is considered critical for organisational resilience during extreme, disruptive crises (Jundt & Shoss, 2023), identifying the factors through which organisations can support employees' adaptive performance in such contexts is therefore imperative for enabling effective change management.

Although adaptive performance in response to sudden and unanticipated change has received considerable empirical attention, much of the empirical evidence on its drivers originates from laboratory-based task-change paradigms (e.g. Chen et al., 2005; Huck et al., 2020; Lang & Bliese, 2009). These paradigms capture 'relatively granular contexts with constrained adaptational demands' (Jundt & Shoss, 2023, p. 408) and typically unfold over short timeframes. While methodologically rigorous, this micrograin-sized perspective (Jundt & Shoss, 2023) offers a limited understanding of adaptive performance under the complex, multifaceted and sustained demands of extreme, disruptive crises, in which employees are required to adapt rapidly and continuously across multiple domains and at a broader temporal and task scale (Crevani et al., 2021; Roulet & Bothello, 2023).

While a small but growing body of research has begun to examine adaptive performance in extreme, disruptive crisis settings, such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Alabri et al., 2022; Bajaba et al., 2021; Joie-La Marle et al., 2021), this emerging stream has primarily emphasised individual difference variables, such as self-efficacy (Bajaba et al., 2021; Joie-La Marle et al., 2021), adaptive personality (Bajaba et al., 2021) or self-leadership (Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2019). Although this research provides valuable insight into who is more likely to adapt effectively, it offers comparatively less evidence of how work can be designed – specifically through the strategic provision of job resources – to facilitate adaptive performance across employees. This lack of attention to work design is particularly salient given the theoretical emphasis on the central role of job resources in enabling effective adaptation, especially under the intensified demands of crisis situations (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023). Beyond a single study directly linking broad job resources – for example, employee involvement and job enrichment – to adaptive performance during the Covid-19 pandemic (Alabri et al., 2022), the mechanisms

through which job resources foster adaptive performance remain empirically unexplored. Therefore, advancing our understanding of which specific job resources contribute to adaptive performance during extreme, disruptive crises and the processes through which they operate represents an important but underexplored avenue for further empirical investigation.

Considering that work autonomy has long been recognised as a core motivational job resource that directly fosters adaptive performance (e.g. Goštautaitė & Bučiūnienė, 2015; Tabiu et al., 2020) and is theorised to play a critical role in crisis contexts (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023), it is remarkable that empirical research has yet to examine its role and the mechanisms through which it contributes to adaptive performance in extreme, disruptive crises involving sudden and unanticipated change.

Moreover, when reviewing the literature, it is important to emphasise that prior research has rarely accounted for the multidimensional nature of autonomy – that is, work method, work scheduling and work criteria autonomy (Breugh, 1985). Thus, the distinct contributions of these dimensions to adaptive performance remain largely unknown, even though scholars have repeatedly called for a finer-grained investigation of work autonomy (Sadler-Smith et al., 2003; Spiegelaere et al., 2016).

The present study addresses these gaps by developing a model that incorporates the multidimensional nature of work autonomy – encompassing work method autonomy (WMA), work scheduling autonomy (WSA) and work criteria autonomy (WCA) – to investigate how these distinct forms contribute to adaptive performance in crisis contexts, with a specific focus on the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany. Drawing on the job demands–resources (JD-R) framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018) and its extensions to crisis (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023), we propose a double-mediation pathway whereby autonomy enhances adaptive performance through job crafting towards personal strengths (JC-strengths) and employees' perceptions of demands-abilities fit (DA fit).

In doing so, this study makes three key contributions. First, it extends the research on adaptive performance by moving beyond the dominant focus on individual differences to emphasise work design factors, thereby highlighting work autonomy as a critical job resource under crisis conditions. Second, it elucidates the mechanisms linking specific autonomy dimensions to adaptive performance through JC-strengths and DA fit, thereby advancing our understanding of how job resources translate into adaptive performance. From a practical standpoint, we provide organisations with actionable insights by identifying specific autonomy dimensions that can sustain employee resilience and adaptive performance amid sudden and unanticipated change. Third, it refines theoretical perspectives on work design and job crafting by demonstrating that distinct forms of autonomy are not equally beneficial for promoting adaptive performance via strengths-based crafting and DA fit perceptions.

## **2. Adaptive Performance and Sudden and Unanticipated Changes**

Against the backdrop of sudden and unanticipated change, such as in crisis situations, business interest has grown in understanding and promoting organisational resilience (Kim et al., 2024) by depending on employees' ability to adapt effectively (Jundt & Shoss, 2023). This ability is commonly discussed under the umbrella of adaptation,

although distinct concepts are often blurred in the literature. In particular, three related but different constructs require sharper delineation. First, individual adaptability refers to an individual's general and relatively stable disposition to cope with change by calling on their own ability, skill, disposition, willingness and/or motivation to adjust to novel situations (e.g. Griffin & Hesketh, 2003; Ployhart & Bliese, 2006). Second, adaptive behaviour refers to the actions employees take to cope with, respond to and facilitate change within their work roles (Griffin et al., 2007). Third, adaptive performance captures the actual effectiveness of employees in adjusting to change (Shoss et al., 2012) by reflecting their ability to modify behaviours to meet shifting situational demands (Charbonnier-Voirin & Roussel, 2012).

As a construct, adaptive performance was first systematically conceptualised by Pulakos et al. (2000), who developed an eight-dimensional taxonomy linking different types of change (e.g. uncertain or unpredictable work situations) to specific behaviours that enable effective adaptation. This framework established the multidimensionality of adaptive performance and provided a conceptual basis for identifying contextually relevant adaptive responses (Jundt et al., 2015; Jundt & Shoss, 2023). Addressing the limitation of a broadly applicable, robust measurement instrument in this regard, Charbonnier-Voirin and Roussel (2012) advanced this line of work by developing a refined five-dimensional scale that is psychometrically sound (Krijgsheld et al., 2024) and attuned to the specific demands that different types of change place on adaptive responses. In the specific context of sudden and unanticipated change, such as crisis situations, how quickly and effectively employees adapt is especially critical (Jundt & Shoss, 2023). Accordingly, this study focuses specifically on employees' adaptive performance in terms of their reactivity in the face of emergencies or unexpected circumstances that capture their ability for rapid and effective behavioural adjustment. This includes taking decisive actions under uncertainty, imposing self-structure, maintaining focus and objectivity, and quickly revising priorities (Charbonnier-Voirin & Roussel, 2012; Pulakos et al., 2000).

### 3. Hypothesis Development

#### 3.1. *Autonomy and Job Crafting Towards Strengths*

Job crafting refers to self-initiated changes employees make to shape their work, aimed at improving their person-job fit (Tims & Bakker, 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Scholars have emphasised the need to focus not solely on job characteristics that are crafted but also on the personal side of person-job fit by integrating employees' personal resources – such as individual strengths – into the job crafting concept (Kooij et al., 2017; Kuijpers et al., 2020). Accordingly, JC-strengths refer to self-initiated efforts to redesign one's work to better leverage personal strengths at work (Kooij et al., 2017). Strengths are personal characteristics that enable optimal functioning and performance (Linley, 2008). For example, employees who engage in JC-strengths expand their jobs by adding tasks in which they are highly competent (Zhang et al., 2021).

We propose that employees are more likely to engage in JC-strengths when they perceive high work autonomy. Work autonomy reflects the discretion and freedom individuals experience in carrying out their work (Humphrey et al., 2007) and represents a

well-recognised motivational job resource in JD-R theory (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018). Accordingly, jobs that provide autonomy foster employees' motivation while also providing leeway to make work-related adjustments that facilitate and promote JC-strengths. Next, we explain in detail why specific types of autonomy – namely, WSA, WCA and WMA (Breugh, 1985) – enhance JC-strengths.

First, WSA refers to the control that job incumbents perceive over the scheduling, sequencing or timing of their work activities (Breugh, 1985). It enables employees to schedule their work in a more efficient way, thereby freeing up additional cognitive and temporal resources (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012) that can be reinvested in JC-strengths efforts, such as integrating tasks that allow for strength utilisation.

Second, WCA refers to employees' freedom to modify or choose the criteria used for their performance evaluation (Breugh, 1985). It is expected to have similar effects, as it can release surplus cognitive and temporal resources. WCA helps employees assess themselves, leading to opportunities to realise their abilities and address weaknesses and existing drawbacks related to their performance, thereby allowing them to pursue work more efficiently and effectively (Sia & Appu, 2015). Moreover, WCA grants employees discretion over the types of tasks they execute and the goals they are supposed to achieve at work (Breugh, 1985, 1999), thereby creating opportunities to set more self-concordant goals, such as those that allow them to use their strengths (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018; van Woerkom et al., 2016). Consequently, greater discretion over task and goal selection is likely to facilitate stronger engagement in JC-strengths.

Finally, WMA refers to the discretion granted to employees in determining how to execute their jobs by choosing the methods to use (Breugh, 1985). Such discretion allows employees to identify more efficient and accurate ways of performing their work (Pearson et al., 2009), thereby freeing cognitive and temporal resources (ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012), which can be reinvested into JC-strengths. In addition, WMA encourages experimentation and exploration of new methods (Battistelli et al., 2013; Tabiu et al., 2020), allowing employees to choose approaches that best align with their strengths (Linley, 2008; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Thus, building on the previous argumentation, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1a–c: Work autonomy in terms of (a) WSA, (b) WCA and (c) WMA has a positive effect on job crafting towards strengths.

### **3.2. Job Crafting Towards Strengths and Adaptive Performance**

Drawing on strengths use theories (Buckingham, 2010; Linley, 2008), and JD-R theory, we assume that the relationship between JC-strengths and adaptive performance is positive. Accordingly, the use of strengths leads individuals to enter a state of deep concentration and involvement (Buckingham, 2010; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In this state, employees have greater cognitive activity, enabling them to accomplish work in a more effective way and, therefore, be better able to adapt to change (e.g. Dubreuil et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2021). Furthermore, employees who use their strengths at work feel more alive, experience high levels of vigour and recover faster (Linley, 2008). In this way, employees can achieve optimal functioning and best performance even in challenging situations, such as sudden and unanticipated changes in the work environment (e.g. Dubreuil et

al., 2014; Shoss et al., 2012). As a result of these positive emotional and energy states, employees are more inclined to think unconventionally and break their habitual ways of thinking, which ultimately spurs their adaptive performance (e.g. Dubreuil et al., 2021; Jundt & Shoss, 2023). This argumentation is further in line with JD-R theory, which emphasises the importance of proactive individual strategies (e.g. the use of JC-strengths) because they help employees control, direct and correct their own actions to function better at work during sudden and unanticipated change (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023). Our argumentation for a positive relationship between JC-strengths and adaptive performance is further underpinned by previous studies highlighting the critical role of job crafting, as well as the use of strengths for helping employees better adapt to changing work situations (e.g. Dubreuil et al., 2021; Vakola et al., 2023). Based on these theoretical and empirical groundings, we posit the following hypothesis:

H2: Job crafting towards strengths is positively related to employees' adaptive performance.

### **3.3. Mediating Role of Job Crafting Towards Strengths**

Building on prior argumentation and JD-R theory, we posit that JC-strengths mediate the relationship between the autonomy dimensions (WSA, WCA and WMA) and adaptive performance. According to the gain spiral proposed by JD-R theory, job resources stimulate motivational processes that foster proactive behaviours aimed at further increasing resources and motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). As important job resources, the autonomy dimensions are functional for effective and efficient task accomplishment (Pearson et al., 2009; Sia & Appu, 2015), thereby fostering the motivation necessary for employees to engage in JC-strengths (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018). By enacting JC-strengths, employees can actively generate additional resources, including greater energy and positive affect (Dubreuil et al., 2021; Linley, 2008). In this way, JC-strengths act as a central behavioural mechanism through which employees create their own gain cycle of motivation and resource accumulation, ultimately fostering positive performance outcomes (Bakker & van Woerkom, 2018) – particularly adaptive performance (Jundt & Shoss, 2023). Taken together, employees who have WSA, WCA and WMA are more likely to engage in JC-strengths, thereby expanding their resource pool, which ultimately benefits their adaptive performance. Supporting this reasoning, Gordon et al. (2015) found that job crafting mediates the relationship between job resources and performance. Hence, we posit the following hypothesis:

H3a–c: Job crafting towards strengths mediates the positive relationship between work autonomy in terms of (a) WSA, (b) WCA and (c) WMA and adaptive performance.

### **3.4. The Mediating Role of Demands–Abilities Fit**

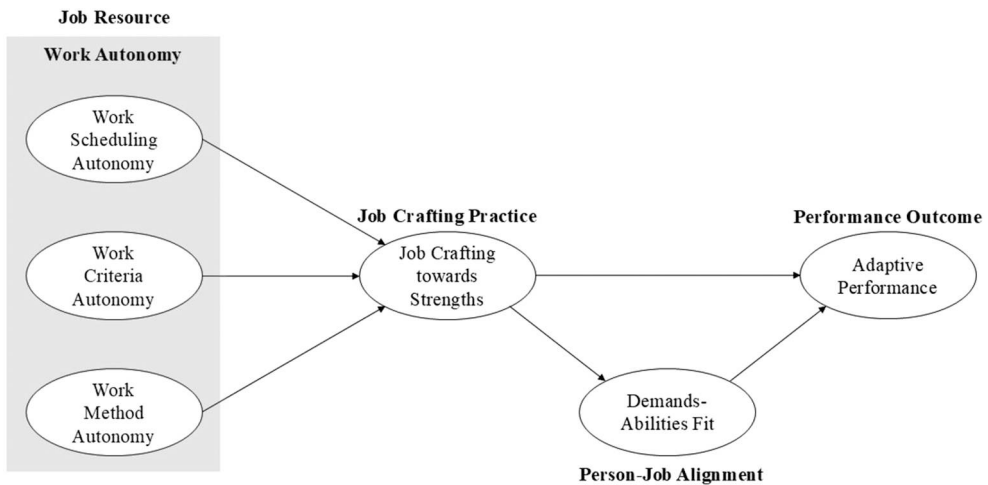
Referring to the specific relationship between JC-strengths and adaptive performance, we expect DA fit to serve as an important mechanism linking JC-strengths to adaptive performance. DA fit, a specific form of person-job fit, reflects the perceived congruence between employees' knowledge, skills and abilities and their job demands (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). In times of crisis (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023), JD-R theory highlights the role of bottom-up job redesign approaches, such as job

crafting, in helping employees balance job demands and resources. Because JC-strengths are inherently aimed at optimising this alignment (Kooij et al., 2017), engaging in such behaviours represents a promising strategy for enhancing DA fit. Employees who actively use their strengths at work are more likely to achieve their work goals effectively, experience reduced job demands and develop stronger confidence in their ability to meet job requirements. Moreover, the use of strengths fosters feelings of competence and accelerates learning, thereby stimulating personal growth and development (e.g. van Woerkom & Meyers, 2019), which are key components of DA fit perceptions (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Supporting this reasoning, Kooij et al. (2017) found that increased DA fit was a direct outcome of JC-strengths. JD-R theory, in times of crisis, further suggests that employees whose job demands match their abilities are better able to adapt and maintain functioning (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023), which also aligns with the person-environment fit theory (Edwards, 1991). Employees with high DA fit possess deeper role-specific knowledge (Astakhova et al., 2017), experience an enhanced capability to perform their work and feel more efficacious and less constrained by their job demands (Dineen et al., 2018). Consequently, they may be better positioned to acquire and organise change-relevant information and to focus on the most salient cues for comprehending the situation at hand. This can facilitate more rapid and context-appropriate responses during crises, manifesting in higher adaptive performance (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023; Jundt & Shoss, 2023). Supporting this view, Chen et al. (2005) found that task-related knowledge and individuals' skills positively predicted adaptive performance – particularly employees' ability to handle crises and uncertain work conditions.

Taken together, these arguments suggest the potential mediating role of DA fit in the relationship between JC-strengths and adaptive performance. This aligns with JD-R theory, which posits that employees shape and refine their jobs through job crafting to enhance their fit with the work environment, which ultimately benefits employee performance outcomes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2024; Demerouti & Bakker, 2023). Therefore, we posit the following hypothesis:

H4: DA fit mediates the positive relationship between job crafting towards strengths and adaptive performance.

Integrating the preceding arguments from previous hypotheses, we propose that work autonomy dimensions foster adaptive performance via a sequential pathway encompassing JC-strengths and DA fit. Specifically, autonomy dimensions provide both the opportunities and the motivation for employees to engage in JC-strengths (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). By leveraging their strengths through JC-strengths activities, employees can reduce job demands and improve their perceived ability to manage them (van Woerkom et al., 2016; van Woerkom & Meyers, 2019), thereby achieving better DA fit (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Kooij et al., 2017). In turn, employees with higher DA fit, characterised by deeper role knowledge, feelings of competence and efficacy (e.g. Dineen et al., 2018), are better equipped to respond rapidly and effectively to sudden and unanticipated changes, manifesting in higher adaptive performance (e.g. Jundt & Shoss, 2023). Hence, we hypothesise the following:



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model.

Note: The control variables included in the final model are not depicted in this figure.

H5: The relationship between work autonomy – specifically (a) WSA, (b) WCA and (c) WMA– and adaptive performance is sequentially mediated by job crafting towards strengths and demands–abilities fit.

Grounded in these hypotheses, our research model was developed (see [Figure 1](#)).

## 4. Materials and Methods

### 4.1. Participants and Procedure

We conducted an online survey over a three-week period in March and April 2021 at an insurance organisation in Germany that operates internationally. A total of 2,760 employees were invited to participate via email and intranet posts. To encourage participation, employees were assured of anonymity and permitted to complete the survey during work hours. They were also sent a reminder via email after two weeks. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for the use of their data for research purposes. With the exception of work autonomy, the responses to our focal study variables referred to employees' experiences from mid-December 2020, thus capturing those during the second wave of the pandemic. In particular, at this time, the German government abruptly imposed a stricter 'hard lockdown' after the preceding 'light lockdown' had failed to contain the second wave of infections despite being framed as a strategy to preserve a sense of normality during the Christmas season. The lockdown was further tightened in January 2021 and remained in effect until late April. Additionally, this phase of the pandemic was marked by less evidence-based policy decisions and the increasingly inconsistent implementation of restrictions across federal states (Warren et al., 2021). These circumstances, combined with the recurrent lockdowns and intermittent relaxations throughout the pandemic, fostered a climate of persistent uncertainty and ambiguity (Roulet & Bothello, 2023; Sarkar & Osiyevskyy, 2018), making it increasingly difficult to anticipate where and when disruptions might unfold and how one might be affected (Crevani et

al., 2021). Such perceptions were likely strengthened by the prevention paradox, whereby the successful management of the first wave in Germany reduced perceived risk and public urgency for continued precautions (Warren et al., 2021). As such, employees' experiences during Germany's second Covid-19 wave offered a unique, real-world context for examining adaptive performance under sudden and unanticipated change.

We received surveys from 1,604 employees (response rate 58.12%). To ensure data quality, we excluded participants who failed the relative completion speed index as an attention-check indicator (Leiner, 2019). To reduce unobserved heterogeneity, we retained only employees who worked at home at least 75% of their time (Verelst et al., 2023). After cleansing the data of implausible, inconsistent and missing values, the final sample included 1,259 employees. Among these, 543 (43.13%) were female and 716 (56.87%) were male. The mean age was 46.93 years (range = 18–65; SD = 10.91). A total of 155 employees (12.31%) held leadership positions, and participants worked from home for an average of 98% of their weekly hours (SD = .06).

#### 4.2. Measures

The items were measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), unless otherwise noted. The questions were in German, following a back-translation procedure and bilingual translation (Brislin, 1980).

**Autonomy** was assessed using a scale developed by Breaugh (1985) capturing three dimensions – WMA, WCA and WSA – each measured by three items. A sample item for WMA is 'I am allowed to decide how to go about getting my job done (the methods I use)'. A sample item for WCA is 'I am able to modify what my job objectives are (what I am supposed to accomplish)'. A sample item for WSA is 'I have control over the scheduling of my work'. One item from the WCA scale ('My job allows me to modify the normal way we are evaluated so that I can emphasise some aspects of my job and play down others') was removed to achieve adequate convergent validity of this subscale (Hair et al., 2021). Because the resulting WCA measure comprised only two items, we did not compute McDonald's omega but used the Spearman–Brown coefficient to assess internal consistency, as recommended by Eisinga et al. (2013). This reliability estimate yielded a value of .70 for WCA. McDonald's omega yielded a value of .83 for WSA and a coefficient of .91 for WMA.

**Adaptive performance** was measured using the four-item scale developed and validated by Charbonnier-Voirin and Roussel (2012). The scale includes items that capture adaptive performance in terms of employee reactivity in case of emergencies or unexpected circumstances. A sample item is 'I easily reorganise my work to adapt to new circumstances'. McDonald's omega for the scale was .81.

**JC-strengths** was measured using the scale developed by Kooij et al. (2017). A sample item is 'I organise my work in such a way that it matches my strengths'. One item ('I discuss the task division with my colleagues to make sure I can do tasks I am good at') with the lowest factor loading was dropped from subsequent analyses to ensure the convergent validity of the measurement scale (Hair et al., 2021). McDonald's omega for the remaining three items yielded a value of .76.

**DA fit** was measured with three items using the scale developed by Cable and DeRue (2002). A sample item is 'The match is very good between the demands of my job and my personal skills'. The McDonald's omega total for the scale was .90.

**Controls** included gender (1 = male), age (in years) and leadership position (1 = yes), consistent with prior adaptive performance research (Goštautaitė & Bučiūnienė, 2015; Vakola et al., 2023). Given the pandemic context, we additionally controlled for WFH voluntariness, equipment satisfaction and caring responsibilities. WFH voluntariness was measured with a single item ('I would prefer to work less from home') on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (fully applies) to 5 (does not apply at all). Equipment satisfaction was coded as a dummy variable (1 = satisfied with the workplace equipment), and caring responsibility was assessed on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (does not apply at all) to 5 (fully applies), indicating the extent to which caregiving impaired work. The omission of these controls did not alter the pattern or significance of the results.

## 5. Analytical Procedure and Results

### 5.1. Analytical Procedure

To test the hypothesised model, we employed structural equation modelling using the *lavaan* package (version 0.6–13; Rosseel, 2012) in R. As recommended by Gerbing and Anderson (1988), we followed a two-step approach to test the model. First, to evaluate the measurement models' discriminant validity (O'Leary-Kelly & Vokurka, 1998), we conducted a set of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) using a robust maximum likelihood estimator appropriate for non-normally distributed data (Lai, 2019). Measurement models were assessed using chi-square statistics and established fit indices, including the comparative fit index (CFI), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). In addition, we relied on average variances extracted (AVEs) to establish the convergent validity of the measurement models (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Hair et al., 2019). Second, we evaluated the overall goodness of fit of our proposed double-mediation model based on several established fit indices (Hu & Bentler, 1999). To test the derived hypotheses, we applied a non-parametric bootstrapping method with 10,000 subsamples. To examine the mediating effects, we used percentile bootstrap confidence intervals, as recommended in the literature (Hayes, 2018).

### 5.2. Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations for the variables used in the analyses.

The results of the CFAs, as presented in Table 2, suggest that the proposed six-factor model yielded an acceptable fit and showed a significantly better fit than all alternative models, supporting the discriminant validity of the study constructs. In addition, all AVEs (ranging from .518 to .764) exceeded the suggested cut-off value of .50 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988; Hair et al., 2011), thereby verifying convergent validity. Because the data for the criterion variables and predictors were self-reported and measured at a single point in time, we took precautions to ascertain whether common method variance (CMV) may have been an issue in our study. First, procedural remedies – including anonymity and not using bipolar numerical scales – were employed to control for CMV (Conway & Lance, 2010; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Moreover, post hoc statistical remedies were



**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, intercorrelations (Pearson’s *r*) and McDonald’s omega reliabilities of the measures.

| Variable                  | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1            | 2            | 3            | 4      | 5            | 6            | 7      | 8      | 9      | 10     | 11     |
|---------------------------|----------|-----------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------|--------------|--------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1 Adaptive performance    | 4.17     | 0.60      | <b>(.81)</b> |              |              |        |              |              |        |        |        |        |        |
| 2 WSA                     | 3.71     | 0.81      | .24**        | <b>(.83)</b> |              |        |              |              |        |        |        |        |        |
| 3 WMA                     | 3.54     | 0.95      | .22**        | .65**        | <b>(.91)</b> |        |              |              |        |        |        |        |        |
| 4 WCA                     | 3.35     | 0.88      | .27**        | .54**        | .54**        |        |              |              |        |        |        |        |        |
| 5 JC-strengths            | 3.86     | 0.70      | .38**        | .29**        | .32**        | .31**  | <b>(.76)</b> |              |        |        |        |        |        |
| 6 DA fit                  | 4.14     | 0.74      | .40**        | .28**        | .28**        | .30**  | .35**        | <b>(.90)</b> |        |        |        |        |        |
| 7 Leading position        | 1.88     | 0.33      | -.09**       | -.10**       | -.13**       | -.12** | -.10**       | -.08**       |        |        |        |        |        |
| 8 Age                     | 46.93    | 10.91     | .12**        | -.07**       | -.06*        | .04    | .06*         | .00          | -.01   |        |        |        |        |
| 9 Gender                  | 1.43     | 0.50      | .04          | -.00         | .06*         | -.01   | .08**        | .03          | -.10** | .08**  |        |        |        |
| 10 Equipment satisfaction | 1.14     | 0.35      | -.15**       | -.05         | -.05         | -.11** | -.05         | -.13**       | .03    | -.17** | -.01   |        |        |
| 11 WFH voluntariness      | 3.88     | 1.28      | .24**        | .02          | -.03         | .02    | .04          | .08**        | .13**  | .10**  | -.08** | -.18** |        |
| 12 Caring responsibility  | 1.69     | 1.17      | -.17**       | -.00         | -.02         | -.01   | -.06*        | -.05         | .06*   | -.10** | -.06*  | .09**  | -.13** |

Note: *N* = 1,259, *M* = mean, *SD* = standard deviation. WSA = work scheduling autonomy, WMA = work method autonomy, WCA = work criteria autonomy, JC-strengths = job crafting towards strengths, DA fit = demands–abilities fit. Gender was coded as 0 for women and 1 for men. Leading position was coded as 1 for yes and 0 for no. Equipment satisfaction was coded as 1 for yes and 0 for no. Values in parentheses are McDonald’s omega estimates of internal consistency reliability. \**p* < .05, \*\**p* < .01.

**Table 2.** Results of the confirmatory factor analyses.

| Variable                                       | $\chi^2$ | df  | CFI  | RMSEA | SRMR | TLI  | $\Delta\chi^2$ (df) |
|--|----------|-----|------|-------|------|------|---------------------|
| Six-factor model (proposed model)              | 396.763  | 120 | .971 | .047  | .041 | .963 |                     |
| One-factor model (all variables combined)      | 4445.919 | 135 | .522 | .18   | .146 | .458 | 1884.5 (6)***       |
| Four-factor model: (WSA, WCA and WMA combined) | 1016.975 | 129 | .905 | .082  | .058 | .888 | 542.9 (9)***        |
| Model with unmeasured latent factor            | 262.878  | 119 | .985 | .034  | .031 | .981 |                     |

Note:  $\chi^2$  = chi-square, CFI = comparative fit index, RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation, SRMR = standardised root mean square residual, TLI = Tucker–Lewis index.

In determining  $\Delta\chi^2$ , the one-factor and four-factor models were compared with the six-factor model. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

conducted to assess CMV using two approaches elaborated in the literature (Podsakoff et al., 2003). First, the results of the Harman single-factor test revealed that the first factor in the unrotated factor analysis accounted for only 30.962% of the total variance in our variables, which mitigated concerns regarding CMV to some extent. Second, an orthogonal, unmeasured latent method factor was created and added to the proposed six-factor model. This approach involves loading each measurement item on its corresponding theoretical construct and the latent method factor (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This model obtained an acceptable fit (see Table 2). To compare this model with our hypothesised six-factor model, we calculated the difference in the CFI values (Castanheira, 2016; Jiang et al., 2019; Karatepe et al., 2020). CFI differences close to or less than .010 indicate that the compared models do not significantly differ (Jiang et al., 2019; Lent et al., 2008). In the current study, the CFI difference between both models was .014, close to the suggested rule of thumb of .010. Therefore, CMV was not a major concern.

Our proposed double-mediation model provided a good fit to the data (CFI = .955, TLI = .946, RMSEA = .044, SRMR = .054) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Regarding H1, the results showed that only WCA ( $b = .319, p < .01$ ) and WMA ( $b = .143, p < .05$ ) were positively related to JC-strengths, whereas WSA was not ( $b = .063, p > .05$ ). Thus, H1 is partially supported. The results further revealed a positive effect of JC-strengths on adaptive performance ( $b = .362, p < .01$ ), supporting H2. H3 suggests an indirect effect of autonomy dimensions on adaptive performance through increased JC-strengths. Our data only partially support this hypothesis, as the 95% CIs for the indirect effect did not include zero for WMA ( $b = .052, p < .05, 95\% CI [.003, .061]$ ) or WCA ( $b = .116, p < .01; 95\% CI [.041, .158]$ ) but for WSA ( $b = .023, p > .05; 95\% CI [-.028, .063]$ ). Supporting H4, the empirical results show that DA fit mediated the relationship between JC-strengths and adaptive performance ( $b = .11, p < .01, 95\% CI [.063, .134]$ ).

Finally, we posited a serial mediation effect in H5a–c, with a pathway involving the two sequential mediators of JC-strengths and DA fit (in that order) in the relationship between work autonomy dimensions and adaptive performance. While the indirect effects of WMA ( $b = .016, p < .05, 95\% CI [.001, .019]$ ) and WCA ( $b = .035, p < .01, 95\% CI [.012, .047]$ ) on adaptive performance via JC-strengths and DA fit were positive and significant, this did not hold for WSA ( $b = .007, p > .05, 95\% CI [-.009, .020]$ ). Hence, our empirical results support H5b–c but not H5a. The amounts of explained variance for the endogenous variables in our model were 39.1% for adaptive performance, 20% for DA fit and 24.7% for JC-strengths. Tables 3 and 4 provide an overview of the direct and indirect effects in the model.

**Table 3.** Bootstrapped direct effects of structural equation modelling.

| Predictors               | JC-strengths |      | DA fit |      | AP      |      |
|--------------------------|--------------|------|--------|------|---------|------|
|                          | b            | SE   | b      | SE   | b       | SE   |
| WSA                      | .063         | .074 |        |      |         |      |
| WMA                      | .143*        | .045 |        |      |         |      |
| WCA                      | .319**       | .075 |        |      |         |      |
| JC-strengths             |              |      | .428** | .056 | .362**  | .053 |
| DA fit                   |              |      |        |      | .256**  | .040 |
| <i>Control variables</i> |              |      |        |      |         |      |
| Leading position         | .052         | .056 | .038   | .054 | .062*   | .044 |
| Age                      | .072*        | .002 | -.055  | .002 | .074**  | .002 |
| Gender                   | .069*        | .041 | -.002  | .038 | .005    | .033 |
| Equipment satisfaction   | -.012        | .060 | .11**  | .062 | .041    | .049 |
| WFH voluntariness        | .051         | .016 | .039   | .015 | .211**  | .014 |
| Caring responsibility    | -.043        | .018 | -.006  | .018 | -.105** | .015 |

Note: N = 1,259. SD = standard deviation. Standardised coefficients (b) are reported. Bootstrap sample of 10,000 iterations. AP = adaptive performance, WMA = work method autonomy, WSA = work scheduling autonomy, WCA = work criteria autonomy, JC-strengths = job crafting towards strengths, DA fit = demands-abilities fit. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01.

## 6. Discussion

Our study makes several key contributions. First, it contributes to the growing literature on how employees’ adaptive functioning can be supported under crisis conditions (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023). Our findings underscore that autonomy is a critical job resource in the context of sudden and unanticipated change while illustrating the need to consider its dimensions individually. This is because WMA and WCA indirectly relate to adaptive performance, whereas WSA does not. This pattern also refines JD-R theory in crisis settings by illustrating that the functional value of work autonomy is contingent on its specific form. In this way, we also address calls to disentangle the differential effects of autonomy dimensions on outcomes (Sadler-Smith et al., 2003; Spiegelaere et al., 2016).

Second, we advance our understanding of how autonomy dimensions translate into adaptive performance by identifying JC-strengths as a key explanatory mechanism. While this indirect link aligns with the propositions in JD-R theory, our findings extend this framework by clarifying how strengths-based individual strategies (i.e. JC-strengths) operate within it, as called for by Bakker and van Woerkom (2018). Specifically, only WCA and WMA encouraged employees to engage in JC-strengths, which, in turn, enhanced adaptive performance. The nonsignificant role of WSA may reflect its inherent limited

**Table 4.** Bootstrapped indirect effects of structural equation modelling.

| Indirect effects                 | b      | SE   | 95% CI [LL, UL] |
|----------------------------------|--------|------|-----------------|
| WMA → JC-strengths → AP          | .052*  | .015 | [.003, .061]    |
| WSA → JC-strengths → AP          | .023   | .024 | [-.028, .063]   |
| WCA → JC-strengths → AP          | .116** | .030 | [.041, .158]    |
| JC-strengths → DA fit → AP       | .110** | .018 | [.063, .134]    |
| WMA → JC-strengths → DA fit → AP | .016*  | .005 | [.001, .019]    |
| WSA → JC-strengths → DA fit → AP | .007   | .007 | [-.009, .020]   |
| WCA → JC-strengths → DA fit → AP | .035** | .009 | [.012, .047]    |

Note: N = 1284. Standardised coefficients (b) are reported. Bootstrap sample of 10,000. AP = adaptive performance, WMA = work method autonomy, WSA = work scheduling autonomy, WCA = work criteria autonomy, JC-strengths = job crafting towards strengths, DA fit = demands-abilities fit, LL and UL indicate the lower and upper limits of a percentile bootstrap confidence interval, respectively. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01.

scope, as it merely grants discretion over the sequencing or timing of work activities, thereby providing fewer opportunities for JC-strengths than WMA and WCA (Breugh, 1985; Humphrey et al., 2007). Moreover, given that employees in our sample primarily worked from home, blurred work–home boundaries and increased role conflicts (Kossek et al., 2006; Verelst et al., 2023) may have undermined the motivational benefits of WSA (Yucel, 2019), thereby limiting its contribution to JC-strengths. Furthermore, by demonstrating that JC-strengths enhance adaptive performance, we address prior inconsistent evidence on the job crafting–adaptive performance link (Demerouti et al., 2017; Vakola et al., 2023) and highlight crafting directed towards leveraging personal strengths as a valuable yet overlooked form of job crafting in this relationship.

Third, our findings underscore DA fit as a critical mechanism linking JC-strengths and adaptive performance. Employees who craft their jobs to capitalise on their strengths perceive a stronger congruence between their abilities and job demands, which subsequently enhances their adaptive performance. While this is consistent with prior work positively linking JC-strengths and DA fit (Kooij et al., 2017) and the person–environment fit theory (Edwards, 1991), our study is the first to empirically demonstrate this mediating pathway. Our results suggest that JC-strengths constitute a promising proactive strategy for sustaining DA fit and, consequently, adaptive performance, thereby advancing our limited understanding of the effectiveness of proactive individual strategies in managing crisis situations (Demerouti & Bakker, 2023).

Finally, by integrating JC-strengths and DA fit as sequential mediators in the work autonomy–adaptive performance relationship, we uncover its underlying complexity and respond to calls to clarify the mechanisms connecting antecedents to adaptive performance (Jundt et al., 2015; Jundt & Shoss, 2023). Overall, our findings reveal that the positive effect of work autonomy on adaptive performance amid sudden and unanticipated change depends not only on its specific form but also on the proactive strategies it motivates (JC-strengths) as well as the alignment between employees' abilities and job demands that these proactive strategies help sustain and foster.

## 7. Practical Implications

Our findings offer several implications for organisations and employees seeking to enhance adaptive performance amid sudden and unanticipated change – an ongoing challenge for organisations and the field of change management. Based on our empirical findings, we encourage organisations to grant their employees discretion over their working methods and the criteria by which their performance is evaluated rather than over scheduling their work. This appears especially effective in enabling and motivating employees to craft their jobs towards their strengths, which, in turn, benefits their adaptive performance. Organisations and leaders can further support JC-strengths by remaining open-minded to alternative ways of working and offering opportunities – for example, workshops or interventions – that help employees identify their personal strengths, as awareness of one's strengths is a prerequisite for their effective use. Employees may consider engaging in JC-strengths to help them meet evolving demands more quickly and effectively under conditions of sudden and unanticipated change. Our findings also suggest that these crafting efforts promote adaptive performance by helping employees maintain or restore adequate DA fit perceptions. This is an especially critical factor during

extreme, disruptive crises because such perceptions are dynamic and sensitive to change (Kim et al., 2020). Finally, regular leader-employee discussions about employees' willingness and opportunities for JC-strengths, along with HR assessments of perceived DA fit through developmental conversations or evaluations, may help detect misalignments early on and create conditions that sustain adaptive performance.

## 8. Limitations and Future Research

This study has certain limitations that potentially point to avenues for future research. First, our data capture employees' experiences during Germany's second Covid-19 wave, offering a unique context for examining adaptive performance under sudden and unanticipated change. Although we did not assess explicitly whether employees perceived these changes as sudden and unexpected, the volatile 'stop-and-restart' policy environment, inconsistent state-level regulations and less evidence-based policy decisions (Warren et al., 2021) suggest an inherently unpredictable and uncertain context (Roulet & Bothello, 2023; Sarkar & Osiyevskyy, 2018). Future research could replicate our design while directly measuring employees' perceptions of change. Second, the data were collected from a single German insurance organisation, which may limit generalisability. Although the insurance sector was notably affected by the pandemic (Puławska, 2021), replication across industries and countries would strengthen external validity. In addition, voluntary participation may have introduced self-selection bias (Bethlehem, 2010), even though the opportunity to complete the survey during working hours likely mitigated this concern. Third, our cross-sectional design limits causal inference and includes the potential for reverse causality, and longitudinal or experimental research may help establish causal directionality. Similarly, reliance on self-reported single-source data may raise concerns about CMV (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Nevertheless, self-reports were appropriate, given that individuals had the most insight into our focal variables. In addition, employing procedural and statistical remedies reduced concerns regarding CMV (Capone & Petrillo, 2020; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Still, multisource data could be incorporated in the future. Finally, future research could examine potential moderators, such as workload, strengths-based feedback or strengths-based leadership.

## 9. Conclusions

Our research contributes to the literature by uncovering how specific dimensions of work autonomy indirectly enhance employees' adaptive performance under conditions of sudden and unanticipated change. By examining the sequential mediation roles of JC-strengths and DA fit perceptions, we demonstrate that only certain autonomy dimensions – namely, work method and work criteria autonomy but not work scheduling autonomy – foster adaptive performance through these mechanisms. This highlights the importance of considering the multidimensional nature of work autonomy when evaluating its effects. By illuminating how and which autonomy dimensions indirectly shape adaptive performance, this study advances research on change management and adaptive performance and offers new insights for work design theory

into how organisations can better enable adaptive performance in times of sudden and unanticipated change.

## Acknowledgements

We would particularly like to thank Professor Margret Borchert for her insightful and inspiring commentary and guidance, which were invaluable in the development of this paper. We would also like to thank all the employees who participated in this study. Finally, we sincerely thank the editors and reviewers. Their insightful comments and constructive feedback greatly improved the clarity and overall quality of this manuscript.

## Informed Consent

All participants provided informed consent, signifying their acknowledgement and acceptance of the privacy statement as a prerequisite for participation in our study.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Data Availability Statement

The authors do not have permission to share the data. However, if deemed necessary, the data will be made available upon request solely for review purposes.

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