

Sustaining Flourishing at Work: A Two-Way Street

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Summary

Flourishing—the pursuit of the best possible life—has long intrigued scholars, with the workplace receiving particular attention due to its central role in daily life. However, research on workplace flourishing predominantly focuses on exploring antecedents and outcomes, often overlooking conceptual limitations. Frequent reliance on general life-domain frameworks neglects work-specific nuances, while quantitative methodologies and a lack of contextual considerations further constrain understanding. Addressing these gaps, this study employs a grounded theory approach, drawing on interviews with 19 employees across diverse industries in India to explore their understanding and definition of workplace flourishing. Our findings reveal that flourishing is a dynamic, value-driven process shaped by individual and workplace factors. This study advances workplace flourishing theory and provides actionable insights for organizations to foster and sustain employee flourishing over time.

Keywords: Workplace flourishing; Qualitative research, Grounded theory, Employee well-being, Work environment

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Introduction and Brief Literature Review

Envision a workplace where employees exude positivity and vitality and find profound meaning in their daily tasks—a realm where personal growth, happiness, and contentment converge. This state, known as flourishing, embodies pervasive goodness in every facet of life (Vanderweele, 2017). While originally rooted in broader well-being research, flourishing has gained prominence in organizational studies for its potential to enhance employee well-being and drive positive workplace outcomes. Scholars have linked flourishing to job satisfaction, commitment, performance, and retention (Diedericks and Rothmann, 2014; Janse van Rensburg et al., 2017; Redelinguys et al., 2019). Recognizing these benefits, research has sought to identify key determinants of workplace flourishing, emphasizing factors such as leadership styles, person-environment fit, organizational support, and workplace spirituality (Giolito et al., 2021; Ho and Chan, 2022; Hunsaker and Ding, 2022; Imran et al., 2020; Janse van Rensburg et al., 2017; Kleynhans et al., 2022; Kleynhans et al., 2022; Rautenbach and Rothmann, 2017; Redelinguys et al., 2019; Redelinguys et al., 2019). While these studies offer valuable insights, their focus on antecedents and outcomes often overshadows critical conceptual shortcomings in existing flourishing frameworks, particularly regarding their applicability to workplace settings.

Prevailing conceptual frameworks of flourishing are largely adapted from the broader life domain, often without sufficient modification to account for the unique complexities of the workplace (Verma et al., 2025). Many studies adopt Diener's (2010) flourishing framework due to its brevity, despite it being designed for the life domain rather than work settings. Similarly, Rothmann's (2013) framework, though validated in workplace contexts, is grounded in Keyes' (2002) Mental Health Continuum model, which was originally intended to assess flourishing in broader life experiences.

Moreover, these frameworks are predominantly constructed using quantitative methodologies, such as psychometric assessments (Fowers et al., 2023; Willen, 2022). While these approaches facilitate measurement and generalizability, they impose intuitive assumptions that may lack empirical grounding in employees' lived experiences (Willen et al., 2025). As a result, existing models often reduce workplace flourishing to a fixed set of predefined indicators, failing to capture its complex and subjective nature. This oversimplification reinforces an individual-centric perspective, overlooking the broader organizational and social factors that shape flourishing at work.

This oversight is particularly concerning, as emerging research highlights the critical role of workplace environments in fostering or hindering flourishing. Willen et al. (2025) emphasize that individuals cannot flourish in dehumanizing, unjust, or otherwise detrimental environments. Similarly, Lomas et al. (2023) argue that flourishing must be understood in relation to its broader context, as it is deeply embedded in environmental and social conditions. These studies underscore that beyond individual attributes, the promotion and sustainability of flourishing over time depend on workplace factors. Yet, predominant workplace flourishing frameworks fail to integrate these contextual dimensions, portraying flourishing as a temporary, individual-centric state rather than an enduring phenomenon shaped by the dynamic interplay between individual and organizational factors. This narrow perspective results in an incomplete and potentially misleading representation of the construct.

Recognizing these limitations, this study explores how employees themselves define workplace flourishing and whether they perceive workplace factors as integral for its promotion and sustainability over time. By employing a qualitative methodology, this study seeks to move beyond predefined theoretical constructs and uncover employees' lived

experiences of flourishing in the workplace. Unlike quantitative approaches that primarily seek to measure and categorize flourishing within rigid frameworks, qualitative inquiry allows for a more nuanced exploration of how employees interpret and experience flourishing in real-world settings.

By grounding the investigation in employees' subjective realities, this study contributes to the literature by offering a more contextually informed and employee-driven understanding of workplace flourishing. In doing so, it seeks to refine existing theoretical perspectives and provide insights that help organizations cultivate environments that genuinely support employee flourishing. Ultimately, the findings aim to inform the development of more holistic and context-sensitive frameworks, ensuring that organizational strategies align with employees' lived experiences and evolving needs.

Research Methodology

We employed an inductive grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to develop a theory of workplace flourishing based on employees' lived experiences. Grounded theory was particularly suited to this study, as it allows theoretical insights to emerge from the data, ensuring that the conceptual framework remains deeply rooted in participants' perspectives (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Sample and Data Collection

We used purposive sampling to recruit 19 knowledge workers in India, each with a minimum of one year of work experience across various sectors and industries, thereby enhancing the transferability of our findings (Coyne, 1997). Participants were recruited through professional and personal networks, and interviews were scheduled at their convenience. To uphold ethical standards, all participants were assured anonymity, and informed consent was obtained before each interview.

The interviews were semi-structured allowing for flexibility in responses and deeper insights into the phenomenon of flourishing (Banihani and Syed, 2020). We avoided leading questions and ensured that the questions were simple and clear. Each interview was conducted in English and lasted 30-40 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis were conducted iteratively, with continuous refinement of the interview protocol based on emerging themes. The first author conducted all interviews, while two research team members independently analyzed the data using NVivo 12 for coding. All members regularly discussed the coding scheme and agreed on new codes by consensus.

In the initial phase, known as 1st-order coding, we adhered strictly to participants' language, capturing their terms, phrases, and descriptions. As the analysis progressed, patterns and distinctions among the categories emerged, leading to the development of 2nd-order themes, which provided a theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. These themes were further distilled into aggregate dimensions, offering a structured framework for interpreting workplace flourishing (Gioia et al., 2013).

To ensure methodological rigor, we maintained thorough documentation, engaged in reflexive memo writing, and employed researcher triangulation (Pratt et al., 2020). These measures reinforce the trustworthiness of our research, providing a robust and empirically grounded framework for understanding workplace flourishing from an employee-centered perspective.

Initial Findings and Discussion

The first round of data collection and analysis revealed four emerging themes: (a) flourishing as an ongoing, value-driven process, (b) the central role of individual agency, (c) the facilitative role of workplace factors, and (d) the interplay between individual and workplace factors in sustaining flourishing over time.

Our findings highlight that workplace flourishing is not a passive outcome but an active, value-driven process that motivates individuals to formulate goals and take action to actualize, promote, protect, and maintain their values (Jeffrey and Mehari, 2023; Raibley, 2011). These values—including financial security, achievement and recognition, personal growth, and meaningful contributions to others—are interdependent. Individuals strive to realize them through their work, with their fullest attainment providing a profound sense of flourishing.

Secondly, we find that individual agency plays a central role in flourishing (Raibley, 2011). Participants emphasized that flourishing results from personal action and initiative. As one participant noted, *“If you want to grow and flourish, it starts with you.”* (#P9). This perspective aligns with the Aristotelian concept of eudaimonia, which emphasizes the active pursuit of one’s highest potential as a rational and social being (Symons and VanderWeele, 2024).

Additionally, our findings underscore the facilitative role of workplace factors, such as job autonomy and flexibility, opportunities for development, social support, fair compensation, employee involvement, and an inclusive, ethical, and fair work culture. These factors create an environment that nurtures and sustains flourishing at work.

However, flourishing emerged as a dynamic process shaped by the interplay between individual agency and organizational context. One participant explained this interdependence

“It’s all about balance. Even if I work as hard as I can, if my workplace doesn’t provide space or appreciation, I’ll eventually lose interest and just let it go. On the other hand, if my workplace offers opportunities for growth but I don’t put in the effort, then no amount of a good workplace will help. It’s a two-way street.” (#P11)

In work environments conducive to flourishing, individual agency is amplified, fostering sustained flourishing. Conversely, when workplaces fail to support employee flourishing, individuals may retreat into survival mode, reducing their engagement and motivation or actively seeking to leave the organization.

These findings highlight the limitations of existing frameworks that reduce flourishing to a static state of being, often focusing primarily on employees’ emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Keyes, 2002; Rautenbach and Rothmann, 2017; Ryff and Singer, 2008). However, a deeper examination of employee experiences reveals flourishing as an ongoing, value-driven process that requires both active individual engagement and a workplace that serves as a synergistic force in promoting and sustaining flourishing over time (Fowers et al., 2024; Willen et al., 2022).

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