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Empowering Leadership, Job Satisfaction, and the Moderating Effect of Individual Ambidexterity of Information Technology Workers

Research Paper

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Abstract. Effective leadership is crucial for developing and sustaining ambidexterity, which involves engaging in both exploratory and exploitative activities. Empowering leadership behaviors, which foster trust and discipline to create engaged employees, have been identified as facilitators of contextual ambidexterity. However, there is still a lack of understanding of how individual outcomes are affected by these leadership styles in ambidextrous information technology (IT) work environments. This study investigates the impact of empowering leadership on job satisfaction among IT workers and whether the level of individual ambidexterity moderates this relationship. Analyzing survey data from 553 IT workers, we find a positive direct effect of empowering leadership on job satisfaction and, contrary to our hypothesis, a negative moderating effect of individual ambidexterity. Our study contributes to the leadership and ambidexterity literatures in Information Systems by highlighting the need for nuanced approaches to leadership in ambidextrous IT organizations.

Keywords: Individual ambidexterity, empowering leadership, job satisfaction, information technology (IT) worker

1 Introduction

Dynamic competitive conditions have forced companies to adapt their organizational structures by creating ambidextrous work environments that focus on both exploration of innovative ideas and exploitation of the known (Haffke et al., 2017). This phenomenon is especially relevant in information technology (IT) organizations, as they play a crucial role in digitization and innovation, while ensuring stable and reliable IT operations (Gerster, 2017; Leonhardt et al., 2017). To manage the contradictory goals and potential paradoxes of exploitation and exploration, academia and practice are searching for measures that help organizations and individuals cope (Jöhnk et al., 2019). Regarding facilitating factors of ambidexterity, a growing body of research indicates that

the role of leadership in organizations and specific leadership styles, such as empowering leadership, can be beneficial (von Assen, 2020).

In line with further calls for research (Tang et al., 2020) we examine empowering leadership, a leadership style in which leaders provide support, resources, and autonomy to their team members, allowing them to take ownership of their work and make decisions (Tang et al., 2020). Research on empowering leadership in adjacent disciplines, including the study of empowering leadership in the context of ambidexterity, has been increasing. There is a particular focus on innovation, which represents the exploratory side of ambidexterity (Caniëls et al., 2017). In addition, empowering leadership is assumed to influence perceptual, attitudinal, motivational, and behavioral outcomes in employees (e.g., Kim et al., 2018). Several studies and two meta-analyses have linked empowering leadership to, among other things, positive employee work behavior (e.g., Kim et al., 2018) and firm performance (e.g., Srivastava et al., 2006; Carmeli et al., 2011). Given the notion that leadership must be evaluated contextually (Tigre et al., 2022), we still lack insight into the influence of empowering leadership on job satisfaction in the IT context.

Job satisfaction significantly affects business-critical outcomes, such as organizational business performance (e.g., Chi & Gursoy, 2009) and turnover intentions (e.g., Alam & Asim, 2019). The importance of job satisfaction is fueled by the current shortage of information systems (IS) professionals, creating a highly competitive labor market for IT workers (Prommegger et al., 2019). Given the dynamic nature of the global marketplace and the pace of change, attracting, motivating, and retaining employees is critical to an organization's continued success (e.g., Venkatesh et al., 2017).

Although a correlation between empowering leadership and contextual ambidexterity has been confirmed by previous research (von Assen, 2020), it is unknown whether individual ambidexterity, encountered through one's work environment, has a moderating effect of empowering leadership on job satisfaction. Therefore, we aim to contribute to the existing knowledge base by posing the following research question: *How does empowering leadership affect job satisfaction in ambidextrous IT work environments?* Specifically, we examine the interplay between individual ambidextrous behavior, empowering leadership, and job satisfaction, shedding light on the combined effects of supervisors and employee behavior within challenging work environments.

Our analysis of survey data from 553 IT workers reveals a positive direct effect of empowering leadership on job satisfaction. This reinforces the notion that a leadership style that empowers employees and fosters trust and discipline can lead to more engaged and satisfied workers. However, contrary to our hypothesis, we also found a negative moderating effect of individual ambidexterity. These results highlight the importance of considering individual differences in ambidexterity when examining the effects of leadership on job satisfaction in IT organizations.

We contribute to the current research on (empowering) leadership by investigating the context (i.e., individual ambidexterity) in which and the extent to which empowering behaviors can be considered beneficial. Simultaneously, we contribute to the ambidexterity literature by adding potential measures (i.e., empowering leadership) that

could help build and maintain successful individual ambidexterity. The remainder explains the theoretical foundations, methods, and results, before closing with a discussion of the findings, limitations, implications for future research, and a brief conclusion.

2 Background and Hypotheses

This section reviews the theoretical foundations of job satisfaction, individual ambidexterity and empowering leadership, which are core constructs of this research.

2.1 Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is “*a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job or job experiences*” (Locke, 1976, p. 1300). Job satisfaction remains one of the most studied work attitudes in industrial and organizational psychology and organizational behavior theory (Judge et al., 2020). Academics and practitioners have recognized the value of job satisfaction due to its usefulness in predicting the efficiency and effectiveness of business organizations (e.g., Judge & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2012). Further, employee job satisfaction is often considered a significant predictor of organizational business performance (Chi & Gursoy, 2009; De Leaniz & Rodríguez, 2015) and turnover intention (Ali, 2008; Alam & Asim, 2019) in the literature. Judge et al. (2020) presented a detailed review of job satisfaction outcomes (performance, effectiveness, organizational citizenship behavior, counterproductive work behavior, and withdrawal). Their review also concluded that, especially in today’s turbulent climate with high turnover rates, “*satisfied employees are more likely to be loyal champions, ambassadors, and advocates for their organizations*” (Judge et al., 2020, p.1). Thus, companies are interested in creating and maintaining organizational and structural conditions conducive to employee satisfaction.

2.2 Ambidexterity

The need to adapt organizationally and structurally to changing economic conditions (O’Reilly & Tushman, 2013) is as inevitable as the ongoing and intensifying struggle for resources in the IT industry (e.g., Prommegger et al., 2019). Ambidexterity (i.e., the simultaneous performance of two seemingly contradictory activities, such as exploitation and exploration) helps organizations meet this challenge and has become increasingly popular with multiple applications in IS research (Werder & Heckmann, 2019; Birkinshaw et al., 2016). While ambidexterity describes the general ability to pursue two different goals simultaneously (Tushman & O’Reilly, 1996), it also includes combining capabilities from these two conflicting dimensions (Cao et al., 2009; Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004).

Organizational ambidexterity encompasses the notion that organizations can adapt to their environment and achieve long-term success by simultaneously exploring new opportunities and exploiting existing capabilities (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2010). In other words, exploitation refers to the efficient use of existing resources and capabilities

through known processes, whereas exploration refers to discovering how to combine resources and capabilities in new ways to create new capabilities and further opportunities (March, 1991). Accordingly, in the context of IS research, IT ambidexterity is viewed as the ability of an IT function to simultaneously explore new IT resources and practices (IT exploration) and exploit current IT resources and practices (IT exploitation; Gregory et al., 2015; Napier et al., 2011). In addition, IT utilization reflects the ability of the IT function to manage existing IT assets well and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of deployed IT resources to ensure their best use. In contrast, IT exploration reflects the ability of the IT function to devote resources to learning about and experimenting with new technologies, methodologies, and capabilities to select those of the highest value to the organization (Leonhardt, 2017).

The literature generally distinguishes between structural, temporal, and contextual ambidexterity. Structural ambidexterity achieves two conflicting goals using two separate subunits, such as through bimodal IT, each of which pursues a different goal (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996, Kusanke & Winkler, 2022). Temporal ambidexterity suggests that a unit is capable of working on conflicting goals simultaneously over time (Duncan, 1976; Turner, 2011). Contextual ambidexterity suggests that paradoxical demands can be resolved by providing an organizational context that enables employees to behave ambidextrously (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). Thus, exploitation and exploration are simultaneously organized in an organizational unit based on a context-specific combination of social support, performance management, structure, and capabilities to create alignment (i.e., coherence among all activity patterns) and adaptability (i.e., the ability to quickly reconfigure activities to meet changing demands in the task environment; van Assen, 2020; Meglio et al., 2015).

From a contextual ambidexterity perspective, individual ambidexterity refers to an employee's behavior to balance, coexist, and nest two extreme ambidextrous activities (Birkinshaw & Gibson, 2004). This can be achieved through aligning the current goals with performance and adaptability to a changing environment and future performance in the context of an individual's daily work (Zhang et al., 2019). The combination of these two distinct behaviors, stemming from exploitation and exploration, is conceptualized as individual ambidexterity (e.g., Mom et al., 2009; Zacher et al., 2016). Good and Michel (2013) argue theoretically, that ambidextrous individuals should be proficient in both exploratory and exploitative activities, with high skill levels in each. In practice, individual ambidexterity is challenging because individuals tend to be biased toward either exploratory or exploitative behaviors, potentially creating inter- and intrapersonal conflicts (Smith & Tushman, 2005, Schnellbacher et al., 2019).

Thus, at the department, group, and even individual level it is necessary to determine when and how conflicting activities and corresponding goals can best be pursued, depending on the specific context (van Assen, 2020). Consequently, contextual and, thus, individual ambidexterity requires a supportive organizational context that enables and encourages employees to make judgments about allocating their time between the conflicting demands of alignment and adaptability (van Assen, 2020). Organizational factors that support individual ambidexterity are proposed to be support and trust to provide employees with the security and assistance they may need to perform (Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004). This supportive environment inspires people to work together and

feel free to engage in conflicting ambidextrous behaviors (Zhang et al., 2019). Extending this approach, scholars have begun to discuss the active role of operational managers in reconciling tensions between exploration and exploitation (e.g., Mom et al., 2009; Zimmermann et al., 2017). Effective leaders could help organizations and individuals balance exploration and exploitation, creating a culture that fosters innovation and continuous improvement.

2.3 Empowering Leadership

Leadership style plays an important role in developing and maintaining contextual ambidexterity throughout organizational ambidexterity (Havermans et al., 2015; Junni et al., 2013) by implementing and maintaining mechanisms of differentiation and integration (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2010; Raisch et al., 2009). As part of a qualitative study exploring leadership in project-based organizations, Havermans et al. (2015) examined the role of adaptive leadership in enabling contextual ambidexterity by exploring the daily practices that leaders enact to promote exploration and exploitation and shift dynamically between them. Similarly, Gibson and Birkinshaw (2004) found that appropriate leadership behaviors to enable contextual ambidexterity are based on facilitating trust and discipline to create engaged and empowered employees.

Although research on empowering leadership is at a relatively early stage (Kim & Beehr, 2021), the number of publications outside the IS field is growing. Empowering leadership is considered “*the process of enhancing an individual’s or group’s capacity to make purposive choices and to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes*” (Alsop et al., 2005, p. 1). It refers to a leadership style that empowers employees to take control of their work, make decisions, and solve problems independently. Empowering leaders provides employees with the authority, resources, and support they need to achieve their goals and develop their skills and abilities (Tang et al., 2020). Empowering leadership is a set of leadership behaviors characterized by the following (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999; Sharma & Kirkman, 2015; Knippenberg, 2017):

- (1) Trust: Empowering leaders trust their followers to take responsibility for their work and make decisions in the best interest of the organization (Caniëls et al., 2017).
- (2) Collaboration: Empowering leaders encourage collaboration and teamwork and create a supportive and inclusive work environment.
- (3) Delegation: Empowering leaders delegate responsibility and authority to their followers, allowing them to take ownership of their work and develop their skills.
- (4) Coaching: Empowering leaders provide support and coaching to their followers, helping them overcome challenges and achieve their goals (Arnold et al., 2000).
- (5) Empowerment: Empowering leaders empower their followers to take control of their work, make decisions, and solve problems independently.

Kim et al. (2018) meta-analyzed 55 independent samples to examine the relationship between empowering leader behaviors and subordinate responses, confirming positive associations of empowering leadership, among others, with employee motivation and

attitudes such as job satisfaction. Subordinates who were subjected to empowering leadership displayed increased job satisfaction, likely due to the emphasis placed by empowering leaders on granting them autonomy in establishing objectives and determining work methods. This approach facilitates employees' comprehension and execution of complete tasks, ultimately enabling subordinates to find purpose in their work (Amundsen & Martinsen, 2014). Given the importance of retaining IT workers, which is largely influenced by job satisfaction, we seek to replicate these findings and validate previous findings within the research setting of IT workers. Consequently, we pose:

Hypothesis H1: *Empowering leadership has a positive direct effect on job satisfaction in IT workers.*

Empowered employees are more proactive, continually searching for methods to improve and revise work processes and seeking innovative solutions to work problems (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999). Because employee empowerment is associated with higher levels of self-efficacy and self-confidence and makes employees feel free to take risks and solve problems in novel ways, it is thought to support exploratory learning (van Knippenberget al., 2004). In addition, employee empowerment is associated with higher commitment and motivation to perform work most efficiently and effectively; thus, it is assumed to support exploitative learning (Kirkman & Rosen, 1999). Accordingly, appropriate leadership behaviors to facilitate contextual ambidexterity include employee empowerment (Caniëls et al., 2017). This finding is supported by other studies confirming that empowerment is positively associated with contextual ambidexterity (van Assen, 2020; Yu et al., 2012), including in an IT context (Siachou & Gkorezis, 2018) and software developer context (Xu & Shen, 2018). As individuals strive to manage and balance the two potentially conflicting and, in any case, opposing work styles of exploration and exploitation, tensions may arise (March, 1991). Empowering leadership could help resolve these conflicting demands. Consequently, we hypothesize that the more an individual must balance the conflicting demands of exploration and exploitation, the greater the influence of empowering leadership on job satisfaction. In other words, employees who need to balance both exploration and exploitation perceive higher job satisfaction if they receive support and guidance through empowering leadership from their supervisor than employees who do not face these conflicting demands. This leads to our second hypothesis:

Hypothesis H2: *The influence of empowering leadership on job satisfaction is moderated by the individual ambidexterity level.*

3 Research Method

3.1 Sample and Procedure

We conducted an online survey to assess the hypotheses and collected data in April and May of 2022. A pretest ($n = 12$) was performed to ensure the comprehensibility and technical functioning of the online questionnaire. Survey data were collected by a market research company. Participants were part of an online panel in Germany and received a small compensation for their participation. The participants were preselected

and confirmed that they worked in the IT department of a company, participated in IT projects, or were employed or self-employed as IT professionals. At the beginning of the questionnaire, we guaranteed confidentiality to reduce social desirability bias. After data collection, we applied data cleaning procedures. All incoming datasets were filtered for data quality based on consistency checks in the respondents' response behavior. We received a total of $n = 553$ datasets. Of the 553 participants included in the analysis, 348 were male (63%), and 201 were female (36%). The age of the participants ranged from 21 to 70 years, with a mean of 44 years. The participants came from IT work environments in a variety of industries, including professional services (18%), public services (10%), and electronics and high technology (9%). Over 50% of respondents had been with their company for over 5 years.

3.2 Measures

Following Judge et al. (1998), we measured job satisfaction with five items adapted from the Brayfield-Rothe (1951) measure of job satisfaction. These items included the statements "*I feel fairly satisfied with my current job*" and "*I find real enjoyment in my work.*" These and all subsequent items in this study were translated from English to German in a collaborative, iterative process, as suggested by Douglas and Craig (2007), and tested for applicability at the level of an IT employee. This approach is superior to the method of back-translation because it also considers issues of conceptual equivalence (Douglas and Craig, 2007). We measured responses on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the reliability analysis. The internal consistency is satisfactory, with a Cronbach's alpha job satisfaction of .79.

We measured empowering leadership with ten items from the empowering leadership questionnaire developed by Arnold et al. (2020). These items aim to measure employees' perceived level of empowering leadership behaviors exhibited by a direct supervisor. The scale included the statements "*My supervisor encourages team members to point out ideas and suggestions*" and "*My supervisor encourages team members to solve problems together.*" We measured responses on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The internal consistency is highly satisfactory, with a Cronbach's alpha score for empowering leadership of .95.

To measure the individual level of ambidexterity experienced in the work environment, we used two 7-item scales by Mom et al. (2009), who validated these scales in the financial services industry (exploration $\alpha = .85$ and exploitation $\alpha = .81$). The authors developed a measure of exploration and exploitation consisting of exploration and exploitation activity items. Thus, we asked respondents about the extent to which they engaged in certain work-related activities (e.g., activities in which considerable experience was accumulated). We measured responses on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). While some scholars, such as March (1991), viewed exploration and exploitation as two opposite ends of a continuum, with ambidexterity being the exact midpoint, more recent scholars (e.g., Gupta, 2006) have begun to characterize exploration and exploitation as more orthogonal. This way, firms and individuals could increase their exploration or exploitation levels without compromising. Following this

line of reasoning, we followed previous authors and multiplied the exploration and exploitation measures to obtain the magnitude to construct the measure of individual ambidexterity (see Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004; Cao et al., 2009; Mom et al., 2009, 2015). This approach reflects the argument that these two abilities are non-substitutable and interdependent.

We included several covariates to control for their direct effect on job satisfaction. Specifically, we tested for the influence of age and gender, the respondents' affiliation with the business or IT department, tenure (measured in years associated with the company currently employed), leadership responsibility, company size and IT department size. Harman's single-factor test was applied to test for common method variance. The factor analysis results (33.9%) are below the 50% threshold, suggesting that common method bias is not an issue in the data.

4 Results

A moderation analysis was performed using the PROCESS macro by Hayes (2013), which has become widely used by researchers interested in testing hypotheses about moderation (Hayes & Rockwood, 2017). We tested whether the interaction between empowering leadership and individual ambidexterity significantly predicts job satisfaction. The PROCESS method uses ordinary least squares regression, yielding unstandardized coefficients for all effects. Bootstrapping with 5,000 samples and heteroscedasticity-consistent standard errors were employed to compute the confidence intervals (Davidson & MacKinnon, 1993).

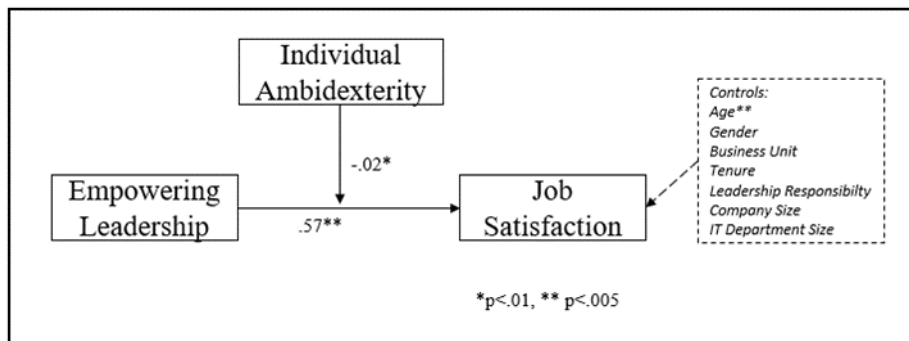


Figure 1. Model Results

The overall model (Figure 1, Table 1) was significant, $F(10, 509) = 20.4, p < .001$, predicting 28.62% of the variance. The analysis reveals a significant direct effect of empowering leadership on job satisfaction ($.57, p < .001$). Thus, H1 is supported. In addition, the moderation analysis indicates that individual ambidexterity significantly moderates the effect between empowering leadership and job satisfaction, $\Delta R^2 = 1.25\%$, $F(1, 509) = 6.15, p = .01$. Despite the modest level of significance, there is support for Hypothesis 2. Furthermore, the data reveal that the interaction coefficient is negative

(-.02). If the direction (indicated by the sign) of the interaction coefficient is the same as that of the main effect (positive sign), then the interaction variable strengthens the main effect. An opposite (negative) direction means the main effect is weakened. Therefore, the data shows a negative moderation effect.

		Coeff.	SE	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
-	Constant	.184	.461	.399	.690	-.721	1.09
H1	Empowering Leadership (EL)	.572**	.106	5.38	<.001	.363	.780
-	Level of Ambidexterity (IA)	.109**	.031	3.50	<.001	.048	.170
H2	Interaction (EL×IA)	-.020*	.008	-2.48	.010	-.035	-.005
Control Variables	Gender	.006	.064	.094	.925	-.12	.132
	Age	.018**	.003	6.62	<.001	.013	.024
	Business Unit	.105	.066	1.59	.110	-.024	.234
	Tenure	.005	.023	.205	.837	-.04	.050
	Leadership Responsibility	.065	.061	1.07	.284	-.054	.185
	Company Size	.001	.016	.053	.957	-.031	.033
	IT Department Size	-.009	.017	-.543	.588	-.043	.024

* p<.01; ** p<.005

Table 1. Moderation Model Output

Of the control variables we included, only age had a significant direct effect on job satisfaction, indicating that older IT workers in our sample had higher job satisfaction. Regarding the moderating effect, we find that as the level of ambidexterity increases, the effect size of moderation decreases (Table 2).

Individual Ambidexterity	Effect	SE	p	LLCI	ULCI
9.05	.4	.04	<.001	.31	.48
12.45	.33	.03	<.001	.26	.4
16.53	.25	.04	<.001	.16	.34

Table 2. Conditional effects of the focal predictor at values of the moderator

The interaction effect was significant. We used the Johnson-Neyman technique (Hoyt, 1944) to identify the points along the continuous moderator where the relationship between the independent variable and outcome variable transitions from being statistically significant to insignificant or vice versa (Hayes & Matthes, 2009). Based on the multiplicative interaction effect model, the Johnson-Neyman technique uses a regression line where the effect of the predictor on the outcome is regressed on the moderator to demonstrate how the effect changes with changes in the moderator. The Johnson-Neyman technique also uses 95% confidence bands around the simple regression line to determine the region of significance. When one of the confidence bands crosses the x-

axis, the corresponding value of the moderator is the dividing point between a region of significance and a region of nonsignificance (Bauer & Curran, 2005). By finding the transition points within the observed data, this method allows us to understand the patterns of significance across the moderator range (Montoya, 2019). The analysis results reveal that the positive effect of empowering leadership on job satisfaction became insignificant when the ambidexterity score was >20.7 .

We used the data to visualize the conditional effect of individual ambidexterity, the focal predictor (Figure 2). The graphs depict that, within the corridor of significance, the interaction effect is negative, and the effect size decreases. Thus, when exposed to the same level of empowering leadership, higher scores of individual ambidexterity generally lead to higher job satisfaction. However, this effect decreases with elevated individual ambidexterity.

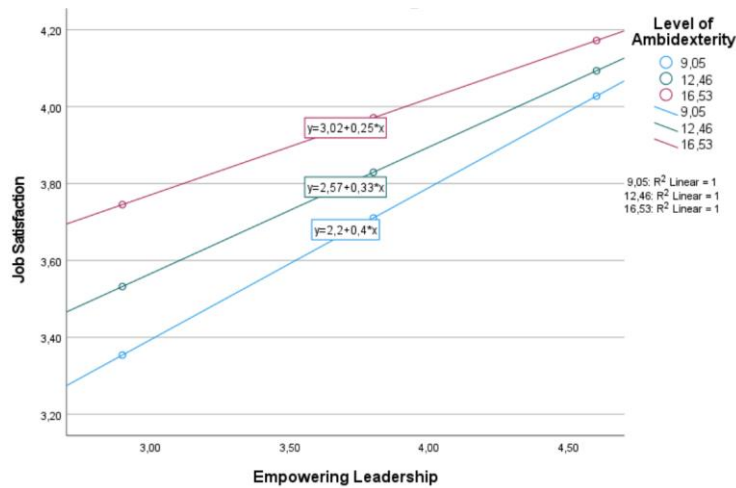


Figure 2. Visualized Interaction Effects

5 Discussion

While the relationship between empowering leadership and ambidexterity has been investigated by previous research outside the IT domain, this study assesses the extent to which empowering leadership facilitates job satisfaction of on IT workers and the role of individual ambidexterity in this relationship. We hypothesized that empowering leadership influences job satisfaction (H1) and that individual ambidexterity is a moderator that positively amplifies this relationship (H2). While our findings confirm H1, we found an opposing moderating effect regarding H2: higher levels of individual ambidexterity reduce the effect of empowering leadership on job satisfaction. Consequently, our contribution is two-fold.

Our finding regarding H1 supports the notion that empowering leadership behaviors are associated with positively connotated outcomes such as, increased employee motivation, performance, and creativity (e.g., Srivastava et al., 2006; Lee et al., 2018). This finding adds to the empowering leadership literature by adding job satisfaction to the outcomes and consequences and encourages organizations to promote and facilitate empowering leaders.

This research also expands the knowledge base on ambidexterity, the simultaneous occurrence of exploitation and exploration, and empowering leadership in the IT context. As individuals strive to manage and balance the two potentially conflicting and, in any case, opposing work styles, tensions may arise (March, 1991). Empowering leadership can assist individuals in managing the conflicting demands of explorative and exploitative tasks by providing them with the autonomy and support necessary to navigate these dual responsibilities effectively (von Assen, 2020). This, in turn, may positively influence job satisfaction as individuals feel supported and empowered to strike a balance between exploration and exploitation, ultimately enhancing their ability to cope with these conflicting demands. Although we hypothesized that the greater the level of ambidexterity, the greater the need for and effect of empowering leadership on job satisfaction, we found the opposite.

We, therefore, argue that our specific contribution regarding H2 is a further evaluation of the contextual facilitators and, ultimately, the potential limitations of empowering leadership styles. The need for organizations to build more dynamic and exploratory capabilities while ensuring efficient operations through exploitation is undeniable, resulting in the need to implement ambidextrous structures through bimodal IT (Haffke et al., 2017), for example, or foster contextual and, thus, individual ambidexterity. To this end, we evaluated whether individual ambidexterity moderates the relationship between empowering leadership and job satisfaction in IT workers. Due to the non-hypothesized direct effect of ambidexterity on job satisfaction, IT workers with the same perceived empowering leadership report higher job satisfaction at higher levels of individual ambidexterity. However, the effect of empowering leadership on job satisfaction diminishes with increasing levels of ambidexterity (see Figure 2) until it becomes insignificant (ambidexterity score >20.7). The data, therefore, indicates a moderate negative moderation effect of the interaction of individual ambidexterity and empowering leadership. Thus, the moderator weakens the main effect of empowering leadership on job satisfaction.

A potential explanation for this effect can be found in previous studies that have suggested that empowering leadership could also yield negative outcomes, potentially due to the emphasis on granting high autonomy in decision-making and task delegation, which might consequently amplify task uncertainty (Kim et al., 2018) or job induced tension (Cheong et al., 2016). Our findings underscore the existence of potentially two distinct aspects of empowering leadership: the well-studied positive aspect and the paradoxical or contrasting negative aspect.

These results have interesting practical implications. Although organizations should generally encourage empowering leadership, this may lose its power when individuals are confronted with very high levels of ambidexterity because, as the level of ambidexterity increases, the tension and potential for intrapersonal and interpersonal conflict

may become too high for the individual to manage alone. In this case, the individual may be more likely to seek guidance than empowerment and trust. From a different point of view, Kim and Beehr (2021) suggested that empowering leadership may be construed as a source of stress for employees who desire structure and have a low need for autonomy. This line of thinking is supported by literature that seeks the boundaries of empowering leadership and encourages researchers to explore the less positive outcomes of empowering leadership (Sharma & Kirkman, 2015).

Consequently, individual characteristics should continue to be considered potential moderators when examining the outcomes of empowering leadership (Kim & Beerh, 2021). For future research, we propose including the construct of person-job fit in this research model. Person-job fit refers to the relationship between employee characteristics and job characteristics (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) and includes the question of whether employees would agree that their abilities fit the demands of the job and whether they believe that they are the right type of person for that type of job (Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001). From a survey sample of 6,179 employees of a technology company in China, Cai et al. (2018) concluded that empowering leadership has a positive, indirect effect on employee work engagement through person-job fit. Therefore, it is reasonable that person-job fit may also play a role in the individual assessment of job satisfaction.

This study is not without limitations. Job satisfaction is a multidimensional concept that includes personality traits and environmental factors (Ilies & Judge, 2013). Thus, examining the relationship between empowering leadership and job satisfaction by accounting for the level of ambidexterity may fall short if other potential influencing factors, such as personality traits, teamwork, or performance, are neglected. In addition, we do not account for any learning effects because we did not ask about or account for the length of time someone is led by empowering leadership.

6 Conclusion

Leadership styles that promote trust, discipline, and employee empowerment are crucial in fostering and maintaining ambidexterity. Therefore, we aimed to investigate whether empowering leadership has an effect on job satisfaction among IT workers and whether individual ambidexterity moderates this relationship. The findings contribute to existing research by demonstrating that empowering leadership affects IT employees' perceived job satisfaction. In addition, the data suggest that individual ambidexterity negatively moderates these relationships in that higher levels of individual ambidexterity reduce the effect of empowering leadership on job satisfaction. We explained this finding by potential interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts arising from the conflicting work modes of exploration and exploitation, which may lead individuals to seek guidance and structure rather than trust and empowerment. Altogether, our paper contributes to the empowering leadership and ambidexterity literature in IS by highlighting the need for nuanced approaches to leadership in ambidextrous IT organizations.

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