

When Job Crafting Works: Career Inaction as a Mechanism Linking Job Crafting to Burnout under Work Precarity and Psychological Safety

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Abstract

The study examined how career inaction mediates the relationship between approach job crafting and employee burnout, with work precarity and psychological safety as boundary conditions. The work employed a three-wave time-lagged panel design, collecting data from South Asian employees to test the moderated mediation effects. We found that approach job crafting indirectly decreases burnout, by lessening career inaction, but its influence decreases in the existence of high work precarity and increases in the presence of high psychological safety. We advise managers to reduce structural constraints such as work precarity and actively cultivate psychological safety to enable effective proactivity and prevent burnout. Integrating the Theory of Career Inaction, Psychology of Working Theory, and the Job-Demands and Resources theory, we assessed the boundary conditions by which employee proactivity and wellbeing are interconnected, advancing managerial psychology literature.

1. Introduction

The problem of employee burnout and stagnation of career advancement has become a compelling organizational problem that managers have to deal with in the dynamic and precarious work environment. Organizations are consistently confronting multiple workplace issues like: chronic job stress, lack of engagement, and perceived career immobility (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti, 2026; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). We conceptualize job crafting innately as a behaviour, encompassing the tangible actions employees take to craft or alter their work environment (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Tims et al., 2012). Such employees' behavior also yield a psychological state of activated agency reflected on the employees' feeling of control and intentionality. Therefore, when the activated agency is blocked, it leads to career inaction. The approach job crafting (AJC) is a significant bottom-top strategy that involves employees to widen structural and social resources and address demanding tasks to develop engagement and person-job fit (Makikangas & Schaufeli, 2021; Tims et al., 2022; Zhang & Parker, 2019). Career inaction can happen because workers see the opportunities of change but do not take action (D'Huyvetter et al., 2025; Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). This kind of inaction, as opposed to passivity, is an indication of disconnection between mobilized agency and action, which negatively affects the well-being of employees and organizational performance.

Our research is anchored on the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory, at the interplay of job demands and resources to examine the interaction of AJC on employee burnout and well-being. AJC should produce positive outcomes within JD-R because it helps employees to balance individual needs and work conditions (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti et al., 2015; Bruning & Campion, 2018). However, JD-R principles consider that activated resources can be effectively implemented, which may not be the case when constrained by situational factors.

Despite strong empirical support for job crafting benefits, we identify a significant gap in understanding when and why proactive efforts fail to translate into action. The existing literature presupposes a positive correlation between job crafting and wellbeing (Li & Li, 2026; Nanda, 2025; Zeijen et al., 2018), neglecting the situations, in which proactive acts cannot be performed despite the activation of resources. Literature demonstrate that contextual and organizational conditions, such as managerial support and environmental uncertainties, influence performance and burnout (Popat & Pandey, 2026; Nayak & Budhwar, 2026). We posit

that the activated agency is conditioned by structural (work precarity) and relational (psychological safety) conditions to become meaningful actions.

When activated agency cannot be enacted through proactive efforts, employees may suspend action, resulting in career inaction. Such activated agency has unintended consequences under constrained conditions. Excessive stagnation in the career leads to constant reflection, emotional distress, and counterfactual remorse (D'Huyvetter et al., 2025; Rogiers et al., 2022). Regulatory suspension is an energy-consuming process that results in emotional exhaustion and burnout (Bakker et al., 2023; Hakanen & Keltiainen, 2026). We ask:

When and how does job crafting approach and work precarity in combination with psychological safety interact to determine career inaction and employee burnout?

We seek to examine the interaction of AJC, work precarity, and psychological safety in influencing career inaction, and subsequent burnout (Allan et al., 2025; Duffy et al., 2016; Lichtenthaler & Fischbach, 2019). We incorporate the employee behavior in the larger structural facts to explain the multilevel workplace impacts (Manchia et al., 2026). We conceptualize career inaction as a regulatory reaction to activated agency in the form of suspended action against constraint and lack of motivation or ability (Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022; Rogiers et al., 2022). The state of inactivity leads to emotional stress and burnout, due to the rapid loss of resources (Hakanen & Keltiainen, 2026). The activated proactivity has unintended consequences in constraint. Work precarity worsens the action limitations, bringing in uncertainty and a lack of perceived control (Allan et al., 2025; Rönblad et al., 2019). Psychological safety facilitates or limits agency enactment by promoting organizational support and open communication (Carmeli et al., 2009; Edmondson, 1999), essential for determining the reaction of employees to work-related issues (Popat & Pandey, 2026). We used a three-wave time-lagged panel design that allowed the separation of variables by time and effective testing of our model.

We offer three contributions to managerial psychology. First, we question the assumption that proactivity is inherently beneficial by establishing that activated agency is not necessarily an action under constraint. Second, we redefine career inaction as a control system which occurs as a result of agency misalignment rather than passive deficit. Third, we expand JD-R theory with a pathway in which resource activation but no enactment results in withdrawal and burnout. We advise managers to lessen the structural limits, such as work precarity, and encourage psychological safety to enact proactive behavior.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The JD-R theory serves as the overarching framework, guiding us in explaining how proactive job redesign interacts with contextual factors to shape employee wellbeing and performance (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti, 2026; Lesener et al., 2020). AJC serves as a self-initiated strategy within this framework to optimize job resources and challenges, usually leading to adaptive professional outcomes (Tims et al., 2022;

Zhang & Parker, 2019). Nonetheless, JD-R implicitly presupposes that the activated resources can be successfully implemented, without explaining constrained conditions.

We address this limitation by introducing the concept of agency misalignment, wherein activated agentic efforts cannot be translated into feasible action due to contextual constraints. We conceptualize this mismatch as a condition in which the activation of resources does not translate into gain spirals as expected but rather elicits regulatory reactions.

Drawing on the Theory of Career Inaction (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020), we explain the mediating psychological mechanism. We conceptualize career inaction as a regulatory suspension of action that arises when people feel an incongruity between planned career moves and their attainability. Employees may want to change career but fail because of the limited conditions for enactment, resulting in emotional strain and wasted resources (Rogiers et al., 2022). It is attributable due to agency misfit, rather than a passive deficit, viewed from the JD-R process of health-impairment principles leading to burnout.

To contextualize the structural limits of individual agency, we draw on the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT) (Duffy et al., 2016). PWT provides the theoretical grounding for work precarity, explaining how systemic unpredictability and powerlessness can offset the positive resources gained from job crafting (Allan et al., 2021; Christie et al., 2025; Duffy et al., 2016). We introduce work precarity as a contextual constraint that intensifies agency misalignment by limiting the feasibility of action. We distinguish between Work Precarity and Career Inaction. Work Precarity is employee's perceived environmental condition shaped by job unpredictability and instability. The concerned employee may feel that his continued employment is highly unpredictable. In contrast, Career Inaction represents a psychological state of employee's regulatory suspension on his career goals. Employee may perceive that he does not make tangible steps to achieve his career aspirations. It is an internal experience of employees being stuck in career. Therefore we arrive at the point that work precarity is the cause of the constraint, while career inaction is the reaction to the induced constraint.

We argue that while Approach Job Crafting sets new work-related goals, activating personal agency (Tims et al., 2012), the goal-setting process is subjected to risk. Employees may experience a state of goal hindrance because of contextual constraints obstructing the realization of the newly set goals. From the perspectives of the theory of career inaction, employees may develop a regulatory suspension of action as blocked goals can create a discrepancy between the desired and actual states of achievement (Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). Therefore, we conceptualize Career Inaction as the psychological manifestation of such goal hindrance at the career level. It is a persistent cognitive and emotional demand on the employees. It is a state where the employees suspend job engagement due to perceived environmental barriers despite having active intentions. We argue that prolonged goal hindrance may lead to emotional exhaustion as the employee continuously repeats the blocked intentions consuming self-regulatory resources like ego depletion. Consequently, it directly feeds into the health-impairment process of JD-R, ultimately leading to employee burnout.

The JD-R framework also explains perceived psychological safety (PPS) as a contextual job resource at organizational, team, and dyadic levels (Carmeli et al., 2009; Edmondson, 1999; Wang & Ning, 2024). We

conceptualize psychological safety as a relational condition that enables the enactment of agency by facilitating support-seeking and open communication. A high PPS provides socio-emotional support that influences how employees respond to career inaction and its potential progression toward burnout (Detert & Burris, 2007; Nanda, 2026).

While existing literature grounded on the JD-R framework has extensively examined proximal factors like job autonomy and supervisor support as antecedents to job crafting (Demerouti, 2026; Harju et al., 2021; Mäkikangas & Schaufeli, 2021), we argue that Work Precarity explicates a more fundamental structural condition. While autonomy and support determine how an employee crafts, work precarity governs whether crafting is a viable strategy or not. For example, if an employee perceives his job as unstable or unpredictable, his potential gain on investing resources into job crafting is significantly diminished. Even high autonomy and support cannot overcome the fundamental uncertainty that makes long-term resource investment appear futile in such environments. We contend that career inaction that triggers the regulatory suspension.

We integrate three complementary theoretical perspectives to explain when and why proactive efforts fail to prevent burnout. The JD-R theory guides our overarching framework, positioning approach job crafting as a resource-building strategy and burnout as a health-impairment outcome (Bakker et al., 2023). In the JD-R architecture, the Theory of Career Inaction explains the mediating psychological mechanism, where we conceptualize career inaction as a regulatory interruption attributable to agency misalignment (Verbruggen and De Vos, 2020). We leverage the PWT to contextualize structural constraints, identifying work precarity as a systemic boundary condition which limits agency enactment (Duffy et al., 2016). The integrated framework offers a coherent understanding in which activated agency translates into action only when structural (low precarity) and relational (high psychological safety) conditions the translation of proactive intentions into tangible career actions, thereby preventing the resource depletion leading to burnout.

2.2 Development of Hypotheses

2.2.1 Approach Job Crafting and Career Inaction

Grounded in the JD-R theory, AJC involves proactive, self-initiated behaviors in which employees actively seek structural and social resources and challenging job demands to optimize their work environment (Bakker et al., 2023; Tims et al., 2012, 2022; Zhang & Parker, 2019). Consequently, proactive resource accumulation can improve an individual's personal agency, work engagement, and perceived person-job fit (Demerouti et al., 2015; Holman et al., 2024; Mäkikangas & Schaufeli, 2021; Petrou et al., 2012).

However, increased agency activation does not necessarily guarantee successful enactment. When opportunities for action are constrained, proactive efforts may not translate into actual career advancement, as heightened agency may instead increase awareness of unfulfilled intentions, leading to a regulatory suspension of action (Bruning & Campion, 2018; Lichtenthaler & Fischbach, 2019; Silapurem et al., 2024). Thus, approach job crafting may be positively associated with career inaction when enacted under constrained conditions, reflecting agency misalignment.

H1

Approach job crafting is negatively associated with career inaction.

2.2.2 Career Inaction and Burnout

Anchoring on the Career Inaction and health-impairment process of the JD-R model, employees' failure to achieve a desired career change is a chronic psychological demand (Bakker et al., 2023; Lesener et al., 2020; Verbruggen & De Vos, 2020). When employees experience a discrepancy between planned action and achieved results, they may engage in protracted cognitive and emotional processing, leading to rumination and emotional tension (D'Huyvetter et al., 2025; Rogiers et al., 2022). Such a regulatory pause of action consumes mental and emotional resources, making it more prone to energy loss (Allen et al., 2016). Empirical evidence indicates that unresolved emotional tension and career stagnation undermine positive affective states, leading to emotional exhaustion, psychological distress, and burnout (Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022). Hence, we propose:

H2

Career inaction is positively related to employee burnout.

2.2.3 The Mediating Mechanism

Employees' prolonged suspension of career action reflects a chronic and unresolved stressor. Existing literature on employees' career initiatives suggests that the cognitive processing of unattained goals consumes substantial psychological resources (Budjanovcanin, & Woodrow, 2022; Rogiers et al, 2022; Tims et al., 2022). It leads to contemplation and emotional and psychological distress for employees (D'Huyvetter et al., 2025). Bringing the perspectives from the JD-R framework, it will constitute a hindrance demand. The misalignment between activated agency and constrained enactment initiates a loss spiral, instead of advancing a gain spiral. Hence, employees' effort to maintain the unrealized intention depletes their energy, leads to emotional exhaustion and psychological burnout. Therefore, we argue that career inaction is the key mediating process through which activated agency translates into occupational distress, when constrained in its enactment (Bakker et al., 2023; Demerouti, 2026; Hakanen & Keltiainen, 2026). AJC as a positive antecedent will be effective when activated agency is enacted (Holman et al., 2024; Mäkikangas & Schaufeli, 2021; Petrou et al., 2012; Tims et al., 2022; Zhang & Parker, 2019). When enactment is constrained, proactive efforts may culminate in sustained career inaction, reflecting a misalignment between intention and feasibility. The consequence serves as the mechanism that drives the JD-R health-impairment process (D'Huyvetter et al., 2025; Demerouti et al., 2015; Harju et al., 2021; Rogiers et al., 2022). In the context of JD-R, career inaction can be conceptualized as a hindrance demand that arises from blocked enactment, in which the pursuit of unachieved goals consumes regulatory resources and prevents anticipated gain spirals. Hence, we propose:

H3

Career inaction mediates the relationship between approach job crafting and burnout.

2.2.4 Work Precarity as the Boundary Condition

Psychology of Working Theory (PWT) frames work precarity as a situational limitation that constrains agency (Allan et al., 2021, 2025; Christie et al., 2025; Duffy et al., 2016). Work precarity is characterized by unpredictability, job threat, and powerlessness (Hult et al., 2025). With high work precarity, it is less viable to translate proactive efforts into meaningful results (Zeijen et al., 2018). It leads to limited resource mobilization due to structural instability, even when employees are trying to do so (Allan et al., 2025; D'Huyvetter et al., 2025). Hence, work precarity exacerbates agency misalignment, reinforcing the link between job crafting and career inaction.

H4

Work precarity moderates the negative relationship between approach job crafting and career inaction, such that the negative relationship is weaker when work precarity is high.

2.2.5 Psychological Safety as the Boundary Condition

Based on the JD-R principles, contextual resources can attenuate the health-impairment process by breaking the link between hindrance demands and psychological strain (Bakker et al., 2023; Lesener et al., 2020; Schaufeli et al., 2009). We conceptualize perceived psychological safety (PPS) as a multilevel relational resource covering team, organizational, and dyadic dimensions (Carmeli et al., 2009; Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 1999; Wang & Ning, 2024). PPS reflects the extent to which employees take interpersonal risks, feel safe to express themselves, and seek assistance without fear of negative consequences (Kahn, 1990; Tynan, 2005).

Accordingly, we derive that high PPS weakens the positive relationship between career inaction and burnout through three interconnected mechanisms. High PPS allows employees to voice career concerns, aids adaptive coping through open dialogue, reveal barriers, and seek feedback. Consequently, it will reduce emotional distress associated with unresolved inaction (D'Huyvetter et al., 2025; Rogiers et al., 2022). Similarly, high PPS facilitates problem-solving and resource conservation by providing a supportive context in which employees leverage collaborative support, mobilize coaching, and mentoring to overcome barriers to career enactment (Carmeli et al., 2009). Additionally, by enabling emotional expression and validation, diminishing self-doubt, frustration, and regret, high PPS reduces the affective cost of goal hindrance (Budjanovcanin & Woodrow, 2022). Contrarily, low PPS intensify the inaction-burnout relationship through constrained adaptive processes. Based on the above insights we argue that PPS moderates the career inaction-burnout relationship, such that the relationship is weaker when PPS is high. Hence, we propose:

H5

Perceived psychological safety moderates the positive relationship between career inaction and burnout, such that the positive relationship is weaker when perceived psychological safety is high.

2.2.6 The Moderated Mediation Effect

Building upon our previous arguments for the mediating role of career inaction and the moderating roles of work precarity and perceived psychological safety (PPS), we advance a moderated mediation model. We

argue that the indirect effect of approach job crafting on burnout via career inaction is contingent upon structural constraints and relational resources. The potential of translating proactively activated agency into meaningful career action relies on whether the work context constrains or enables enactment (Allan et al., 2025; D'Huyvetter et al., 2025; Wang & Ning, 2024; Zeijen et al., 2018).

Employees face unpredictability, structural instability, and perceived powerlessness, when work precarity is high. Work precarity leads proactive efforts less feasible and reduce the likelihood of activated agency translating into actual career progress (Allan et al., 2021; Christie et al., 2025; Hult et al., 2025). Hence, employees who engage in approach job crafting may experience heightened awareness of the gap between their career aspirations and the constrained opportunities for enactment, thereby intensifying career inaction in such contexts. (Rönnblad et al., 2019). Such misalignment initiates a loss spiral in which proactive efforts culminate in regulatory suspension and sustained inaction rather than generating gain spirals.

Employees lack the relational safety essential to seek support, voice career concerns, and mobilize resources to overcome barriers to action, when PPS is low (Carmeli et al., 2009; Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 1999). Consequently, low PPS may still constrain the enactment of agency by discouraging employees from seeking the interpersonal and organizational resources necessary to convert proactive intentions into action, even when work precarity is not exceptionally high. The combination of structural constraints (high work precarity) and relational constraints (low PPS) creates a particularly debilitating context in which activated agency is doubly constrained, neither relationally supported nor structurally feasible.

Arguably, when PPS is high, and work precarity is low employees can effectively enact their proactive efforts. Psychological safety enables employees to seek resources, voice concerns, and engage in adaptive coping that resolves goal hindrance, while structural stability provides the foundation for meaningful career action, before it escalates into sustained inaction and burnout. Therefore, we expect approach job crafting likely to generate gain spirals, reducing career inaction and protecting against employee burnout.

The above arguments lead us to derive that the indirect protective effect of approach job crafting on burnout via reduced career inaction would be weakest (or even reversed) under conditions of low PPS and high work precarity; and strongest under conditions of high PPS and low work precarity. Proactive efforts may result in sustained inaction and subsequent burnout, when both constraints are present. Hence, we propose:

H6

The indirect effect of approach job crafting on burnout via career inaction is strongest when work precarity is low and psychological safety is high.

The conceptual framework is presented in Fig. 1.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design and Context

We utilized a three-wave panel design to evaluate our hypothesized model. Our design allowed a 4-month time lag between waves of data collection, supporting temporal separation between predictors, mediators, and outcome variables. The time lag was chosen as career inaction and burnout typically develop over months, not weeks (D'Huyvetter et al., 2025; Hakanen & Keltiainen, 2026). The interval allows job crafting effects to manifest while minimizing extraneous influences, consistent with prior longitudinal occupational health research (Bakker et al., 2023; Schaufeli et al., 2009). The sampling population from the manufacturing, energy, health, and infrastructure sectors are traditional, highly organized, and high-stress settings where systemic labor insecurity overlaps with a contemporary demand for proactive adaptability and psychological safety (Demerouti, 2026; Wang & Ning, 2024), making the population appropriate for analyzing situations in which proactive actions might not yield expected results.

3.2. Sampling Strategy and Recruitment

A purposive, network-based sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. We contacted with professional networks and collaborated with HR departments to identify participants. Participants (N = 495) were drawn from manufacturing (28%), energy (24%), healthcare (26%), and infrastructure (22%) across India (52%), Bangladesh (20%), Pakistan (18%), and Sri Lanka (10%). The problem of clustering by organization (four firms) was addressed based on robust standard errors (MLR estimator). The inclusion criteria ensured respondents are full-time employees with at least 1-year organizational experience, to assess their work environments and career paths. The survey links were shared with participants. To reduce social desirability bias and common method variance, we build a firewall between the organizations and the data collection process. Participants were informed that the researcher was fully independent and that employers would not have access to individual responses. The procedural separation minimized evaluation apprehension and response distortion.

3.3. Data Collection and Attrition Handling

We administered the survey exclusively in English across three waves spanning 8 months. To ensure anonymity, participants were assigned a unique identification code through the waves. Based on an a priori power analysis for structural equation modeling with approximately 66 observed indicators, we determined that a final sample of approximately 400 respondents was required to detect conditional indirect effects. We anticipated an 18% cumulative attrition rate and therefore recruited 495 participants at Wave 1. To maximize retention, we provided participants with a summary report of the aggregate findings and planted a tree on behalf of each participant who completed in our eco-club.

Attrition analyses indicated no systematic differences between retained and dropped participants on key study variables, supporting the robustness of the final sample.

3.4 Measures

We measured all focal constructs using validated scales drawn from recent organizational literature. To maintain cognitive consistency and reduce respondent burden, we measured all items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*completely disagree / never*) to 5 (*completely agree / always*).

3.4.1. Approach Job Crafting

We conceptualized Approach Job Crafting (AJC) as a behavioral strategy exclusively focusing on the approach-oriented dimensions of the Job Crafting Scale (Tims et al., 2012). We operationalized the construct using the sub-dimensions of structural job resources, social job resources in addition to challenging job demands, as the other dimensions of the scale represents a prevention-focused strategy, rather than an approach-oriented one. We measured AJC at Wave 1 using the 21-item Job Crafting Scale developed by Tims et al. (2012). This scale precisely measures approach job crafting strategies (Demerouti, 2026). The scale addresses three approach-oriented dimensions: increasing structural job resources, increasing social job resources, and increasing challenging job demands. An exemplary item is "I try to develop my capabilities." The established reliability of the scale is significant (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.75$ to 0.82).

3.4.2. Career Inaction

At Wave 2, we measured career inaction using the 8-item Career Inaction Scale (CARINAS) developed by D'Huyvetter et al. (2025). This measure reflects self-reported inaction among individuals in converting career intentions into action, consistent with our theoretical framework of inaction as a control mechanism in limited circumstances. The scale is unidimensional. One such example is: "I do not make tangible steps to achieve my career aspirations". Reliability of the scale was established (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$).

3.4.3. Burnout

Wave 3 used 10-items from the Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT) by Schaufeli et al. (2020) to measure burnout. The scale is a clinical cutoff scale of severe occupational energy depletion. It thoroughly describes the fundamental aspects of burnout, such as emotional exhaustion, cognitive impairment, and mental distance (Hakanen & Kaltainen, 2026; Schaufeli et al., 2023). An exemplary item is: "At work, I feel mentally exhausted." The Cronbach's alpha for this measure is significant (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$ to 0.91).

3.4.4. Work Precarity

At Wave 1, we assessed subjective work precarity using 15 highly loaded items from the 28-item Work Precarity Scale, developed by Allan et al. (2025) and adopting to our study context. This scale captures psychological experiences of systemic uncertainty beyond objective job insecurity. The scale measures precarity across nine subscales: unpredictability, job threat, technological precarity, and deprivation of basic needs. An exemplary item is: "My continued employment in this job is highly unpredictable." The whole scale was highly internally consistent in terms of validation (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$ to 0.92).

3.4.5. Perceived Psychological Safety

At Wave 2, we measured PPS using the 14-item scale developed by Wang and Ning (2024). The reason for our selection of this scale was that it was developed through a multidimensional, combined interaction approach, is highly relevant and validated for organizations in the context of China, and is therefore highly appropriate for capturing the contextual norms in our South Asian cultural context. The scale measures three distinct dimensions: organizational-level PPS (4 items), team-level PPS (4 items), and dyadic-level PPS (6 items). An exemplary item for the organizational level is "In the workplace, we can freely express our views without taking risks," while an exemplary item for the dyadic level is "In the workplace, I can be my true self." The scale had a good internal consistency during first validations (Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$).

3.4.6. Control and Marker Variables

To systematically eliminate other possible causes of career inaction and burnout and potential confounding effects, we controlled for age, gender, educational level, relationship status, and organizational tenure at Wave 1. Control variables would help in isolating the focal relationships from demographic and methodological influences. We also used a theoretically unrelated marker variable, Attitude Towards the Color Blue, with 4 items to eliminate common method variance (CMV). Attitude Toward the Color Blue (Miller & Simmering, 2023) served as a theoretically unrelated marker variable for CMV detection. An exemplary item is, "I prefer the color blue to other colors." This marker variable enabled statistical assessment of potential method bias in the measurement model.

3.5. Analytical Strategy

Data were analysed using Mplus 8.1. We performed confirmatory factor analysis using maximum likelihood estimation with robust standard errors to establish discriminant validity among the five latent variables and the marker variable. To ensure consistent interpretations of constructs over time, we conducted measurement invariance tests at the configural, metric, and scalar levels. The hypothesized relationships were tested using SEM. We used full-information maximum likelihood estimation to deal with missing data and panel attrition. Bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples was used to test for conditional indirect effects, yielding 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals.

The model was tested to enhance causal inference (e.g., reverse causation directions from burnout to job crafting and career inaction) that showed worse model fit, supporting our temporal sequence.

3.6 Ethical Considerations & Procedural Controls

All participants received comprehensive information about the study's purpose, their right to withdraw without penalty, and guarantees of complete confidentiality and anonymity. Written informed consent was secured before participation, and we collected no personally identifying information. To minimize common-method bias and socially desirable responding, procedural controls comprising temporal separation of measures across three waves and careful item wording to reduce ambiguity was adopted (Podsakoff et al., 2024). Missing data were handled using full-information maximum-likelihood procedures to leverage all available information without compromising accuracy. We obtained ethical approval from our Institutional Ethics Committee (Ref. No: NITT/IEC/2025/DEC/042 Date: 16/12/2025).

4. Results

4.1. Preliminary Analyses and Measurement Model

The participants' profiles are appended as Appendix A. The attrition analyses resulted: Wave 1 N = 495; Wave 2 N = 423 (85.5% retention); Wave 3 N = 401 (81.0% retention). Attrition analyses revealed no significant differences between completers and dropouts on T1 study variables (all $p > .05$). We evaluated descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and zero-order correlations among all study variables. All Cronbach's alphas exceeded .70. Marker variable correlations were non-significant and near zero (refer to Appendix A).

Approach job crafting was negatively associated with career inaction at the bivariate level. Career inaction, in turn, was significantly positively correlated with subsequent burnout.

We conducted a confirmatory factor analysis to verify construct validity (Refer Appendix A). We compared our hypothesized five-factor model against alternative models to ensure distinctiveness. The hypothesized five-factor model demonstrated good fit: $\chi^2(220) = 415.32$, CFI = .963, TLI = .958, RMSEA = .042, SRMR = .035. This model fit significantly better than a four-factor model merging approach job crafting and work precarity ($\Delta\chi^2(4) = 435.13$, $p < .01$) and a one-factor Harman's single-factor model ($\Delta\chi^2(10) = 1125.35$, $p < .01$).

The results indicate that the five-factor model is much closer to the data than all other options. Longitudinal measurement invariance tests supported configural invariance ($\chi^2(340) = 650.12$, CFI = .965, RMSEA = .045). Metric, scalar, and strict invariance were established, with $\Delta\text{CFI} \leq .002$ across models, indicating that participants interpreted the constructs consistently over the eight-month study period.

4.2. Direct and Mediating Effects

We used structural equation modeling with full information maximum likelihood estimation to test the proposed hypotheses (see. Table 1).

Hypothesis 1

proposed that the relationship between approach job crafting and career inaction is contingent on contextual constraints. The results indicated that approach job crafting at Wave 1 was negatively related to career inaction at Wave 2 ($\beta = -0.38$, $p < .001$), suggesting that, in the absence of strong constraints, proactive efforts are associated with reduced inaction.

Table 1 Structural Equation Modeling Results						
Structural Path	Estimate (B)	SE	t-value	p	95% CI	Supported?
Direct Effects						
Approach Crafting → Career Inaction [H1]	-0.38	0.06	-6.33	< .001	[-0.50, -0.26]	Yes
Career Inaction → Burnout [H2]	0.45	0.05	9.00	< .001	[0.35, 0.55]	Yes
Approach Crafting → Burnout	-0.15	0.05	-3.00	.003	[-0.25, -0.05]	
Indirect Effect						
Approach Crafting → Career Inaction → Burnout [H3]	-0.17	0.03		< .001	[-0.23,-0.11]	Yes
First-Stage Moderation (Work Precarity)						
Work Precarity → Career Inaction	0.22	0.05	4.40	< .001	[0.12, 0.32]	
Crafting × Work Precarity → Career Inaction [H4]	0.25	0.06	4.16	< .001	[0.13, 0.37]	Yes
Low (-1 SD)	-0.51	0.08	-6.38	< .001	[-0.67, -0.35]	
High (+ 1 SD)	-0.12	0.09	-1.33	.18	[-0.30, 0.06]	
Second-Stage Moderation (Psychological Safety)						
Psych. Safety → Burnout	-0.30	0.05	-6.00	< .001	[-0.40, -0.20]	
Inaction × Psych. Safety → Burnout [H5]	-0.28	0.05	-5.60	< .001	[-0.38, -0.18]	Yes
Low (-1 SD)	0.58	0.06	9.67	< .001	[0.46, 0.70]	

Table 1 Structural Equation Modeling Results					
High (+ 1 SD)	0.21	0.08	2.63	.009	[0.05, 0.37]
Conditional Indirect Effect of Approach Job Crafting on Burnout via Career Inaction					
Work Precarity	Psychological Safety	Indirect Effect	SE	95% CI	Interpretation
Low (-1 SD)	Low (-1 SD)	-0.30	0.05	[-0.40,-0.20]	Significant
Low (-1 SD)	High (+ 1 SD)	-0.11	0.04	[-0.19,-0.03]	Significant
High (+ 1 SD)	Low (-1 SD)	-0.07	0.05	[-0.17, 0.04]	Non-significant
High (+ 1 SD)	High (+ 1 SD)	-0.03	0.03	[-0.09, 0.03]	Non-significant
<i>Note.</i> $N = 406$. Unstandardized coefficients are reported. CI = bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence interval. Control variables (age, gender, education, tenure, marker variable) were included in the model but omitted from this table for parsimony. The index of moderated mediation was significant (Index = 0.14, 95% CI [0.06, 0.23]), indicating that the indirect effect differs significantly across combinations of the moderators. Source: Author					

In line with Hypothesis 2, career inaction positively and significantly associated with employee burnout at Wave 3 ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < .001$). We tested the mediating mechanism proposed in Hypothesis 3. Approach job crafting had no significant direct association with burnout, which was indirectly mediated via career inaction ($\beta = -0.08$, $p = .21$). The relationship between approach job crafting and burnout through career inaction was significant ($\beta = -0.17$, 95% CI = -0.24 -0.11), which supported H3.

Additionally, alternative models testing reverse pathways (e.g., burnout association with job crafting and inaction) demonstrated inferior fit, thus confirming the proposed temporal ordering.

4.3. Moderation and Moderated Mediation Effects

We tested the boundary conditions of Hypotheses 4 and 5. Simple slopes analysis showed that approach job crafting had a significant negative association with career inaction when work precarity was low ($\beta = -0.51$, $p = .001$) but not significant when work precarity was high ($\beta = -0.12$, $p = .18$). This trend suggests that contextual pressures undermine the proactive action into less action translation.

The relationship between career inaction and burnout was significant when psychological safety was low ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < .001$), but became weaker when it was high ($\beta = 0.21$, $p < .05$), indicating that relational resources mitigate the effect of inaction on burnout.

We synthesized these boundary conditions to test the full model. Table 1 shows conditional indirect effects and the index of moderated mediation.

The index of moderated mediation was significant (Index = 0.14, 95% CI [0.06, 0.23]). The data revealed that when work precarity was low, job crafting exerted a significant indirect protective association against

burnout. However, this indirect effect diminished and became non-significant under conditions of high precarity and low psychological safety. The figure with path coefficients is presented in Fig. 2.

We plotted the simple slopes for both interactions of Work Precarity and Perceived Psychological safety to visually illustrate the moderation effects.

As shown in Fig. 3, the negative association between approach job crafting and career inaction was significant only when work precarity was low ($\beta = -0.51, p < .001$), but was non-significant when work precarity was high ($\beta = -0.12, p = .18$).

These findings support the proposed mechanism in which proactive efforts fail to yield beneficial outcomes when agency cannot be effectively enacted due to contextual constraints. Hypothesis 6 was supported.

5. Discussion

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

Our work examined the intersection of proactive behavior, career inaction, and occupational health in unpredictable work settings. The three-wave panel design supported the proposed model linking proactive efforts, contextual constraints, and employee outcomes. Approach job crafting was associated with reduced career inaction under low constraint conditions; however, this association weakened under high work precarity. A multidimensional PPS buffered the relationship between career inaction and burnout, reducing the adverse consequences of sustained inaction. Our findings emphasize the effectiveness of proactive behavior, depending on whether it can be meaningfully enacted within contextual constraints.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

We contribute to the JD-R model and job crafting literatures. Existing models assume that proactive work behaviors are equally advantageous to improve wellbeing and performance (Demerouti, 2026; Hakanen & Keltiainen, 2026; Li & Li, 2026). Our results support this assumption by showing that the advantages of proactivity are contingent on the realization of the enactment.

We revealed that agency misalignment as a process that can explain why proactive work does not yield positive outcomes. Although previous studies have recognized the possible drawbacks of job crafting, overinvestment or misfit (Diller et al., 2026; Silapurem et al., 2024), we identified a distinct pathway in which activated agency cannot be enacted, resulting in career inaction and subsequent burnout, shifting focus from the quantity of proactivity to its viability within contextual constraints.

We conceptualized career inaction as a regulatory response rather than a passive deficit. Career inaction arises when people hold back in limited circumstances. Our findings extend the JD-R model by identifying a process in which resource mobilization fails to generate gain spirals, instead adding to the health-impairment pathway.

We emphasized the contextual factors influencing proactivity outcomes. Work precarity is a structural barrier to the realization of agency, which aligns with the Psychology of Working Theory (Allan et al., 2021). Our

findings suggest that individual agency alone is insufficient when opportunity structures are restricted.

We extend the buffering perspective of JD-R by showing that psychological safety is a multilevel relational resource that mitigates the effects of inaction on burnout. Our model includes organizational, team, and dyadic levels to provide a more precise interpretation of the influence of social context on employee reactions. The contribution stems from the relational conditions buffering strain and determining the degree of maintenance of agency under constraint.

5.3. Practical Implications

Our findings offer managerial guidance to harness the benefits of employee proactivity while safeguarding against burnout (Demerouti, 2026; Wu et al., 2026). Based on our findings, managers need to recognize that without ensuring contextual support, encouraging employee proactivity can be counterproductive. Before promoting job crafting, they should evaluate whether employees possess foundational conditions like job security, clear career pathways, and psychological safety, to convert activated agency into tangible career progress.

By providing transparent communication about organizational changes, employment stability, and well-defined career development pathways, managers can significantly reduce work precarity. Proactive investments yield limited returns, when employees perceive their positions as unpredictable, accelerating resource depletion and burnout. We advise them to employ validated instruments like the Work Precarity Scale (Allan et al., 2025) to identify instability pockets and implement targeted interventions such as regular career development discussions, contract stabilization, and skill development programs.

We emphasize that cultivating psychological safety represents a critical priority for managers. They should establish monthly safe-space career check-ins where employees openly discuss barriers without fear of judgment. Managers can employ open-ended questions, practice non-judgmental listening, and refrain from immediately offering solutions during these sessions. When employees feel psychologically safe, they seek feedback, voice concerns, and mobilize resources that resolve career inaction before it escalates into exhaustion. Hence, HR policy makers can institutionalize psychological safety by incorporating it into leadership training, performance evaluations, and organizational culture initiatives.

Uncontrolled self-directed crafting may trigger role ambiguity and interpersonal conflict (Silapurem et al., 2024). Rather than encouraging unstructured proactivity, we inspire organizations to implement structured job crafting interventions. Strategies like quarterly job-crafting sessions following evidence-based insights (Van den Heuvel et al., 2015; Zeijen et al., 2018) can coach employees to set SMART objectives aligned with team goals. Expressing gratitude to colleagues, and explicitly instructing employees to negotiate work scope collectively, ensures resource-seeking behaviour generates synergistic outcomes rather than competitive aggression.

We advise HR to adopt anonymous semi-annual pulse surveys using the Career Inaction Scale (D'Huyvetter et al., 2025). Scores exceeding one standard deviation above the organizational mean signal needs for mentoring, career coaching, or job rotation. This is because early identification of career inaction enables intervention before it escalates into emotional exhaustion and burnout.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

While our methodology establishes temporal separation, the use of self-report measures introduces potential bias. However, given that perceptions of agency, constraint, and inaction are inherently subjective, self-reports remain appropriate for capturing these constructs. Future studies may employ experience-sampling or diary methods to capture dynamic fluctuations in job crafting, inaction, and exhaustion (Hakanen & Kaltainen, 2026). Our design captures a unidirectional process, whereas reciprocal relationships may exist. Career inaction may reduce subsequent job crafting, creating feedback loops that were not examined. Future research should explore such dynamic processes. We did not fully distinguish between internally driven and structurally constrained inaction. Multi-source designs, including supervisor ratings or behavioral indicators, could disentangle these mechanisms.

Our South Asian sample limits contextual generalizability. Future research should examine whether these findings extend to other cultural and institutional contexts. Cross-cultural studies may clarify how differences in power distance and individualism shape the enactment of agency. Future research may examine the conditions under which proactive behaviors become ineffective or counterproductive, including how contextual constraints interact with individual differences to influence whether proactive efforts are enacted or suspended.

5.5. Conclusion

We conclude that approach job crafting remains a valuable behavioral strategy for employee wellbeing. However, its effectiveness depends on whether proactive efforts can be meaningfully enacted within the work context. Our study shifts the focus from promoting proactivity to ensuring its viability by demonstrating that activated agency may not translate into action under constrained conditions. Proactive behavior is contingent upon structural stability and the presence of multilevel psychological safety within organizations.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Conceptualization, Design, Data Collection and Analysis, Interpretation and Drafting

Data Availability

The data used in the study will be made available upon a reasonable request from the corresponding author

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Figures

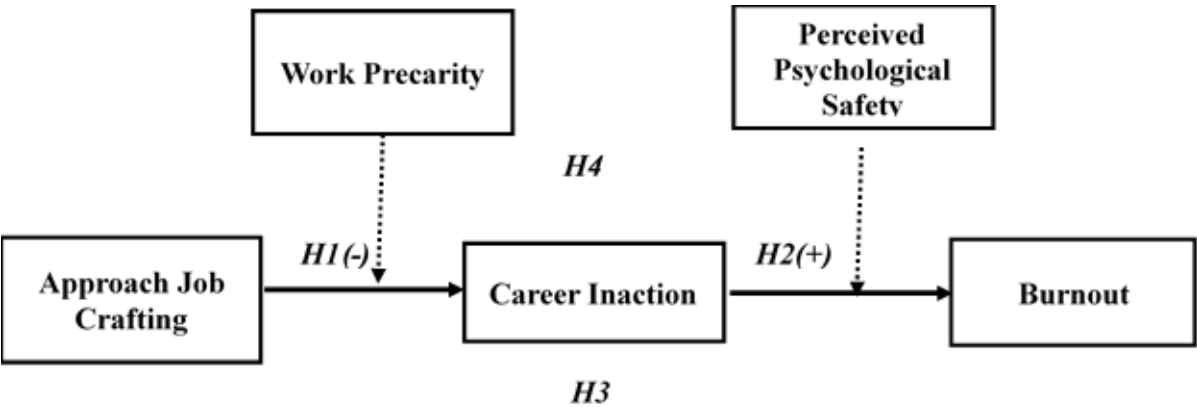


Figure 1. The Conceptual Framework

Figure 1

See image above for figure legend.

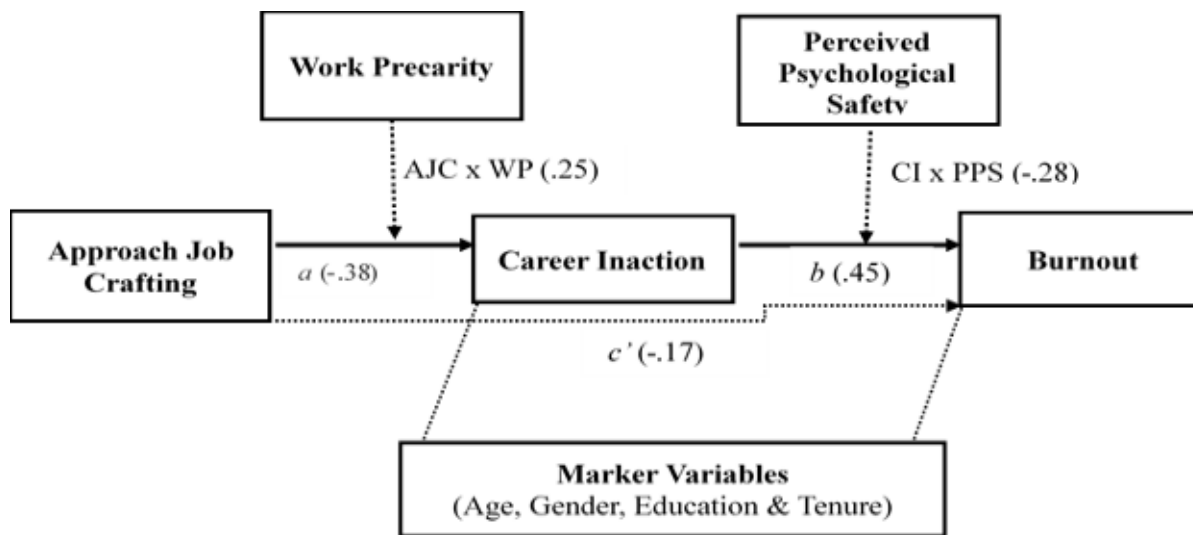


Figure 2. The Structural Diagram with Path Coefficients

Figure 2

See image above for figure legend.

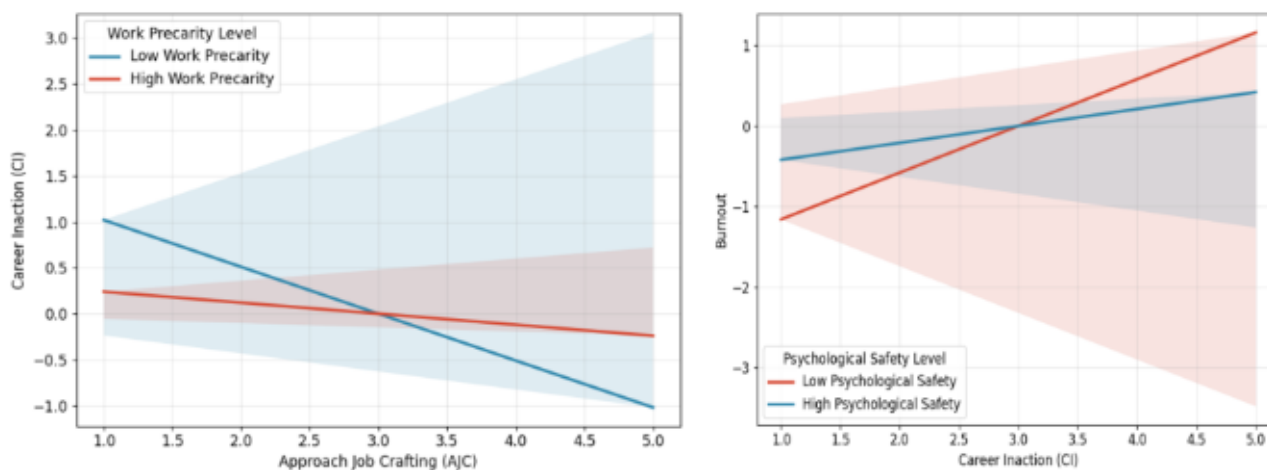


Figure 3. The moderating role of Work Precarity and Psychological Safety

Figure 3

See image above for figure legend.