

A process perspective on psychological contract change: Making sense of, and repairing, psychological contract breach and violation through employee coping actions

SARAH BANKINS*

Newcastle Business School, University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia

Summary

Psychological contracts are dynamic, but few studies explore the processes driving change and how employees influence them. By adopting a process approach with a teleological change lens, and drawing upon the sensemaking and coping literatures, this study positions individuals as active and adaptive agents driving contract change. Employing a mixed methodology, with a four-wave longitudinal survey ($n = 107$ graduate newcomers) and qualitative interviews ($n = 26$ graduate newcomers), the study focuses on unfolding events and develops an “adaptive remediation” process model aimed at unraveling contract dynamics. The model demonstrates how breach or violation events trigger sensemaking, resulting in initially negative employee reactions and a “withdrawal” of perceived contributions, before individuals exercise their agency and enact coping strategies to make sense of, and adapt and respond to, these discrepancies. A process of contract “repair” could then occur if the coping actions (termed “remediation effects”) were effective, with individuals returning to positive exchange perceptions. These actions either directly addressed the breach and repaired both it and the psychological contract (termed “remedies”) or involved cognitive reappraisal of the broader work environment and repaired the contract but not the breach (termed “buffers”). The results highlight the unfolding, processual nature of psychological contracting. Copyright © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Keywords: psychological contract change; sensemaking of psychological contract breach and violation; stress and coping; psychological contract repair; process research

The psychological contract consists of the perceived implicit reciprocal obligations that exist between an employee and his or her employer (Conway & Briner, 2005). The contract is theorized to unfold via a dynamic process, through ongoing cycles of negotiation, breach and fulfillment (Conway & Briner, 2009), and influences outcomes such as job satisfaction and turnover intentions (Rousseau, 1995). But our understanding of how and why the contract changes remains limited. Few studies utilize the “tools” of process research to explore contract dynamics (Conway & Briner, 2005), despite these frameworks and methodologies allowing researchers to deeply explore events and “generative mechanisms” driving contract content change (or “contract change”) (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 511).

Breach and violation events are often cited as triggers for contract change. Breach refers to employees perceiving unmet employer obligations and violation refers to the negative affective responses that may ensue (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). However, predominantly cross-sectional quantitative studies of these events offer a largely static view by focusing on resultant negative employee attitudes and behaviors (Conway & Briner, 2002). This is despite recent, particularly qualitative, work identifying that employees can engage in constructive responses to episodes of breach and violation (e.g., Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Pate, 2006). This suggests that individuals ultimately find ways to manage these situations as active exchange participants (Seeck & Parzefall, 2008) and over time are

*Correspondence to: Sarah Bankins, Newcastle Business School, University of Newcastle, Ourimbah Campus, NSW, Australia, 2258. E-mail: sarah.bankins@newcastle.edu.au

unlikely to only passively reciprocate negative employer behavior (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011). The complexity of employees' responses to breach and violation events requires further study to better understand psychological contract dynamics (Pate, 2006).

This mixed methods (quant->qual) study adopts a process approach to explore contract change. Rousseau's (2000) relational-balanced-transactional typology of employee and employer obligations is used to model contract content. Relational contracts involve long-term employment arrangements and high affective commitment, with two sub-dimensions of mutual *loyalty* and long-term *stability* (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). Balanced contracts blend the features of relational exchanges with the flexibility to alter the contract as circumstances dictate (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). These dimensions involve offering *performance support*, *development* activities and growing *externally marketable* skills (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004). Transactional contracts have limited duration and often result in turnover and low organizational commitment, with dimensions of *narrow* involvement in the organization and *short-term* employment (Dabos & Rousseau, 2004).

To explore the contracting process a teleological change "motor" is applied, which assumes individuals generate change through purposeful and adaptive actions aimed at meeting a chosen end-state (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 511). Two literatures are then drawn upon to form an analytical framework supporting this change perspective. Weick's (1995) notion of sensemaking is first utilized to focus on individuals' interpretations and actions following discrepant events, such as contract breaches or violations. The coping literature then provides an avenue for exploring individuals' actions to manage the stress of breach or violation events and the influence on the contracting process. This framework allows a "process story" (Van de Ven & Huber, 1990, p. 214), a narrative outlining the sequence of events generating the change, to be developed and explored. This narrative focuses on the interplay between employees' reactions to breach or violation events, their active sensemaking of them through employing coping strategies and how these events unfold and iterate to change the psychological contract. The longitudinal mixed methodology then allows the process story to be expanded into a detailed process model of contract change. Study 1 consists of a four-wave quantitative survey to analyze individuals' contract change trajectories over time. Study 2 then utilizes qualitative interviews, with a purposive sample of Study 1 participants with varying degrees of contract change, to more deeply explore how the posited events in the process story unfold and influence contract dynamics.

The study makes a number of contributions to the literature. Process research is novel in the contract field, with this being one of the few studies to empirically unearth the theorized evolving nature of the contract by creating dynamic theory through the development of a rich and detailed process model. By focusing on unfolding and ongoing sequences of events, this study moves the literature beyond examining change through variance theories focused on causal relationships between variables (Mohr, 1982). Focusing on cycles of interpretation and action following a breach or violation event also allows for the exploration of positive employee responses to these events, such as individual adaptation and contract repair, counter-balancing the literature's predominant focus on employees' immediate negative reactions to these events. Further, in contrast to much of the contract literature, by theorizing a teleological change motor (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995) this study centrally positions employees as active and purposeful agents in the exchange process who deliberately shape, manage, and change their psychological contracts. Understanding the role of agency and its enactment in the contracting process is sorely lacking (Seeck & Parzefall, 2008), with a disproportionate focus on employees as relatively passive reciprocators of employer behavior. The sensemaking and coping frameworks also allow us to explore how individuals exercise their agency in the ongoing exchange by interpreting and acting upon discrepant events through implementing various coping responses in order to manage, and potentially repair, their psychological contracts following breach or violation events.

Theory and Research Questions

Process research involves "understanding how things evolve over time and why they evolve in this way" (Langley, 1999, p. 692), generating theories that can provide rich explanations of changing phenomena by focusing on

unfolding sequences of events, activities, and choices (Mohr, 1982; Langley, 2009). Identifying the mechanisms generating change is important in developing process theory and Van de Ven & Poole (1995, p. 511) offer four underlying explanatory “motors” to delineate different change processes: life cycle (pre-determined change); teleology (goal-directed change); dialectic (conflict-generated change); and evolutionary (competitive change). Teleological theories incorporate human agency by viewing individuals as purposeful and adaptive drivers of change, with their goal-directed responses to a problem or opportunity triggering the process (Garud & Van de Ven, 2002). Envisioning a goal, acting to achieve it, monitoring progress toward it, taking action to remedy deviations from it, or modifying the goal all play a role in the change process (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). While not without limitations, teleological models represent change processes across many disciplines (Garud & Van de Ven, 2002). This study adopts a teleological change perspective by taking the enactment and fulfillment of the psychological contract, both employee and employer obligations, as the goals to be realized and centrally positioning employees as the adaptive drivers of change by monitoring their contracts and taking action when deviations from perceived obligations arise. With this change motor in place, the analytical framework for exploring the contract change process is now developed.

The change triggers: breach or violation events

Breach and violation are recognized as two important “critical events” precipitating contract change (Schalk & Roe, 2007, p. 170). Because breach cognitions can occur with or without an ensuing belief in a contract violation, this study takes them to be separate events (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). Breaches or violations interrupt predictability in employment exchanges, prompting individuals to re-assess and potentially change their contract terms (Rousseau, 1995). While these events influence contract dynamics, their theoretical and empirical investigation largely follows a linear “cause-effect” approach, demonstrating that after these experiences employees generally respond negatively and will likely engage in adverse workplace behaviors (Conway & Briner, 2002, p. 288). To instead explore how these events unfold over time, individuals’ responses to them and how this translates into contract change, it is necessary to identify the processes subsequent to breach or violation perceptions.

Schalk and Roe (2007, p.172) have progressed this agenda by drawing on self-regulation theory and outlining “corrective responses” that employees initiate to address contract discrepancies: balancing (negative behavioral deviations by the organization are similarly reciprocated by the individual); revising (terms of the contract are reconsidered and a new contract established); and deserting (the contract is abandoned, usually via resignation). Turnley and Feldman (1999) suggest that employees’ responses to discrepancies are to either leave the organization (*exit*), actively engage with superiors or coworkers to improve the situation (*voice*), decrease extra-role behaviors (*loyalty*), or increase withdrawal behaviors (*neglect*). While options such as “revising” and “voice” recognize that employees will not always react negatively, more dynamic frameworks are needed to position employees as active parties to ongoing exchanges. Indeed recent, particularly qualitative, work identifies constructive employee responses to contract violations such as attempts at relationship restoration and recalibration (Pate, 2006), re-framing the breach to avoid negative reciprocity (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011), and work-role innovation (Kiazad, Seibert, & Kraimer, 2014), with positive exchanges ensuing. This suggests more complex, constructive, and employee-initiated post-breach and violation processes exist than are currently theorized (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011). To explore this, the sensemaking and coping literatures are drawn upon to examine how employees may purposefully adapt and proactively respond to employer discrepancies and change their contract terms.

Sensemaking of breach or violation events through action

When there is a discrepancy between predicted and actual outcomes, individuals begin a conscious cognitive process of sensemaking (Louis, 1980). Both interpretation and action are required, with individuals first asking “what’s

going on here?” before responding to the next “equally important question ... ‘what do I do next?’” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 412). These questions reflect Weick’s (1995, p. 34) enactment property of sensemaking, as individuals combine action and cognition to “create their environment”. In response to Weick et al.’s (2005) first question, psychological contract studies often draw upon sensemaking to explain employees’ interpretative processes during uncertain events (e.g., De Vos, Buyens, & Schalk, 2003; Rousseau, 1995). For example, employees engage in cognitive sensemaking appraisals to derive meaning from breaches (through information seeking, explanation, and interpretation (Dulac, Coyle-Shapiro, Henderson, & Wayne (2008)) and from socialization (as inducements and contributions are negotiated (De Vos et al., 2003)).

Fewer contract studies directly explore Weick et al.’s (2005) second question focusing on individual action, meaning little is known about how employees actively shape their psychological contracts (Seeck & Parzefall, 2008). Using Weick et al.’s (2005) action perspective Parzefall and Coyle-Shapiro (2011) found employees’ post-breach interpretations, emotional responses, and actions were interlinked, as they re-interpreted the event following active responses (such as seeking clarification) in an iterative sensemaking process. Other work shows that employees shape their contract content by actively learning about their roles and social relationships (Thomas & Anderson, 1998) and seeking contract-relevant information congruent with their personal work values (De Vos, Buyens, & Schalk, 2005).

These findings demonstrate that employees are not passive in influencing and making sense of their psychological contracts and often “create and find what they expect to find” (Weick, 1995, p. 35). This supports Seeck and Parzefall’s (2008, p. 475) call to better integrate the role of employee agency, or “the capacity of an agent to act in a world ... make choices and impose these choices on the world”, into contract theory. Drawing upon sensemaking, and focusing on its “action” property, affords an understanding of the contract as an active exchange process (De Vos et al., 2003) by identifying what employees *think* and then *do* when they experience breach or violation events. The final plank of the analytical framework guiding this process study draws on the coping literature to explore how employees act and adapt when making sense of, and responding to, breach or violation events. Weick (1995, p. 5) links the two constructs, suggesting that “to understand sensemaking is also to understand how people cope with interruptions”.

Acting and adapting: post-breach or violation sensemaking through coping actions

Stress involves experiencing “adversity in one’s goal-related efforts” (Carver & Connor-Smith, 2010, p. 684) and is a situation an individual appraises as “taxing or exceeding his or her resources” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 21). Contract breaches and, particularly, violations are situations known to stress and strain employees to varying degrees (Gakovic & Tetrick, 2003). Coping is the dynamic process used to respond to stress (Skinner, Edge, Altman, & Sherwood, 2003) through problem-focused and adaptive responses. This framework offers a proactive lens to assess employees’ sensemaking actions after breach or violation events.

Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) cognitive appraisal coping process initially involves a primary appraisal to assess whether an event is irrelevant (no need or commitment is impinged upon), benign-positive (encounters preserve or enhance well-being), or stressful (encounters entail some type of harm or loss, threat or challenge). When stressful events are construed, a secondary appraisal process involves determining how to manage the situation and evaluating what coping strategies to enact (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). This coping model reflects a sensemaking process activated by a stressor by combining cognition (primary appraisal) and action (secondary appraisal), as in Weick’s (1995) enactment property of sensemaking. That is, primary and secondary appraisals are akin to responding to the sensemaking questions of “what’s going on here?” and “what do I do next?” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 412). To explore psychological contract change, appraisal-based coping processes allow us to position employees as active exchange partners and assess, when faced with a stressful breach or violation event, the ways in which people make sense of the situation by formulating what to do next. Once individuals sense that action is required, many coping responses are available. Although there is no agreed categorization of coping strategies, Skinner et al.’s (2003) comprehensive

meta-analysis of the literature identified 12 higher-order coping strategy families, grouped by three adaptive processes. The link to adaptation reflects that, when faced with stressors, individuals engage in coping actions to generate a better fit with their environment (Skinner et al., 2003).

The first adaptive process involves individuals coordinating their *actions* to re-align with the environment and includes four coping strategies: problem-solving (strategizing, effort, determination); information-seeking (reading, observing); helplessness (relinquishing control, passivity, pessimism); and escape (cognitive and behavioral situation avoidance, denial) (Skinner et al., 2003). Second, individuals adapt by coordinating available *social resources* and their focus of reliance (e.g., others or self) via four coping strategies: self-reliance (regulating one's emotions and behaviors); support-seeking (seeking contact, comfort, or instrumental support from others); delegation (dysfunctional dependency, complaining); and isolation (social withdrawal) (Skinner et al., 2003). Third, individuals coordinate their *preferences*, or intended outcomes, within the environment through four coping strategies: accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring by positively reviewing a stressful event, acceptance of the situation, distraction); negotiation (priority setting, seeking compromises); submission (catastrophizing, negative focus, anxiety); and opposition (blaming others, aggression) (Skinner et al., 2003). Broadly, individuals cope by adapting, or changing, something in their environment (e.g., actions) or something within themselves (e.g., preferences) (Skinner et al., 2003). Linking coping to adaptation also aligns with the teleological view of individuals as adaptive drivers of change. While it is contentious to identify "good" or "bad" coping styles (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), evidence suggests some strategies (such as problem-solving) are adaptive and can enhance well-being (Welbourne, Eggerth, Hartley, Andrew, & Sanchez, 2007), while others (such as helplessness) can be maladaptive and deplete coping resources (Skinner et al., 2003). Given the varied responses available, the coping process is dynamic and complex, with individuals likely to engage in many responses within the same, and different, stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Some studies of employees' breach and violation responses align with this coping framework by identifying actions that include: reframing or rationalizing the breach event (Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011), which aligns with accommodation strategies; acts of resistance (Hallier & James, 1997), which aligns with opposition strategies; and relying upon high quality social relationships (Dulac et al., 2008), which aligns with support-seeking strategies. From a conservation of resources coping perspective, Kiazad et al. (2014) found employees with greater organizational embeddedness positively engaged in work-role innovation to acquire resources (such as recognition) in lieu of those lost through contract breach, aligning with problem-solving strategies. Although focused on emotion regulation theory, Bal and Smit (2012) also found that employees who engaged in reappraisal strategies after a breach (akin to positive cognitive restructuring) upheld feelings of positive affect. These findings show that employees can respond to breaches and violations in many positive and negative ways. Utilizing a coping framework, premised upon adaptation, allows us to explore how employees utilize their agency and coordinate their responses to make sense of a breach or violation event and drive the contract change process.

Research questions

The preceding section introduced the types of events posited to drive contract change. This allows a preliminary process story to be developed and shape research questions broad enough to widely explore the complexity of contract dynamics. It also offers a starting point for identifying predominant change patterns from the events theorized and, in line with a teleological basis, it is expected that individuals will vary in how they interpret and act upon those events. The theorizing presented suggests an event-based, potentially curvilinear, contract change process. That is, a triggering event of a breach or violation occurs and employees actively make sense of it by coordinating and implementing adaptive coping responses. Individuals attempt to address the stressor and, depending upon the effectiveness of the actions taken or whether multiple stressors exist, this sequence of events may recur and influence the pattern of change. Based on this process story, contract content changes are likely to follow a curvilinear trajectory. Using Rousseau's (2000) typology, previous studies show employees' initial responses to a breach or violation are often

negative because of perceived exchange inequity and a damaged relationship (Robinson, Kraatz, & Rousseau, 1994). This likely prompts decreased perceptions of employer and employee relational and balanced obligations and increased transactional beliefs. However, as individuals utilize their agency through active sensemaking this may result in some recovery in these negative perceptions in the direction of the original beliefs held (Nicholson & Arnold, 1991) and may “repair” the contract. This aligns with coping theory, which shows that individuals can purposefully change something in their environment or within themselves to adapt to a triggering stressor. To explore this process story more deeply, the following questions guide this study:

- RQ1:* Does change in psychological contract content follow an event-based, curvilinear model?
- RQ2:* How do the events of breach or violation, sensemaking, and coping unfold over time to generate psychological contract change?
- RQ2a:* How active are individuals in making sense of, and responding to, breach or violation events and how does this influence psychological contract change?

Overall Research Design

Utilizing various strategies for collecting and analyzing data can develop richer process theorizing (Langley, 1999). This study employs a quantitative and qualitative mixed methodology via a four-wave longitudinal survey to identify the average trajectories of contract change (Study 1) and semi-structured interviews to generate richer data and delve into the process story and events posited to produce that change (Study 2). Participants’ survey responses were tracked via unique identifier codes to facilitate Study 1 analyses and purposive sampling of Study 1 participants for Study 2 interviewing. For clarity, and while intertwined, the Study 1 and 2 methods, analyses, and results are discussed separately.

Study 1: Methods and Results

The Study 1 sample was organizational newcomers in 12 private sector organizations (including accounting, banking/finance, and engineering/technical industries) in Australia and New Zealand. Newcomers were entering entry-level roles in graduate programs that provided structured training and development opportunities, including rotations to various work areas. This sample was studied as contract change is most likely to occur during times such as organizational entry (Robinson et al., 1994) and is likely to be more pronounced for individuals who are new to employment relationships (Nicholson & Arnold, 1991). Online surveys were distributed to 322 newcomers in four waves. The first survey was sent within one month of entry (February/March 2008 (Time 1)) and again three more times over a 14 month period (at approximately July 2008 (Time 2), December 2008 (Time 3), and March 2009 (Time 4)). Longitudinal contract studies range between 12 and 36 months (e.g., De Vos, 2005) and this 14 month timeframe was considered appropriate to capture some degree of contract change. Participants were emailed the survey link and their unique identifier code.

The final sample consisted of 107 newcomers who completed the survey a total of three or all four times: Time 1 (96); Time 2 (101); Time 3 (97); and Time 4 (77). Initial analyses with the full sample of individuals who completed the survey between one to four times led to estimation problems for the more complex growth models, resulting in sample adjustment to remove individuals who completed the survey only once or twice. An independent samples *t*-test comparing the “one or two time” and “three or four time” respondents found no significant differences in age, gender, employment location, or psychological contract type (except for the employer relational contract type which was marginally significant ($p = .046$)). Based on Time 1 surveys, most participants were male (63.2%), 20–28 years

of age (91.6%), in their first professional role (70%) in a permanent, full-time capacity (92.6%), and all participants held at least an undergraduate degree.

Measures

Psychological contract content

Rousseau's (2000) Psychological Contract Inventory was used which, as outlined earlier, measures relational, balanced, and transactional contract types and their sub-dimensions. Twenty-eight items measure perceptions of obligations made by the employer to the employee (employer obligations) and 28 items measure those made by employees to the employer (employee obligations), rated on a 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Agree to a Great Extent*) scale. Example items for the contract sub-dimensions are: "be responsive to my personal concerns and well-being" (employer loyalty dimension) and "make no plans to work anywhere else" (employee stability dimension); "support me in meeting increasingly higher goals" (employer performance support dimension), "build skills to increase my value to this organization" (employee development dimension), and "help me develop externally marketable skills" (employer external marketability dimension); "require me to perform only a limited set of duties" (employer narrow dimension) and "leave at any time I choose" (employee short-term dimension). Cronbach's alpha reliability measures are reported in Table 1.

Time

The unstructured time variable was "weeks from organizational entry". Survey respondents identified their tenure since organizational entry (via a free-text item). Some consistency checking of this measure over time did not identify any obvious errors.

Results

Table 1 shows correlations between the dependent variables are in the expected directions, reflecting Rousseau's (2000) work. Over time, employees broadly held psychological contracts with balanced and relational content and lower levels of transactional content.

Individual growth modeling identified individuals' change trajectories. Assumptions regarding residual error structures were relaxed, given the multiple measurements per individual (Singer & Willett, 2003), and these are outlined below each results table. Results are grouped into perceived employer (Table 2) and employee (Table 3) obligations and their constituent contract types and sub-dimensions. For each contract sub-dimension (dependent variable), unconditional means and growth models were estimated to identify which average population change trajectories, either linear or quadratic Level-1 curves, best fit the data. For dependent variables where linear slopes provided the best fit, variability in individuals' intercepts and slopes (random effects) was also assessed. For dependent variables where quadratic curves provided the best fit, these curves were fixed to achieve model estimation and only variability in individuals' intercepts was assessed. For parsimony, Tables 2 and 3 present the final models with the best-fitting growth curves for each dependent variable.

Employer obligations

These contract dimensions showed substantial and significant within-person (50–61%) and between-person (39–54%) variation, indicating a growth modeling approach is reasonable. Table 2 summarizes the results. For employer relational obligations, on average, individuals began with quite high scores of 3.97 ($p < .001$) and 3.89 ($p < .001$) on the 5-point scale for the loyalty and stability dimensions, respectively. The loyalty dimension showed a quadratic convex growth trajectory, meaning individuals' beliefs initially decreased and then increased again ($p < .01$). The stability dimension showed a negative linear slope for time ($p < .001$), with individuals' beliefs

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations for employee (EEO) and employer (ERO) obligations (Study 1)^a.

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. EEO_loyalty	3.55–3.58	0.65–0.78	(.62–.78)					
2. EEO_stability	3.05–3.15	0.89–0.92	.51**	(.80–.84)				
3. EEO_perfsupport	4.06–4.22	0.51–0.63	.40**	.29**	(.76–.83)			
4. EEO_develop	4.22–4.37	0.48–0.63	.44**	.34**	.60**	(.66–.85)		
5. EEO_extmarket	3.07–3.21	0.88–0.91	.06	–.06	.23*	.28**	(.74–.84)	
6. EEO_narrow	1.97–2.10	0.68–0.76	–.07	.03	–.11	–.10	.07	(.71–.77)
7. EEO_short-term	2.28–2.49	0.71–0.91	–.30**	–.42**	–.07	.01	.16	.02
8. ERO_loyalty	3.40–3.88	0.71–0.83	.24*	.23*	.36**	.30**	.04	–.12
9. ERO_stability	3.53–3.87	0.63–0.73	.03	.13	.20	.23*	.08	–.10
10. ERO_perfsupport	3.68–4.02	0.63–0.76	.17	.15	.44**	.34**	.10	–.33**
11. ERO_develop	3.78–4.16	0.74–0.84	.00	.02	.31**	.27**	.02	–.29**
12. ERO_extmarket	2.85–3.06	0.69–0.83	.11	.22*	.24*	.25*	.41**	–.10
13. ERO_narrow	1.96–2.17	0.70–0.75	–.04	.10	–.11	–.08	–.17	.49**
14. ERO_short-term	1.54–1.90	0.55–0.74	.14	–.08	.07	–.10	.10	.21*

Means and standard deviations show the ranges over the four time points.

Cronbach alpha reliabilities (ranges over the four time points) are on the diagonal in parentheses.

^aThe correlation matrix was generated from the Time 1 data ($n = 96$ (Time 1); $n = 101$ (Time 2); $n = 97$ (Time 3); and $n = 77$ (Time 4)).

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

decreasing. The variance components show both dimensions exhibited individual variation in intercepts ($p < .001$) and the linear slope for the stability dimension ($p < .01$).

For employer balanced obligations, on average, individuals began with high scores of 4.06 ($p < .001$) and 4.23 ($p < .001$) for the performance support and development dimensions, respectively. Both dimensions exhibited quadratic convex growth trajectories ($p < .01$). For the external marketability dimension, on average, initial scores were 3.09 ($p < .001$), with a negative linear slope for time ($p < .05$). All dimensions demonstrated individual variability in intercepts ($p < .001$) and the linear slope for the external marketability dimension ($p < .05$).

For employer transactional obligations, on average, individuals began with low scores of 1.86 ($p < .001$) and 1.50 ($p < .001$) for the narrow and short-term dimensions, respectively. The narrow dimension showed a quadratic concave growth trajectory, meaning individuals' beliefs initially increased but then decreased again ($p < .05$). The short-term dimension showed a positive linear slope for time ($p < .001$), with individuals generally increasing these beliefs. Both dimensions demonstrated individual variability in intercepts ($p < .001$) and the linear slope for the short-term dimension ($p < .001$).

Employee obligations

All of these contract dimensions showed substantial and significant within-person (34–55%) and between-person (45–66%) variation, indicating a growth modeling approach is reasonable. Table 3 summarizes the results. For employee relational obligations, on average, individuals began with scores of 3.62 ($p < .001$) and 3.25 ($p < .001$) for the loyalty and stability dimensions, respectively. The loyalty dimension showed a non-significant linear slope for time, meaning individuals' beliefs did not significantly change. The stability dimension exhibited a quadratic convex trajectory ($p < .05$). Both dimensions showed individual variability in intercepts ($p < .001$).

For the employee balanced contract, on average, individuals' beliefs began with relatively high scores of 4.10, 4.41, and 3.05 (all $p < .001$) for performance support, development, and external marketability dimensions, respectively. For the performance support and external marketability dimensions there were non-significant linear slopes for time. The development dimension showed a quadratic convex growth trajectory ($p < .05$). All dimensions showed individual variability in intercepts ($p < .001$).

Table 1. (Continued)

	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. EEO_loyalty								
2. EEO_stability								
3. EEO_perfsupport								
4. EEO_develop								
5. EEO_extmarket								
6. EEO_narrow								
7. EEO_short-term	(.60–.81)							
8. ERO_loyalty	–.11	(.82–.86)						
9. ERO_stability	–.02	.55*	(.61–.71)					
10. ERO_perfsupport	–.11	.65**	.53**	(.81–.86)				
11. ERO_develop	.01	.51**	.45**	.75**	(.85–.90)			
12. ERO_extmarket	–.03	.32**	.25*	.44**	.31**	(.65–.79)		
13. ERO_narrow	–.01	–.25*	–.22*	–.40**	–.47**	–.13	(.64–.74)	
14. ERO_short-term	.03	–.25*	–.32**	–.12	–.18	–.14	.46**	(.53–.76)

For employee transactional obligations, on average, individuals began with quite low scores of 2.09 ($p < .001$) and 2.31 ($p < .001$) for the narrow and short-term dimensions, respectively. The narrow dimension showed a non-significant linear slope for time and the short-term dimension a positive linear slope ($p < .05$). Both dimensions showed individual variability in intercepts ($p < .001$) and the linear slope for the short-term dimension ($p < .05$).

Study 1: Discussion

Study 1 informs RQ1 by identifying the shape of individuals' contract content change trajectories. In terms of employer obligations, the findings provide some evidence for the theorized curvilinear change model in the process story. The majority of relational and balanced contract obligations followed convex ("U" shaped) curves and the transactional components showed concave ("inverted-U" shaped) curves, suggesting that certain events and employees' responses to them may be steering the change process. That is, while downward revisions in certain relational and balanced employer obligations were mirrored by upward revisions to transactional obligations (possibly following a breach or violation event), the findings suggest a "recovery" in contract beliefs then occurs as employees again shift between contract types and return toward previous levels of employer obligation beliefs (possibly following coping actions). The few longitudinal contract studies undertaken (e.g., Robinson et al., 1994; De Vos, 2005) focus largely on linear change, showing that beliefs in employer obligations increase with social and role knowledge acquisition (Thomas & Anderson, 1998) and increasing perceptions of entitlement as tenure increases (Robinson et al., 1994). The Study 1 results show that contract change is more complex than solely linear models can capture and is likely to accord with a more event-based, curvilinear process model, supporting theorizing that contracting involves ongoing negotiations (Conway & Briner, 2005). However, it was identified that not all sub-dimensions followed a curvilinear pattern, meaning dimensions within the same contract type do not necessarily change uniformly and, indeed, can change differentially. One each of the relational, balanced and transactional dimensions continued on negative and positive (respectively) linear patterns, as suggested in the process story, but without the theorized "recovery" in perceptions through a curvilinear trajectory. It may be that for some contract dimensions sensemaking takes longer to initiate a "recovery" in contract beliefs. Sensemaking is ongoing (Weick, 1995), and if multiple coping strategies are enacted before the stressor is

Table 2. Employer (ERO) obligations: growth modeling summary—best-fitting growth curves.

			Relational contract dimensions		Balanced contract dimensions
Parameter			Loyalty ^b	Stability ^c	Performance support ^b
Fixed effects					
Initial status (π_{0i})	Intercept	$\gamma_{00} + \zeta_{0i}$	3.97*** (0.08)	3.89*** (0.07)	4.06*** (0.08)
(a) Rate of change (π_{1i})	TIME (linear)	γ_{10}	−.02*** (0.003)	−.007*** (0.002)	−.01*** (0.003)
(b) Rate of change (π_{2i})	TIME ² (quadratic)	γ_{20}	9.49E-5** (3.14E-5)	n/a	9.64E-5** (2.93E-5)
Variance components					
Level-2:	In initial status (ζ_{0i})	σ_0^2	.36*** (0.06)	.34*** (0.08)	.28*** (0.05)
	<i>Linear term</i>				
	variance (ζ_{1i})	σ_1^2	n/a	.0001** (4.21E-5)	n/a
	covariance with initial status (ζ_{0i} and ζ_{1i})	σ_{01}	n/a	−.004** (0.002)	n/a
Goodness-of-fit ^a	Deviance statistic		753.51	689.85	687.37
	AIC		769.51	707.85	703.37
	BIC		800.84	743.10	734.70
ICC ^a	WPV; BPV (ρ)		52; 48	61; 39	50; 50

$-p < .1$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$ (where $p < .1$, exact p -values are reported in square brackets). Standard errors are in parentheses.

^aAIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; ICC = intra-class correlation coefficient; WPV = within-person variation; and BPV = between-person variation.

^bThe error covariance structures employed for these models were VC (random effects) and DIAG (repeated effects). To achieve model estimation, the intercept was entered into the model as a random effect and the growth curves were fixed.

^cThe error covariance structures employed for these models were UN (random effects) and DIAG (repeated effects). Both the intercepts and growth curves were entered into the model as random effects.

addressed, interpretation and action may iterate and take longer to initiate a “recovery” for some contract beliefs. It may also be that no “recovery” occurs for some dimensions, if coping actions do not address the stressor.

For employee obligations, the findings offered minimal support for the theorized change model as these beliefs remained largely stable. Other longitudinal research identifies both positive (De Vos, 2005) and negative (Robinson et al., 1994; Thomas & Anderson, 1998) linear trajectories for these beliefs, indicating no consensus on how and why employees’ obligations change. However, the predominant stability identified here may indicate a different sensemaking, and change, process for employees regarding their obligations. Individuals can engage in constructive responses to contract breach or violation (Kiazad et al., 2014), suggesting that following these events and the initial “shock”, rather than withdrawing their contributions they may maintain their obligation levels while continuing to engage in the exchange and activate coping responses. In line with a teleological approach, and given that employers can be unaware of breaches occurring, a change process driven by employees may be necessary. While social exchange theory suggests that employees will respond negatively in-kind to employer breaches, this finding supports other work (e.g., Kiazad et al., 2014) that demonstrates the norm of reciprocity may not be universal in the contracting process. However, as found for employer obligations, some dimensions followed different change patterns, again suggesting that sensemaking does not occur uniformly for all dimensions. While Study 1 offers some support for an event-based, curvilinear change process, to delve deeper into this complexity and the posited process story a more fine-grained qualitative approach is used in Study 2.

Table 2. (Continued)

	Balanced contract dimensions		Transactional contract dimensions	
	Development ^b	External marketability ^c	Narrow ^b	Short-term ^c
Fixed effects				
Initial status (π_{0i})	4.23*** (0.09)	3.09*** (0.09)	1.86*** (0.08)	1.50*** (0.06)
(a) Rate of change (π_{1i})	-.01*** (0.003)	-.003* (0.002)	.009** (0.003)	.007*** (0.001)
(b) Rate of change (π_{2i})	.0001** (3.35E-5)	n/a	-6.11E-5* (2.98E-5)	n/a
Variance components				
Level-2:	.32*** (0.06)	.42*** (0.11)	.26*** (0.05)	.27*** (0.06)
	n/a	6.94E-5* (3.42E-5)	n/a	.0001*** (2.94E-5)
	n/a	-.003- [.063] (0.002)	n/a	-.002* (0.001)
Goodness-of-fit ^a	793.58	758.21	724.96	620.68
	809.58	776.21	740.96	638.68
	840.91	811.45	772.29	673.93
ICC ^a	55; 45	55; 45	53; 47	45; 54

Study 2: Methods and Results

The Study 2 interview sample consisted of individuals with high, moderate, and minimal levels of contract change, as identified through the Study 1 surveys. To provide a robust foundation for Study 2 the sampling frame included only the 50 individuals from Study 1 who completed all four surveys and offered “complete” change trajectories. An independent samples *t*-test compared the age, gender, location of employment, and psychological contract types of the “three” and “four” time respondents and no significant differences were found. SPSS 17.0 plotted individuals’ contract trajectories (via the “Graph” function).

The purposive sampling process broadly followed Monge’s (1990) guidance for categorizing dynamic process variables, adapted to the individual level. First, within the sampling frame four categories of change along Rousseau’s (2000) scale (at the contract-type level) were identified, determining the “degree” of contract change: “no-change” (.5 or below of a scale point change); minimal change (around a .5–1.0 scale point change); moderate change (around a 1.0–1.5 scale point change); and high change (a more than 1.5 scale point change). As contract theory is not explicit on calculating degrees of change, these categories offer reasonable demarcations. Second, the “shapes” of the change trajectories and the “level” at which certain trajectories were situated on the scale were identified. To illustrate, the shapes of individuals’ trajectories were generally: upward (the trajectory ended at a higher point than where it started); downward (the trajectory ended at a lower point than where it started); relatively flat (the trajectory stayed at around the same level over time); or up and down and vice versa (the trajectory moved up or down (or vice versa) and generally returned to near its original starting point). Further, flat, or “no-change”, trajectories were situated on the scale at either a: low level (around or below the 3.0 scale point); moderate level (between the 3.0–4.0 scale points); or high level (above the 4.0 scale point). These groupings accord with the contract scale’s anchors for obligation levels.

Table 3. Employee (EEO) obligations: growth modeling summary—best-fitting growth curves.

	Parameter	Relational contract dimensions			Balanced contract dimensions			Transactional contract dimensions		
		Loyalty ^b	Stability ^b	Performance Support ^b	Development ^b	External Marketability ^c	Narrow ^b	Short-term ^c		
Fixed effects										
Initial status (π_{0i})	Intercept	3.62*** (0.07)	3.25*** (0.11)	4.10*** (0.06)	4.41*** (0.06)	3.05*** (0.09)	2.09*** (0.08)	2.31*** (0.07)		
(a) Rate of change (π_{1i})	TIME (linear)	-.001 (0.001)	-.009** (0.003)	.001 (0.001)	-.006 (0.002)	.002 (0.002)	-.002 (0.001)	.004* (0.002)		
(b) Rate of change (π_{2i})	TIME ² (quadratic)	n/a	8.41E-5* (3.31E-5)	n/a	5.52E-5* (2.21E-5)	n/a	n/a	n/a		
Variance components										
Level-2:	In initial status (ζ_{0i})	.35*** (0.06)	.56*** (0.09)	.15*** (0.03)	.16*** (0.03)	.37*** (0.08)	.33*** (0.05)	.26*** (0.06)		
	Linear term variance (ζ_{1i})	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	4.60E-5- [.09] (2.71E-5)	n/a	6.50E-5* (2.98E-5)		
	covariance with initial status (ζ_{0i} and ζ_{1i})	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a		
Goodness-of-fit ^a	Deviance statistic	603.78	808.51	546.78	541.77	861.49	652.51	805.13		
	AIC	617.78	824.51	560.78	557.77	877.49	666.51	821.13		
	BIC	645.20	855.84	588.19	589.10	908.81	693.93	852.45		
ICC ^a	WPV; BPV (ρ)	34; 66	39; 61	55; 45	50; 50	50; 50	38; 62	52; 48		

- $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (where $p < .1$, exact p -values are reported in square brackets). Standard errors are in parentheses.

^aAIC = Akaike information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion; ICC = intra-class correlation coefficient; WPV = within-person variation; and BPV = between-person variation.

^bThe error covariance structures employed for these models were VC (random effects) and DIAG (repeated effects). To achieve model estimation, the intercept was entered into the model as a random effect and the growth curves were fixed.

^cThe error covariance structures employed for these models were VC (random effects) and DIAG (repeated effects). Both the intercepts and growth curves were entered into the model as random effects.

Following this sampling process, 26 interviews were conducted with individuals demonstrating a range of change trajectories (further detail on interviewees' trajectories is available from the author by request). All interviews were conducted via phone and lasted between 30 min and 1.5 h. Not all contacted participants agreed to an interview, predominantly because of work commitments or turnover. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Prior to each interview participants were provided with their survey results to assist in reflecting upon the past year of employment. The interview protocol firstly focused on interviewees' overall assessments of their work experiences over the preceding 14–16 months, to identify any salient events shaping contract perceptions. Eliciting key incidents reflects how other qualitative work interrogates individuals' breach and violation perceptions (see Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011). Individuals were then questioned about contract breach experiences, their reactions (to assess violation perceptions) and the responses, if any, they enacted (to assess the use of coping strategies). Eliciting stories of coping responses and outcomes has been used in other qualitative research (see Singh, Corner, & Pavlovich, 2007).

The Study 1 and 2 samples had similar characteristics: age range (20–28 years); gender split (a 60/40 split favoring males); employment status (the majority held permanent, full-time roles); and education level (all participants held at least an undergraduate degree). Nearly all individuals had 14–16 months of organizational tenure. However, during Study 1 13 individuals were included who had entered their firms as graduates, but had extended tenure at the time the overall study began (about 6–12 months of added tenure). Four of these individuals were included in the Study 2 interview sample.

Measures and qualitative data coding

A manual, content analysis process was used and the coding framework consisted of both theoretically-derived and data-derived (or emergent) codes.

Coding for psychological contract content

Rousseau's (2000) typology provided the higher-order (contract types) and lower-order (contract dimensions) theoretically-derived coding framework. As individuals spoke about their workplace experiences, these items were coded into the appropriate contract type and dimension. An example response is provided in the following section.

Coding for contract change experiences and breach and violation events

Two higher-order codes were theoretically-derived and termed "contract beliefs met (fulfilled)" and "contract beliefs unmet (breached)". Lower-order codes grouped the met and unmet belief themes (data-derived) and coded them into the relevant contract content (theory-derived). To illustrate from an example response: "I wouldn't think a manager would just say to me 'I don't know'... they just expected me to know things, but ... that was an unreasonable expectation of me ...". This response was higher-order coded as an "unmet belief (breached)" and lower-order coded as relating to a "supervisory relationship" (data-derived code) and "balanced contract (performance support dimension)" beliefs (theory-derived code).

The final lower-order codes related to the intensity of individuals' reactions to "unmet beliefs (breached)" and were theory-derived and data-derived. Three data-driven reaction themes emerged: "little to no negative"; "moderate negative"; and "strong negative". "Moderate" and "strong" reactions reflect the theoretical distinction between contract breaches and violations (Morrison & Robinson, 1997), with the former resulting in some frustration and concern and the latter resulting in feelings of outright anger and in some cases betrayal. To illustrate a "strong negative" response: "... I'm totally de-motivated and I'm pushing back ... I'm not going to put any more effort in ... because it's not recognized".

Coding for responses to contract breaches and violations

Twelve higher-order codes were theoretically-derived from Skinner et al.'s (2003) typology and labeled with the coping family name (e.g., "problem-solving"). For the "accommodation" family, the specific strategy enacted was also identified (e.g., positive cognitive restructuring), as this family is broad (Skinner et al., 2003). Lower-order codes were data-derived to identify specific coping actions in the study context (Skinner et al., 2003). These coping actions are also termed "remediation effects", as they could potentially remediate or repair contract content. To illustrate from an example response: "Yeah (it was frustrating), (but you) ... put it to one side ... and (the organization) might rectify it in six months ...". This response was higher-order coded as "accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)" (coping family) and lower-order coded as "future remedy effect" (coping action and remediation effect).

Results

The "adaptive remediation" contract change process model developed is firstly outlined and then more deeply explored by discussing groups of interview cases and one exemplar case. As in most process studies terms such as "majority" and "generally" are used in this study's context, not to extrapolate to the broader population (Garud & Van de Ven, 2002).

The "adaptive remediation" contract change process model

Figure 1 presents the process model individuals generally followed when experiencing breach or violation events. The term "adaptive remediation" reflects how individuals used sensemaking interpretation and action to implement adaptive coping responses after breaches or violations to change themselves (their perceptions) or their environment

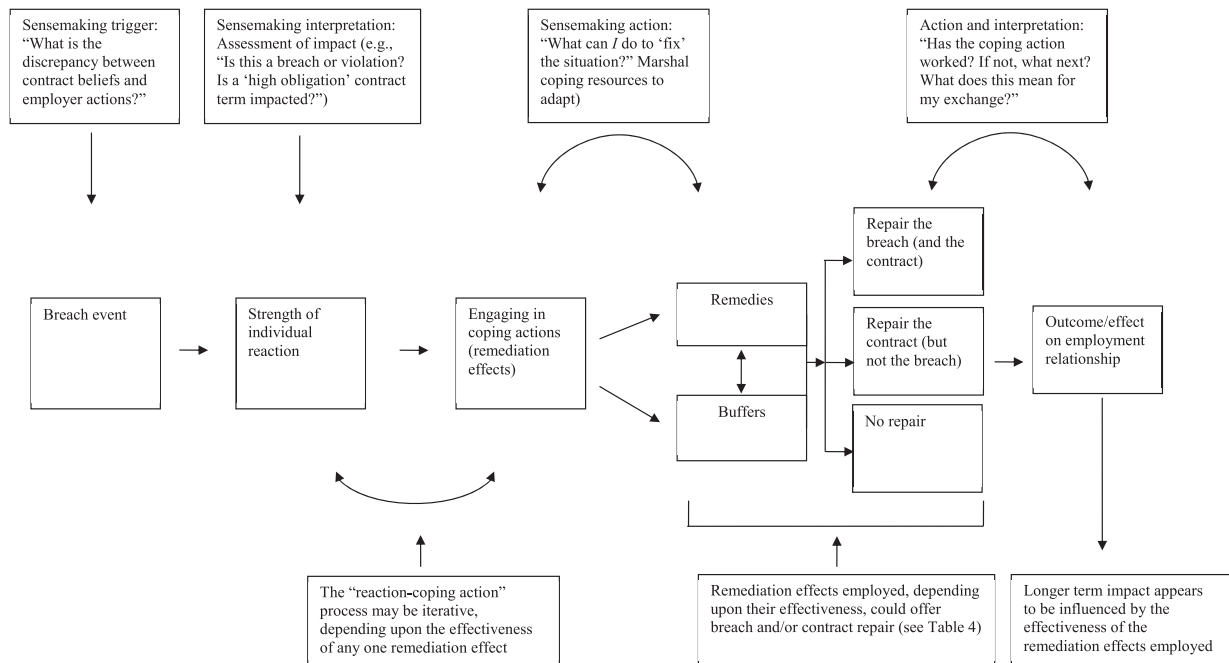


Figure 1. "Adaptive remediation" contract change process model

with the aim of remediating, or repairing, what was “broken”. Breaches (and any violation perceptions) form the basis of the model as these events, and employees’ reactions to them, largely triggered and drove contract changes.

When a perceived employer breach occurred (sensemaking trigger) individuals first assessed its impact on the employment exchange, which influenced their reaction to it (sensemaking interpretation). “High obligation” beliefs, identified in Study 1 as having the strongest commitment on the contract scale and confirmed in Study 2, were cited by most interviewees as being breached and resulted in moderate to strong negative reactions, particularly after multiple breaches and if coping actions (remediation effects) offered no repair. These beliefs included the provision of meaningful and increasingly challenging work and skill development (balanced contract, development and performance support dimensions) and showing care and concern for employees’ well-being and stable employment (relational contract, loyalty and stability dimensions). The perceived strength of these employer obligations may have resulted in them being more vigilantly monitored (see Morrison & Robinson, 1997) and their breaches viewed as salient. When the breach event/s occurred, individuals usually described an increase in their own transactional obligations and a decrease in balanced and relational obligations, by focusing on “just doing what needs to be done” (transactional contract, narrow dimension), not wanting to perform to the best of their abilities and go “above and beyond” in the role (balanced contract, performance support and development dimensions) and/or questioning their ongoing tenure (transactional contract, short-term dimension). Following the breach assessment and any initial negative reactions, a range of coping actions could be instigated, generally by the employee (sensemaking action), which accord with various coping strategy families. Table 4 presents these results.

The coping actions, or remediation effects, largely reflected the “accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)” coping family and the adaptive process of changing preferences (Skinner et al., 2003). Individuals adapted their perceptions by re-assessing the breach and incorporating appraisals of the broader work environment. Employees also engaged in other adaptive processes by coordinating their actions (through problem-solving responses) and social resources (through support-seeking responses). Post-breach actions then influenced contract change via a process of repair. When remediation effects were effective or successful (for example, coping actions addressed the breach or employee perceptions of it) they could repair contract perceptions, with individuals speaking of renewed motivation in their roles, wanting to do a good job, and seeing a future with the employer. The “degree” of contract repair was generally evidenced by increases in relational and balanced contract terms and decreases in transactional terms back to (or trending toward) pre-breach event levels and how individuals ultimately spoke of their identified breaches and exchange relationships. But if remediation effects were ineffective (for example, coping actions did not address, at least in part, the breach or employee perceptions of it) no repair of contract perceptions was evident.

Combined, the Study 1 and 2 results identified two avenues for contract repair, through “remedies” or “buffers”. Remedies were direct attempts, generally initiated by individuals and/or their managers, to address a breach. The most-cited example was the “self-initiated compensatory” remediation effect, a “problem-solving” coping strategy (Table 4, row: 4), with individuals actively seeking to remedy a breach situation, such as a lack of challenging work, by approaching a manager or colleague to assist them to find, or finding themselves, such work. If effective, a remedy could directly repair both the breach and the broader psychological contract. However, breaches were often not directly repaired, although the broader contract could be repaired when remediation effects termed buffers were activated. Buffers were actions that did not directly repair the breach itself and were predominantly “accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)” strategies to re-assess the meaning and interpretation of a breach by incorporating, and re-focusing on, factors such as a positive broader work environment. So even if breaches were not directly repaired, the broader psychological contract could be repaired in other ways. One of the most-cited buffers was the “future focus” remediation effect (Table 4, row: 2), in the “accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)” coping family, where individuals focused on the breach not being permanent, such as when a rotation out of the work area was imminent. This situational re-assessment could repair the contract. Overall, remedies directly addressed a particular breach while buffers did not, and the latter were predominantly used. If effective, remedies repaired the breach and the contract, while buffers repaired only the contract. If ineffective, individuals could engage in iterative sensemaking to enact different remediation effects in ongoing attempts at repair. To illustrate, groups of interview cases are now discussed.

Table 4. Details of Study 2 interview themes identified: Specific responses to breaches – coping and remediation effects.^a

Post-breach remediation effect theme (Coping action) ^b	Coping “family”	Higher-order adaptive process	Type of remediation effect	Can enact breach and/or contract repair?	No. (%) of interviewees citing theme	Theme description ^c	Example quotes
1. Compensatory effect	Accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)	Coordinating preferences	Buffer	Contract repair	11 (42.3%)	Employees described the negative effects of breaches as being buffered by the fulfillment of other, often like, contract beliefs.	“... when I accepted (the role), I thought I would rotate to the different (work areas) ... (but) I was in the same (work area). While different to what I expected ... I’m still getting plenty of variety ... so it’s not such a big deal.” “While doing this rotation (when) things weren’t all that enjoyable, I wasn’t having a good time (following a breach event). I think maybe I kept reminding myself that there is an end to it, this is something finite ... it ends when I choose to end it.”
2. Future focus effect	Accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)	Coordinating preferences	Buffer	Contract repair	11 (42.3%)	Employees described the negative effects of breaches as being buffered by the knowledge that they will exist for a finite period and are thus viewed as non-permanent.	“Talking to different people and hearing other peoples’ stories (assisted in moving past the breach) ... and they would give me advice or tell me who I could go and talk to.”
3. Workplace social relationships	Support-seeking/ Problem-solving	Coordinating social resources/ actions	Buffer	Contract repair	11 (42.3%)	Employees identified that positive workplace social relationships buffered against the negative emotions stemming from a breach and could also assist in identifying strategies to address it.	“I just used that (lack of meaningful work) as an opportunity to say to my manager that I am getting really bored, can I do some more exciting stuff? He was actually really good and ... more than happy to give me stuff to do.”
4. Self-initiated compensatory effect	Problem-solving	Coordinating actions	Remedy or buffer	Breach and contract repair or only contract repair	10 (38.5%)	Employees described “stepping into the breach”, through their own actions. This could effectively address the breach (a remedy) or result in more general compensatory activities which effectively repaired the contract (a buffer).	

(Continues)

Table 4. (Continued)

Post-breach remediation effect theme (Coping action) ^b	Coping "family"	Higher-order adaptive process	Type of remediation effect	Can enact breach and/or contract repair?	No. (%) of interviewees citing theme	Theme description ^c	Example quotes
5. Direct query	Information seeking/ Accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)	Coordinating actions/ preferences	Buffer	Contract repair	7 (26.9%)	This involves the individual gathering and/or receiving information about a breach to understand why and how it occurred.	"I spoke to the senior manager (regarding the breach event) ... (and) (his or her) reasoning was (provided)."
6. Future remedy effect	Accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)	Coordinating preferences	Remedy or buffer	Breach and contract repair or only contract repair	5 (19.2%)	This relates to the knowledge that the breached belief will likely be fulfilled in the future. This is a remedy when organizational communications indicate the breach will be repaired and is a buffer if the belief in a future remedy is more based upon individuals' beliefs in "things getting better".	"My main reason for staying (following multiple breaches), was the potential opportunity to go into (a particular role) (which would remedy at least one of the breaches)."

^a*n* = 26 graduate employee respondents.^bAll themes were data-derived (emergent) themes.^cThe general descriptions in this table solely use the term breach because even when individuals only identified breaches, and not subsequent violation perceptions, they still instigated coping actions to make sense of the situation and manage their response. If an interviewee cited a theme more than once, it is only counted as being cited once.

Breach reaction category 1: little to no negative reaction

Twenty-seven percent of interviewees primarily recounted only positive aspects of their employment, usually without a focus on any negative experiences, resulting in relatively stable contract trajectories. While some contract belief change may have occurred during times of breach, this was not as prolonged as that described by individuals in other breach reaction categories. Positive experiences included fulfillment of both balanced (development and performance support dimensions) and relational (loyalty dimension) contract components, including: the provision of interesting and challenging work; positive manager and team relationships; and a clear career path and opportunities for progression. However, almost all of these individuals also identified employer breaches relating to some “high obligation” contract dimensions, including: reduced training; pay freezes; and an inability to access rotation opportunities. But compensatory factors for the breach, such as other contract beliefs being fulfilled and an overall positive employment experience, rendered these breaches relatively unimportant:

“(I) expected more structured training but ... I learn a lot from on-the-job training anyway so that’s not really something that disappoints me or anything.”

While a breach was acknowledged there was some buffer that, at least presently, repaired the contract itself, resulting in a largely unchanged view of the employment relationship. Two types of remediation effects, within the “accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)” coping family, were most evident in this category: “compensatory” effects (Table 4, row: 1); and “future remedy” effects (Table 4, row: 6), often accompanied by valid organizational agent explanations for breaches:

“Although we (the graduate group) would have preferred to have (structured training), given the current climate (post-Global Financial Crisis) we understand why it didn’t happen, so it’s not really something that frustrates people.”

Breach reaction category 2: moderate negative reaction

Forty-six percent of interviewees recounted positive and negative experiences that shaped their exchanges. These individuals’ trajectories began with quite high employee and employer balanced (development and performance support dimensions) and relational (loyalty dimension) contract terms and low transactional beliefs. Individuals then usually experienced a “dip” in balanced and relational contract beliefs and an increase in transactional beliefs between survey times 2–4. Then, generally, successful remediation effect/s resulted in some degree of repair, with beliefs returning toward, or near to, pre-breach event levels and individuals reflecting positively on their exchanges. Breaches related to balanced (development and performance support dimensions) and relational (loyalty and stability dimensions) contract terms, including: colleague redundancies; workplace conflict; poor recognition; or lack of meaningful work.

Remediation effects used here were mixed, including attempts to change the environment and/or perceptions, and mostly reflected “accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)”, “problem-solving”, and “support-seeking” coping families. A “future focus” remediation effect was predominant (Table 4, row: 2), through adapting perceptions, and provided broad contract repair. In this case, the breach event was not viewed as permanent and this knowledge acted as a buffer. For example, as rotations to different work areas were a common element of graduate programs, breaches could be viewed as temporary:

“It’s not like I am stuck there forever. I do it and then I move on to something else ... I just keep thinking ‘well the next role will be different’ and (thinking that) ... gets you through.”

Further, as many individuals in this category experienced short work rotations (three to four months), there was often not time to enact other effects, such as a “future remedy” effect. Instead, it was anticipating complete removal from the situation, the “future focus” effect, that mitigated any strong negative feelings resulting from the breach/es.

However, many employees also instigated remedies, particularly the “self-initiated compensatory” effect (Table 4, row: 4), a “problem-solving” coping strategy, in the short-term to directly address the breach, often through seeking manager or team assistance. Here, adaptation involved changing the environment rather than themselves:

“I was definitely left to find my own way, find my own work for a fair bit of it ... It wasn’t too much fun at the time I guess I did have to take a fair bit of initiative, to approach people in the team and ask if they had stuff for me to do, to find jobs and tasks to do myself where I could apply the skills that I had ... I push myself to make things into a challenge.”

A constructive team environment and supportive social relationships were also buffers to immediate negative, or de-motivating, feelings resulting from a breach (Table 4, row: 3). This “workplace social relationships” remediation effect (“support-seeking” coping strategy) reflects an adaptive process focused on marshaling available social resources:

“I think that (in difficult times) is when the people you work with make a huge difference. If you are having a couple of week period when you are doing something that you aren’t really enjoying ... that’s when the people at work influence how much you enjoy coming to work.”

However, successful remediation for breach/es did not always occur. For example, one individual in this category identified multiple breaches occurring over time with no effective remediation, resulting in obligation beliefs generally not returning, or trending back, to previous levels and increasing cynicism toward the employer because of a lack of any repair. However, while no maladaptive coping strategies (such as opposition) were identified in these instances, these responses could develop in the future if no effective remediation continues. But presently, this individual continued enacting coping responses, such as “support-seeking” and “accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)” strategies, and particularly focused on possible future repair (“future remedy” effect).

Breach reaction category 3: a strong negative reaction (contract violation)

Twenty-seven percent of interviewees recounted very negative experiences, perceiving that the employer had completely failed to provide expected inducements for their contributions. Individuals described very negative and emotional breach reactions akin to contract violation (Morrison & Robinson, 1997). While some interviewees focused largely on the breach events, nearly all also identified positive workplace experiences which, for some, had acted as “support-seeking” coping strategies and exerted a buffering remediation effect.

As most individuals in this category identified multiple breaches, their experiences are focused upon here. Generally, the contract plots show that between survey times 2–4 there were deeper “dips” (than the previous reaction category) in employee and employer relational and balanced contract beliefs and greater increases in transactional terms. This was usually followed by successful remediation effect/s and some degree of repair, with beliefs beginning to return to pre-breach levels and individuals again speaking positively about their exchanges. With no repair, generally there was no trending back to original belief levels and while these individuals spoke of increasingly entrenched negativity, as in the previous category, they still utilized adaptive coping responses in ongoing attempts to achieve some type of repair.

Identified breaches again reflect balanced (development dimension) and relational (loyalty and stability dimensions) contracts, including: ongoing failure to receive meaningful work; ongoing poor quality managerial relationships; job insecurity; perceived inequitable treatment; and workplace conflict. These breaches elicited violation perceptions because of a greater sense of inequity being compounded by the failure of remedies to address the breach and a “future focus” remediation effect not being accessible, often because of lengthy rotations (e.g., 12 months). Multiple breaches then had a cumulative, negative impact if no type of repair occurred:

“The first few months (of tenure) were different ... I was of the mindset to add as much value (in the role) as I could ... But after that (breaches) I felt much more like a resource to be thrown around ... and now I’m totally

de-motivated and I'm pushing back and saying 'nah' I'm not going to put any more effort in than I need to because it's not recognized."

Multiple breaches meant individuals drew on various adaptive processes, coping families, and remediation effects, with four themes evident. First, "problem-solving" responses, such as "self-initiated compensatory" remediation effects, were more pronounced in this category. This was driven by a perceived lack of any managerial or organizational action to remedy the breaches, reinforcing the need for employee-initiated responses. In line with a teleological change process, individuals "stepped into the breach" through their own actions to receive what it was that they sought. This was enabled by professional, white-collar workplaces allowing some control over work content and conduct. The second theme was the importance of "accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)" strategies. The focus on a "future remedy" effect, a buffer, allowed individuals to hold onto "high employer obligation" contract beliefs, even when they were not being fulfilled and with minimal evidence that they would soon be fulfilled, because they believed "it still might happen". The exit costs of turnover may have also been a factor here, with one interviewee explaining that "it's almost easier to stay than change". Particularly for those individuals whose repair attempts were ineffective, with changed and sometimes cynical exchange perceptions resulting, focusing on positive workplace aspects and prospects for future belief fulfillment became important. While attempting a "future remedy" effect here could align with the "escape (wishful thinking)" coping family, the possibility of other "problem solving" actions eventually being successful meant that anticipating future belief fulfillment was not unrealistic.

Third, the "direct query" remediation effect (Table 4, row: 5) was pronounced in this category (an "information-seeking" response). When direct remedies were outside the control of individuals, or their managers, to enact, querying the breach through others could repair the contract if the information resulted in a re-interpretation of the event. Finally, nearly all individuals across all categories, but particularly this one, enacted "support-seeking" coping strategies through positive workplace social relationships. These offered comfort, support, and lessened negative emotions after a breach, with team members also possibly identifying other "problem-solving" or "accommodation (positive cognitive restructuring)" coping strategies.

An example case with contract plots

This case details the events in the process model, and elaborates on the process story it is based upon, by exploring how breaches or violations, active sensemaking and contract repair influence contract change (see Figures 2 and 3 for contract plots). Daniel (a pseudonym) began with his employer at the study's commencement. He experienced two simultaneous breaches, perceived as major and ongoing, relating to a lack of meaningful work (balanced contract, performance support and development dimensions) and a very poor quality and unsupportive supervisory relationship (relational contract, loyalty dimension):

"Sometimes it (the workplace) felt like it was a jail, to be honest. I didn't feel like I was getting the experience that I so desperately wanted ... I just did the standard hours pretty much—8am-4pm. I wasn't going over and above—it was just like, that is it. I just accepted the fact that this is what they wanted, a band-aid, so I'd just be a band-aid."

These comments suggest an increase in transactional contract (narrow dimension) beliefs at this time. His first actions to remedy the breaches ("self-initiated compensatory" effects) involved speaking with his manager, then his designated mentor, and then the human resources area. These attempts failed to repair the breach. Regarding his manager's response:

"... I'd go into (his or her) office and say 'listen I'm sort of a little bit light on work is there anything I can chase up?' and the answer would be 'no'. Well what can I say to that? So what do you do? So I was just like, well there's no action being taken there, what's Plan B?"

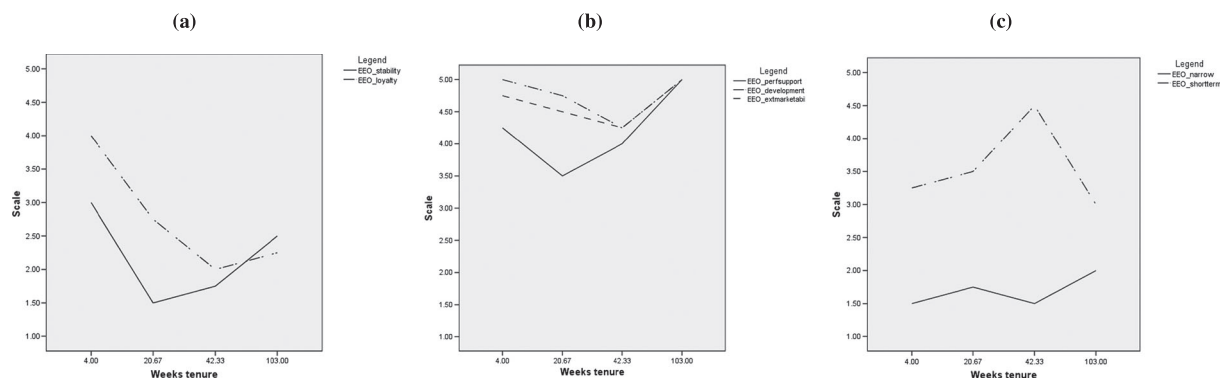


Figure 2. Case: Daniel contract dimension plots (strong negative reaction to breach experience (contract violation)). (a) Employee relational dimensions, (b) Employee balanced dimensions, and (c) Employee transactional dimensions

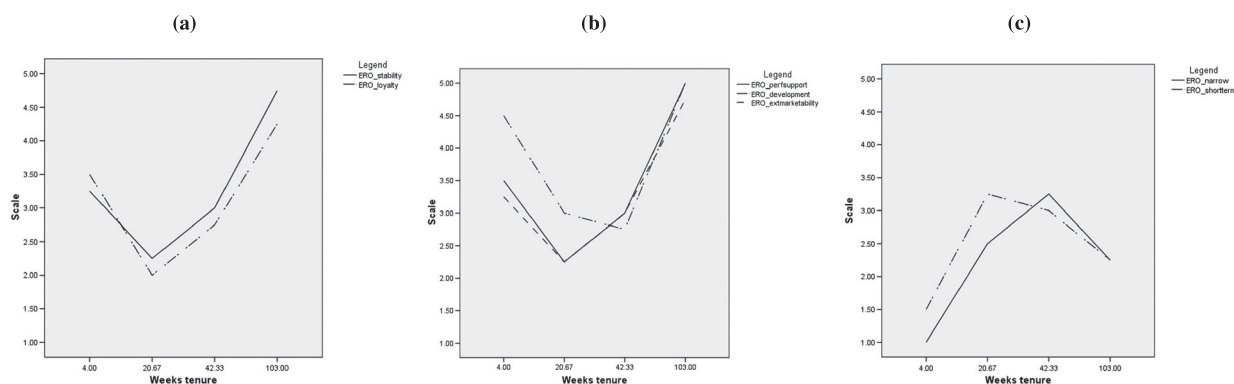


Figure 3. Case: Daniel contract dimension plots (strong negative reaction to breach experience (contract violation)). (a) Employer relational dimensions, (b) Employer balanced dimensions, and (c) Employer transactional dimensions

“Plan B” was another “self-initiated compensatory” effect to remedy the “lack of meaningful work” breach by initiating his own learning experiences, to “find as much learning as I can”. He sought out and spoke to more experienced staff who could “offer you something in terms of imparting a lot of their life skills that they’ve learnt”. The poor quality supervisory relationship was largely outside his control to directly remedy. However, Daniel spoke of the buffering effect of supportive relationships with colleagues, without which he “would not have survived very well”. A “future focus” effect was also evident toward the end of his first year and first rotation, or as Daniel expressed it “I was looking forward to getting out”.

A turning point came toward the end of his first year with a managerial change, leading to a better quality supervisory relationship and more meaningful work, fulfilling the breached balanced contract beliefs particularly. Daniel’s second rotation also then provided him with what he had been seeking in his first. The people in his new work area were “trying to throw me into everything, which is good” and his new manager was clear that “we’ll look after you here and do everything in your best interests”. This new situation appeared to directly repair previous breaches and his psychological contract. Daniel ultimately expressed positive views of his exchange relationship, including engaging in citizenship behaviors such as working longer hours.

Daniel’s plots (Figures 2(a–c) and 3(a–c)) demonstrate how his first 12 months (up until survey time 3) largely resulted in overall decreases in employee and employer relational (Figures 2(a) and 3(a)) and balanced (Figures 2

(b) and 3(b)) contract beliefs and increases in transactional beliefs (Figures 2(c) and 3(c)). Once he shifted to a new work area and the accumulation of breaches stopped, his beliefs in these obligations were returning to (Figures 2(a–c) and 3(c)), and in some cases were above (Figure 3(a–b)), pre-breach event levels.

Study 2 and Overall Discussion

There is a paucity of process research in the psychological contract field, meaning despite the theorized process nature of the contract relatively little is known of how this unfolds to create change (Conway & Briner, 2005). Process theories are developed through stories (Mohr, 1982), often manifest as models with “deterministic phases, parallel paths, feedback loops” and so on, and should be based on a generative mechanism (Langley, 2009, p. 410). This study is novel in its adoption of a process framework, and its development of process theory, to better understand psychological contract change through an “adaptive remediation” teleological process model. This model elaborates on the initial process story posited (and offered some support in Study 1) to identify (through Study 2) that breach or violation events trigger change and how ongoing and iterative cycles of employee sensemaking, through interpretation and coping actions, and attempts to generate contract repair combine to drive the change process. Overall, this development of process theory helps to unravel what is largely only theorized, that contract change is a complex and non-linear phenomenon.

The process model contributes to the literature in three key ways. First, contract research predominantly focuses on negative employee responses to employer breaches or violations. By instead exploring potentially positive responses individuals can enact following these events, the study contributes to emerging work in this area (e.g., Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011; Kiazad et al., 2014). It also extends the literature via the appraisal-based coping framework to identify a broad range of adaptive and constructive actions (remediation effects) that are used, and may be iteratively enacted, to respond to a breach or violation stressor. While no maladaptive coping responses were identified, for this sample and timeframe at least, individuals appeared to instead focus on attempts to proactively adapt to the discrepant event.

Second, theorizing and examining the role of employee agency in contracting, through the teleological basis of the process model, is relatively unique in the field and reveals the extent to which employees are active “constructors” of their contracts rather than passive “reciprocators” of employer behavior. While Seeck and Parzefall (2008) show employees exercise agency in organizing and experiencing their work through the everyday operation of the contract, this study further shows how individuals continue to constructively impose their choices within the exchange even after perceived negative and discrepant events. Here, individuals’ agency manifested through actions to either adapt or change their environment (such as a “self-initiated compensatory” remediation effect) or their perceptions of the environment (such as a “future focus” remediation effect), making choices about the coping resources to deploy to “step into the breach”, and actively managing their contract by attempting to fulfill the breached obligation to receive what they sought. Individuals, even those experiencing feelings of violation, continued enacting different coping responses if initial actions were ineffective. As also suggested by Kiazad et al. (2014), these findings expand and complement the predominant social exchange basis of the contract (focused on in-kind reciprocation) by demonstrating a more “purposeful” exchange where employees can act constructively even if they perceive their employer is not.

Finally, this study extends earlier work on breach sensemaking (e.g., Parzefall & Coyle-Shapiro, 2011), constructive post-breach reactions (e.g., Kiazad et al., 2014), and agency in contracting (e.g., Seeck & Parzefall, 2008) by combining these threads and linking the process of active sensemaking to contract repair and change. Contract repair is a key component of the non-linear change process identified in this study, showing that the widely focused upon withdrawal of contributions following a breach or violation is only one part of the change process. If adaptive coping responses, or the remediation effects employed by individuals following the discrepancy, were effective this could instigate a process of contract repair and begin “reversing” this withdrawal. But if these attempts were ineffective no repair in perceptions was evident, although ongoing attempts at repair, for example through buffers, could temper

increasing cynicism. Further, this study is one of the first to demonstrate how contract repair occurs with a conceptual and empirical distinction between employee actions which repair the breach itself and the contract (remedies) and those which repair the contract more broadly, but not the specific breach (buffers). These actions saw employees actively reconstruct their contracts after a breach or violation, with the predominant use of buffers showing that a breach need not necessarily be “fixed” for contract repair to occur. Overall, the “adaptive remediation” model has begun to unravel the processes of contract change.

Practically, organizations can create conditions to encourage the repair of breaches and potentially avoid lasting negative effects on the employment exchange. This includes fostering supportive managerial and team relationships to offer advice and support and allowing individuals, where reasonable, some latitude in their work conduct. Further, if managers understand what employees perceive an employer’s obligations to be, when they cannot be met they can identify avenues for future fulfillment, offer compensatory alternatives, or help employees re-focus on other positive aspects of the work environment.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Overall, a sample more diverse in age, work experience, and employment context would have reinforced the change patterns identified or perhaps uncovered other ones. In Study 1, a larger sample may have facilitated better testing (particularly for random effects) of the relatively complex growth models and although a longitudinal study, the issue of reciprocal causation remains. Study 1 also did not test the posited mechanisms driving the change trajectories and quantitatively measuring breach, violation, and coping responses would have been ideal. As Study 1 was longitudinal there was some sample attrition, resulting in the Study 2 sample not capturing exited staff. Although difficult to track these individuals, including their data may have offered further insights into contract change and possibly the use of maladaptive coping responses. A longer study would also shed more light on the contracting process and add further weight to the patterns identified. The sample included employees from Australia and New Zealand and while statistical testing indicated no significant differences between the groups, exploring whether the different cultures and labor markets of these countries drive different change triggers and responses would be beneficial.

For Study 2, despite the strengths of qualitative methods in process research the interview approach may have encouraged individuals to focus on their constructive responses to breach or violation events, rather than any maladaptive coping actions. Further studies would strengthen the conclusions drawn, particularly by gathering qualitative data as events are unfolding (Garud & Van de Ven, 2002). The interviews were also conducted and analyzed by a single researcher and while one view suggests that using multiple researchers would improve data analysis quality, important and high-quality qualitative studies that build theory have been conducted by a single researcher (see Teerikangas, 2012). The strong theoretical basis for the qualitative data coding should also help mitigate this limitation.

Future research could explore many areas. Because enacting coping strategies involves time and effort, assessing whether individuals engage in these actions whenever a breach or violation is perceived, or only when central contract beliefs are involved (Ng & Feldman, 2009), would be beneficial. Future studies could also measure the degree of control individuals believe they have over correcting employer breaches and whether this influences the coping actions employed and contract repair. Utilizing more diverse workforce samples, particularly in tenure, may well identify different change patterns to those found here. For example, as older workers generally respond less negatively and emotionally to breaches (Bal & Smit, 2012), and are thus less likely to activate coping responses, different change triggers and processes may better represent this group. Future work could also explore the context driving employees’ use of maladaptive coping strategies and the short-term and long-term impacts on the contract. Comparing the effectiveness of remedies and buffers (as only the former directly addresses a breach) in long-term contract repair could also be further investigated.

Conclusions

The psychological contract is theorized to be shaped by ongoing events that unfold, and are construed and interpreted by employees, over time. However, identifying these sequences of events, and employees' roles within them, requires further investigation in order to truly understand the contract as a dynamic framework. This study shows how process research can unravel the drivers and complexity of evolving phenomena through developing event-based narratives, providing researchers with exciting possibilities for creating more dynamic theories to explain the psychological contracting process.

Author biography

Sarah Bankins is a Lecturer in the Newcastle Business School at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Her research interests include psychological contracting in organizations, exploring how individuals influence the innovation process, and employee well-being and engagement in the workplace.

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