

**Self-Determination as Nutriment for Thriving:  
Building an Integrative Model of Human Growth at Work**

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## Abstract

Thriving may be defined as the joint experience of vitality and learning. It is a marker of individual growth and forward progress. As a result, thriving can serve as a kind of internal gauge that individuals can use to assess how they are doing in terms of their well-being at work. We review findings regarding thriving including key outcomes and antecedent conditions. Given the focus of this volume on self-determination theory, we articulate how thriving may be nurtured from the nutriments of self-determination. All three nutriments of self-determination – a sense of autonomy, competence, and belongingness – facilitate more thriving at work. To this end, by linking self-determination and thriving, we can build a more integrative model of human growth at work.

Key words: thriving, self-determination, vitality, learning, energy, growth

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Introduction

As is true for all living creatures, once an organism stops growing, it begins the process of dying. So growth is an essential human process for life. To truly feel alive, individuals want to be growing psychologically as well as physically. Unfortunately, while we know much about how human beings grow physically over the lifespan, we know less about how they grow psychologically. In this chapter, we articulate how self-determination theory (SDT) and thriving together contribute to building an integrative model of human growth. For purposes of this handbook, we focus our attention on growth in a work context. The thriving construct reflects two key markers or indicators of human growth at work: vitality and learning. The two indicators help us to identify how we would know psychological growth when we see it (akin to how more inches or pounds are indicative of physical growth). SDT, in contrast, identifies key nutrients (or psychological antecedents) for human growth more generally. SDT specifies the importance of satisfying three psychological needs for growth to occur: autonomy, competence and relatedness. In this way, we suggest that SDT specifies three important nutrients for human thriving.

In this chapter, we further develop the interplay between SDT and thriving to begin to build an integrative model of human growth in a work context. We first provide an overview of thriving and distinguish it from related constructs and growth theories. Then, we use SDT to articulate how the satisfaction of the three psychological needs can serve as nutrients to thriving. We also identify other possible nutrients to the process of human growth at work. We draw upon empirical research where available to support this integrative model of human growth

in a work context. Finally, we offer directions for future research as well as practical implications of the integrative model of human growth at work.

### **What Is Thriving?**

The notion of thriving has been embedded in a number of literatures. In medicine, failure to thrive is a diagnosis pertaining to infants and the frail elderly indicated by an acute lack of physical growth – manifest in listlessness, immobility, apathy, and no appetite (Bakwin, 1949; Bergland & Kirkevold, 2001; Verderey, 1995). In psychology, thriving is more about psychological growth than physical growth. When psychologically thriving, individuals are not merely surviving (Saakvitne, Tennen, & Affleck, 1998) or getting by (Benson & Scales, 2009), but they are growing (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998; Joseph & Linley, 2008) – on an upward trajectory (Hall et al., 2009; Thomas & Hall, 2008). While some emphasize thriving more specifically as growth in response to trauma (i.e., resilience; Carver, 1998; Ickovics & Park, 1998), others see thriving as an everyday experience regarding how people interact with their environment (Blankenship, 1998). While people can indeed thrive amidst a crisis, thriving is more than a rare event experienced only in a crisis or trauma. Indeed, in a series of interviews, Sonenshein, Grant, Dutton, Spreitzer, and Sutcliffe (2005) provided preliminary evidence that thriving can occur at work during everyday moments. Employees in a wide range of jobs across three companies were able to provide at least one narrative of their own experience of thriving at work.

In empirical research in other disciplines, thriving is defined broadly with little consensus (Benson & Scales, 2009; Campa, Bradshaw, Eckenrode, & Zielinski, 2008; Haight, Barba, Tesh, & Courts, 2002; King et al., 2005; Theokas et al., 2005; Walker & Sterling, 2007). However,

many of these definitions are specific to the narrow contexts in which these studies were conducted, including the progress of adolescents in school, the recovery of women dealing with domestic abuse, or the health of nursing home residents. For example, in a study of delinquent adolescents (Campa et al., 2008), thriving was conceptualized as being employed, civically engaged, and completing high school. In a study of women recovering from abuse, thriving included a woman's energy, individual resources, and the nature of the relationship with adversity (Poorman, 2002). While informative in understanding the broad applicability and multidisciplinary foundations of thriving, these definitions are less pertinent to an employment setting.

To this end, we draw on the prior, interdisciplinary literature to help provide evidence for the definition and underlying two dimensions of thriving at work advanced by Spreitzer et al. (2005): (1) a feeling of vitality at work and (2) a sense that one is learning or getting better at work. Here we draw on the foundational paper articulating the theory development of thriving by Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, and Grant (2005). They define thriving as the psychological experience of growth in a positive capacity. This experience is captured from excerpts from two narratives they collected from employees' stories of thriving at work:

One social worker described thriving as: "I know thriving as I feel it. It is like going forward. It is not staying in place. It is not stagnant. You are moving forward; not necessarily in job titles or positions, but just being able to move forward thinking and in the activities that you are engaged in and in your mindset, all of those things".

A mid-level manager in a large metropolitan non profit described thriving as "being energized, feeling valued, and that what you do is valued... Thriving is

being productive...being open to the challenges presented and to learn and grow and having those opportunities to grow”.

In both of these examples, employees express thriving as the development of some form of enhanced capacity that they experience as an upward movement or progression that is associated with heightened energy. This definition of thriving is consistent with Ryff's (1989) and Rogers' (1961) perspectives on personal growth. Ryff suggests that when individuals grow, they consider themselves to be expanding in ways that reflect enhanced self-knowledge and effectiveness (Ryff, 1989). Thriving reflects “continually developing and becoming, rather than achieving a fixed state wherein one is fully developed” (Ryff, 1989: 1071). Individuals have a sense of realizing their own potential and seeing improvement in the self and their behaviors over time (Ryff, 1989). In short, thriving involves active, intentional engagement in the process of personal growth (Robitschek, 1998).

Like biomarkers in medicine (that is, specific indicators used to measure the effects or progress of a condition) vitality and learning are markers of thriving (Spreitzer et al., 2005: 538), acting as an indication of the extent to which a person is thriving at any point in time. Vitality indicates the sense that one is energized (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999) and has a zest for life (Miller & Stiver, 1997), while learning signifies acquisition and application of knowledge and skills to build capability (Edmondson, 1999). Why vitality and learning as the markers of thriving? The two encompass both the affective (vitality) and cognitive (learning) dimensions of the psychological experience of personal growth. Ryff (1989), for example, suggests that when individuals grow, they consider themselves to be expanding in ways that reflect enhanced self-knowledge and effectiveness. Likewise, Carver (1998) conceives of thriving as the psychological experience of growth in a positive capacity (i.e., a constructive or forward direction) that

energizes and enlivens. Thus, prior research in psychology has highlighted both the affective and cognitive foundations of human growth.

Further, building on Spreitzer and colleagues' (2005) conceptualization, thriving is viewed as a state rather than as a personality disposition. Individual differences can be differentiated between distal, trait-like constructs and proximal, state-like constructs (Chen, Gully, Whiteman & Kilcullen, 2000). Trait-like constructs are more stable over time (Ackerman & Humphreys, 1990). In contrast, state-like individual differences are more malleable over time and influenced by the situation or task in which one is embedded. In Spreitzer et al.'s model, thriving is "socially embedded" – that is, depending on the specific situation or circumstances a person finds themselves in, he or she may be more or less thriving at any given point in time. For example, certain roles and responsibilities, reporting relationships, or task constraints may be conducive to learning and facilitate vitality or may deplete them. At a more macro level, in a downsizing context when resources are scarce, there may be many demands on people which may deplete energy and reduce resources for learning. But in a context of fast growth, employees may feel more energized and find more opportunities for learning. This social embeddedness may represent the antecedents to feelings of self-determination which, in turn, predict thriving.

Consistent with this, thriving is conceptualized as a continuum where people are more or less thriving at any point in time. There may be personality traits that predispose individuals to experience more or less thriving at work. For example, Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, and Garnett (2012) found thriving to be related to a more proactive personality, more of a learning orientation, and more positive core self-evaluations.

Thriving is a desirable subjective experience (Warr, 1990), helping individuals to understand what and how they are doing, and whether it is increasing their individual functioning and adaptability at work. In this way, thriving can be an internally-derived explanatory mechanism for self-regulation, serving as a type of gauge for individuals to sense well-being and progress in their self-regulatory process (Spreitzer et al., 2005). As markers of thriving, we theorize and have found that vitality and learning combine in an additive manner to indicate one's level of thriving. While each can signify progress toward growth and personal development, more of both markers indicate optimal levels of thriving. If one is learning, but feels depleted, thriving suffers. Conversely, if one feels energized and alive in their work, but finds personal learning to be stagnant, limited thriving is experienced. Thriving, then, is indicated by the joint experience of a sense of vitality and learning.

Recently a measure of thriving has been developed and validated (Porath et al., 2012) across five different samples. The researchers collected data from respondents and their managers across a variety of samples ranging from young adults to well-seasoned executives; from students (i.e. undergrads and Executive MBAs) in academic settings to companies in a range of industries; and those who work in blue collar jobs to those who hold top executive positions in professional firms. The ten items below were validated to measure the two dimensions of thriving:

**Learning items**

- ... I find myself learning often
- ... I continue to learn more as time goes by
- ... I see myself continually improving
- ... I am not learning (reverse code)
- ... I am developing a lot as a person

**Vitality items**

- ... I feel alive and vital
- ... I have energy and spirit



... I do not feel very energetic (reverse code)  
 ... I feel alert and awake  
 ... I am looking forward to each new day

The five items measuring each dimension load appropriately on each first order factor and then the two first order factors load onto a thriving higher order factor. The thriving scale also has strong item reliability.

### **Distinguishing Thriving from Related Growth Constructs**

As articulated in Spreitzer et al. (2005), thriving can be distinguished from related constructs pertinent to human growth including psychological well-being and self-actualization. First, Ryff's theory of psychological well-being (1989) identifies six core dimensions of well-being. Her dimension of personal growth—defined as a sense of continued growth and development as a person—is similar but different to our definition of thriving. Thriving differs from Ryff's psychological well-being because rather than treating all of these components as indicators of well-being, as Ryff does, the learning dimension of thriving is consistent with her personal growth component and articulates how the other components are nutrients of growth (consistent with SDT). For example, positive relations with others are similar to a sense of relatedness. Environmental mastery, the capacity to manage one's life and surrounding world, is similar to a sense of competence. Finally, her construct of autonomy is directly analogous to a sense of autonomy. Her other components do not explicitly capture the vitality dimension of thriving.

Second, self-actualization may be defined as the desire for self-fulfillment and the tendency to become, in actuality, everything that one is capable of becoming (Maslow, 1943). Thriving is a state and may be an indicator that one is on the path to self-actualization. We share with Maslow the belief in the potency of work organizations as sites for human growth.

And third, thriving is distinct from the personality trait of growth-need-strength (Hackman & Oldham, 1980) which is an individual difference highlighting one's need to grow. Growth-need-strength is more stable and less malleable by changes in the work environment. The contrasting assumption underlying thriving is that all individuals have a propensity to grow.

### **Why Care About Thriving?**

Thriving can serve as a gauge for people to sense progress in their growth and development. This gauge helps people understand whether what they are doing and how they are doing is increasing their short-term individual functioning and long-term resourcefulness to become more effective at work. Like a thermometer, a thriving gauge helps individuals understand if they are overheating (with a propensity for burning out) or too cold (indicating stagnation and depletion).

This stands in contrast to the traditional use of external cues, largely feedback from others, in self-regulation and assessments of personal effectiveness. Prior research has typically focused on how individuals assess their progress toward goal attainment and effectiveness using feedback from their supervisor, customers, co-workers, or even the job itself (e.g., Tsui & Ashford, 1994; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Individuals integrate this information regarding their progress toward goal attainment and regulate their behavioral choices and efforts accordingly (Klein, 1991). Even in social cognitive theory, which offers a more empowered view of volitional regulation, the external information gathered from others through active feedback seeking is used to assess one's progress and make subsequent adjustments (Porath et al., 2012).

Through our articulation of thriving, we are learning more about how people use internally-generated cues, such as how they feel (e.g., their affect), in assessing forward progress

or growth. In current self-regulatory models, affect is theorized as an outcome of goal attainment, such as the pride that results from achieving one's goals, or as the disappointment that is generated through externally-provided negative feedback that motivates corrective changes. However, internal cues can also serve as potential gauges for self-regulation. Paying attention to how one feels is particularly important for self-regulating well-being and burnout as well as personal progress.

For example, one consultant we know checks in with herself multiple times a day to see how she is feeling in terms of her vitality and learning and makes adjustments accordingly. If she feels like she's dragging, she'll take a quick power nap (if possible), take a break and a brief walk outside, and/or grab a snack and breather. She'll also try to schedule the work that's most important during her high energy periods of the day (typically early morning), and retain other, less crucial professional and personal tasks for periods when she knows she's not typically as energetic or likely to be thriving. Another top executive we know uses similar strategies over longer term periods. If he senses that he's in danger of burning out after too many long days and stressful events, he'll be sure to schedule golf into his weekly schedule. Similarly, he will restrain himself from checking work email during weekends 'away' and much of each weekend. He finds he's far fresher and more productive when he uses these self-regulatory routines to monitor his thriving.

In these and other ways, people may use their sense of thriving in their work as a gauge to assess progress, in addition to the exogenous feedback received from others about how they are doing. If individuals pay attention to their vitality and learning as they do their work, they can better self-regulate for sustained performance over time, minimizing the potential for burnout. Indeed, consistent with the ideas of thriving as a self-regulatory gauge, as we describe

below, thriving has been found to be related to both performance and well-being outcomes across studies.

**Thriving and performance.** Individuals who report higher levels of thriving in their work are found to have higher levels of job performance. In a sample of blue collar employees in the plant operations section of a large public university, those employees reporting higher levels of thriving were rated by their bosses as performing significantly higher than those reporting lower levels of thriving (Porath et al., 2012). Similarly in a sample of white collar employees across six organizations, employees who rated themselves with higher levels of thriving were assessed by their bosses as performing at a higher level (Porath et al., 2012). In this study of six firms, employees just one standard deviation (less than one on a seven point scale) above the mean performed over 14% better than those one standard deviation below the mean. Additionally, they were 32% more committed to the organization, 46% more satisfied with their job, and 125% less burned out! Thriving has also been found to be related to more career development initiative which suggests that thriving employees are more proactive in seeking out opportunities to learn and grow (Porath, et al., 2012) which may also contribute to their enhanced performance at work.

Thriving has been found to be particularly important for the effectiveness of leaders. In a sample of executives cutting across a variety of industries, thriving executives were rated substantially higher by their subordinates as more effective than executives who report lower levels of thriving (Porath et al., 2012). The subordinates of thriving leaders describe them as role models of how work can be done, who seek opportunities to take initiative, and who enable others to act. So thriving leaders are apt to enable thriving followers.

**Thriving and Extra-Role Performance and Relationship Building.** The theoretical model advanced by Spreitzer et al. (2005) suggests when people are thriving, they heedfully interrelate with others—that is, they look out for the needs of others with whom they work. Our findings suggest that this is the case-- those reporting higher levels of thriving developed more supportive relationships from colleagues (after three months) than those reporting lower levels of thriving.

Because they also look outside the formal task requirements as a way of learning new things (Spreitzer, et al., 2005), individuals who report more thriving are also likely to see ways to contribute to their work beyond that specified by their formal roles. They see opportunities to engage in affiliative behaviors such as helping others, sharing, and cooperating. An individual must be able to identify the opportunities for organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) (have the focused intention and engage in accumulation of knowledge) and then exert the energy to go beyond the call of duty. In a study of six firms, we have found that those who experience more thriving engage in more OCBs, as rated by their bosses.

**Thriving and well-being.** Across industries, executives who see themselves as thriving report themselves to be healthier with fewer physical or somatic complaints. In another study, professionals across six firms in diverse industries also report feeling less burned out. The better health and reduced propensity to burn out may be what enables employees to sustain their thriving over time. In this way, thriving can enable effective self-regulation for better well-being over time.

**Vitality and learning dimensions both important.** We should also note that the most positive outcomes of thriving come when both levels of both learning and vitality are high. Just learning or just vitality by itself is not enough. Learning and vitality help regulate sustained

performance. For example, for those with higher levels of learning and vitality have performance scores that are 15% higher (as rated by their bosses) than when their levels of either or both learning and vitality are low. We've learned that, in particular, when people engage in high levels of learning over time without accompanying high levels of vitality, performance and health may wane. Too much learning focus can contribute to overload and diminishing returns.

These series of findings regarding thriving suggests that thriving matters for individuals and the organizations they are part of. Thriving individuals not only perform better, but they go above and beyond the call of duty in helping others. And they tend to be healthier and less burned out. We turn now to how to enhance individuals' propensity to thrive in their work.

### **So What Can Be Done to Enable More Thriving at Work?**

By drawing on SDT, we can better understand what enables people's inherent growth tendencies. Bringing SDT and thriving together, we can begin to flesh out a more integrative model of human growth at work. SDT assumes that every human being has an innate tendency towards psychological growth and development. As a whole, individuals strive to master ongoing challenges and to integrate their experiences into a coherent sense of self (Gagne & Deci, 2005). SDT is concerned with the motivation behind the choices that people make without any external influence or control (Deci, Connell & Ryan, 1989). It focuses on the degree to which an individual's behavior is self-motivated and self-determined.

Empirical research suggests that when individuals are intrinsically motivated (i.e., doing something for its own enjoyment rather than compelled for instrumental reasons), behaviors are less effortful and vitality increases (Nix et al., 1999). Consistent with the vitality dimension of thriving, Deci and Ryan (2000) define vitality as energy available to the self, either directly or

indirectly, from meeting basic psychological needs. Subjective vitality captures a sense of enthusiasm, aliveness, and positive energy available to the self (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

The assumption that vitality or energy can be renewed stands in contrast to self-regulation theorists (e.g., Baumeister, Bratlavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998) who have posited that self-regulation activity depletes energy. A key assumption of SDT is that energy can be maintained and even enhanced, not just depleted or expended. Whereas self-regulation theory and conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) focus on how energy is depleted (through self-control activities), SDT focuses on the forces that may catalyze or generate energy. SDT assumes that while efforts to control the self (such as emotional regulation) can drain energy (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007), autonomous self-regulation is substantially less draining (Muraven, Gagne & Rosman, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2008). According to SDT, when individuals have choice and their efforts are volitional, energy is depleted at a slower rate than when activity is imposed (Ryan & Deci, 2008). SDT researchers offer an alternative perspective -- while controlled regulation depletes energy; autonomous regulation can actually be vitalizing. At its core, SDT proposes that when individuals are intrinsically motivated (i.e., doing something for its own enjoyment or interest rather than being compelled for instrumental reasons), behaviors are less effortful and less depleting.

More specifically, SDT posits that the larger social context can contribute to feelings of vitality by satisfying individual psychological needs for relatedness (i.e., feeling connected), competence (i.e., feeling capable), and autonomy (i.e., feeling volitional). In a study using an experience-sampling method with college students, autonomy, competence, and relatedness were associated with greater vitality (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). And in longitudinal research of elite female gymnasts, support was again shown for the vitality-

increasing effects of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, even when they had engaged in physically demanding and calorie-draining activities (Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996). Finally, autonomous individuals performed better on subsequent self-control activities than individuals whose behavior was controlled by external forces, even when controlling for anxiety, stress, unpleasantness or reduced motivation (Muravan et al., 2008).

Of the three psychological needs, autonomy is the strongest predictor of energy. Autonomy is defined as the self-endorsement of one's actions, or the extent to which one feels a sense of choice concerning one's behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2008: 707). When behavior is autonomous, the assumption is that it requires less inhibition, creates less conflict, and thus is most energizing. Recently, Muravan et al. (2008) sought to integrate SDT with ego-depletion ideas by designing a research study that examined autonomy as a moderator in determining how depleting a self-control activity would be. Drawing from STD, they hypothesized that more autonomous support of the self-control activity would reduce the magnitude of depletion. In a series of three studies, they found support for the idea that "why" someone exerts self-control may influence how depleting the activity will be. Individuals whose self-control behavior was perceived more as autonomous performed better on subsequent self-control activities than individuals who felt pressured to engage in self-control activities. In fact, they found an increase in vitality following autonomous self-control which helped replenish lost ego-strength. This supports the idea that positive experiences help negate the effects of depletion (Tice, Baumeister, Shmueli, Muravan, 2007).

Vitality has also been linked to more motivation, better mental health, and fewer reports of physical symptoms (Ryan & Frederick, 1997). In a study of nursing home residents, those that reported more vitality engaged in more autonomous regulation of their daily activities (Sheldon



et al., 1996). In a study explaining health outcomes following a natural disaster, individuals who reported vitality before the disaster were less depressed afterward (Tremblay, Blanchard, Pelletier, & Vallerand, 2006). And in three experiments, the feeling of vitality that comes from autonomous behavior related to reduced physical symptoms, faster recovery from fatigue, and increased performance (Muraven et al., 2008).

Research on subjective vitality in organizational settings also has begun to emerge. For example, Quinn and Dutton (2005) have theorized how energy can be created in a conversation by enhancing one's feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. A diary study found that people had more subjective vitality when they experienced more self-determination in their daily work experiences (Ryan, Bernstein, & Brown, 2010). Interestingly, they also found that vitality was higher on weekends when there were more opportunities for autonomy and relatedness activities. Others have found subjective vitality to be related to creative work (Carmeli & Spreitzer, 2009; Kark & Carmeli, 2008).

A key insight from the SDT stream is that when one's context enables autonomy, competence, and relatedness, one is more likely to experience vitality (we should note that the SDT literature doesn't make any explicit link to the learning dimension of thriving; nevertheless, some of the logic does link nicely to notions of growth and development which implies at least some learning). Ryan and Deci (2000) suggest that these three dimensions provide the essential psychological nutrients for agentic behavior and ultimately for psychological growth and development. In each case, the three components of self-determination are the three key mechanisms explaining how context affects behavior (see Figure 1). Self-determination theory (SDT) is at the center of our rationale for how context affects thriving because it describes how individuals pursue conditions that foster their own growth and development (Deci & Ryan,

2000). People do not thrive at work simply because they are exhorted to do so by a boss or forced to do so by the organizational system. Rather, when people act with volition, they are more likely to be oriented toward growth and experience vitality (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination is manifest in feelings of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy refers to volition – the sense that one’s behavior emanates from and is endorsed by oneself. Competence involves a sense of efficacy in dealing with the environment (Bandura, 1977) and making effective use of surrounding resources (Ryff, 1989). Finally, relatedness refers to feeling connected to others and having a sense of belongingness (Bowlby, 1979).

Empirically, we’ve tested how SDT is related to thriving in our sample of six organizations (n=335). We found that the three dimensions of SDT—autonomy, competence, and relatedness explained an extraordinary amount of variance in thriving—54%. Each of the SDT dimensions was a significant predictor of thriving. Moreover, each of these SDT dimensions significantly predicted both the vitality (affective) and learning (cognitive) dimensions of thriving.

In the sections that follow, we draw on Spreitzer et al.’s (2005) thriving model to articulate key antecedents in a work context that will enable more thriving through enhanced self-determination (see also Figure 1). We also go beyond Spreitzer et al. (2005) to offer two additional antecedents: performance feedback and environmental volatility. While prior research has established a link between SDT and the vitality dimension of thriving, in the sections below, we also make the case for the link to the learning dimension of thriving and find strong empirical support for it.

**Decision-making discretion.** When individuals are exposed to work contexts that foster decision-making discretion, their feelings of autonomy are strengthened. Decision-making discretion creates an opportunity for individuals to feel more in control of their work, and to exercise choices about what to do and how to do it (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Decision-making discretion provides individuals with freedom and choices about how to do their work rather than being externally controlled, regulated or pressured. Individuals who perceive that they have little autonomy to act volitionally by choosing work strategies or influencing working conditions—or who have doubts about their capabilities—will prematurely slacken their task focus particularly when faced with challenges (Wood & Bandura, 1989). In contrast, as SDT theory indicates, when people feel autonomous, they are more likely to feel vital (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Decision-making discretion is also likely to enhance the learning dimension of thriving through the SDT dimensions of competence and relatedness. When individuals can exercise choice about what to do and how to do it, they are more likely to feel competent to seek out new directions for doing their work (Amabile, 1993). Being part of organizational decisions helps individuals build new skills and feelings of competence, which lead them to feel more comfortable taking risks and exploring new opportunities (Spreitzer, 1996). Work contexts that support discretion can also strengthen relatedness beliefs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Being part of organizational decisions contributes to a sense of connectedness with others, which encourages individuals to relate heedfully (Spreitzer et al., 2005).

**Broad information sharing.** Information sharing also fuels more thriving at work through enhanced self-determination. Having access to a broad array of information increases the likelihood that individuals will have the requisite knowledge to make good decisions (Spreitzer, 1996). As a result of this knowledge, individuals can feel more competent to perform their work.

The sharing of information also increases individuals' competence because it increases their abilities to quickly uncover problems as they arise, and to integrate and coordinate actions. Accordingly, this increased capacity to respond effectively in unfamiliar or challenging situations fuels learning new behaviors (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2002). When information is disseminated broadly, individuals can increase their understanding of how the system works so they can feel more autonomous (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001).

**Climate of trust and respect.** A climate of trust and respect will also promote more thriving through increased self-determination. When individuals are situated in climates of trust and respect they are likely to feel more competent, efficacious, and capable of mastering challenges in their environment (Spreitzer, 1995). When individuals feel that they can trust each other, they are more willing to take risks (Edmondson, 1999; Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Moreover, a climate of trust and respect also facilitates learning and experimentation with new behaviors (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2002; Spreitzer, 1995), in part because individuals feel safe to experiment. Finally, when individuals are exposed to a climate of trust and respect, they are more likely to believe that they are worthy and valued organizational members. This fosters a sense of relatedness, as individuals are likely to feel much more connected to others (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). This sense of relatedness, may also spark feelings of positive emotion, and unleash the broaden-and-build model (Frederickson, 2001), which leads to increased vitality and openness to learning.

**Feedback.** Access to feedback is also likely to be related to self-determination, particularly the competence component. Whereas broad information sharing gives employees access to general organizational knowledge, feedback provides specific information about their current job performance or personal progress on goals and objectives to date (Ashford, 1986). Studies have

consistently revealed that feedback increases affective outcomes (cf. Ammons, 1956; Vroom, 1964). Feedback provides knowledge about one's competence. By resolving feelings of uncertainty (e.g., about personal accomplishments and superiors' expectations), feedback allows individuals to more accurately and easily appraise themselves, enabling them to see progress, and reducing individual stress (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). Because feedback keeps people's work-related activities directed toward desired personal and organizational goals (Locke & Latham, 1990), feedback is likely to increase thriving. Feedback provides information regarding the relative importance of various goals to an individual's own progress (Ashford & Cummings, 1983), allowing them to make adjustments in order to maximize the use of their time toward personal growth and improvement.

**Environmental turbulence.** In addition to these four enablers, prior research also suggests that levels of thriving will suffer amidst substantial upheaval and change in the work context. Environmental turbulence will be likely to reduce feelings of self-determination, particularly the competence and autonomy components. More dynamic and unpredictable environments require organizations to spend greater resources for monitoring external conditions and responding to them (Sutcliffe, 1994; 2005). Here, we suggest that environmental volatility creates more uncertainty for employees (Dess & Beard, 1984; Mathieu Marks & Zaccaro 2001), defined as the extent to which it is possible to forecast and manage challenges (Waller, 1999). One's feelings of competence may be questioned, particularly as uncertainty drains cognitive and affective resources. Individuals possess a limited pool of cognitive resources that are allocated to and withdrawn from various activities (e.g., Kahneman, 1973). Prior research has shown that task performance is dependent upon the extent to which this limited attentional capacity is devoted to that specific task (Kahneman, 1973; Porath & Erez, 2007). Environmental turbulence

challenges people's ability to focus on the task, versus thinking about how changes may affect them, for example. With less attention and cognitive resources devoted to work performance, it will likely reduce feelings of competence in one's ability to be effective at work. In addition, Quay (2002) found that affective processes suffer during times of organizational upheaval which can contribute to feelings of lack of control and reduced autonomy. Thus, in just appraising and making sense of the ever-changing environment, employees are likely to drain scarce resources that would otherwise contribute to learning and vitality, in much the same way that additional processing demands distract employees from the task at hand, reducing task-focused cognitive resources (Montgomery, Kane, and Vance, 2004).

Empirical research provides support for these antecedents of thriving at work in a study of professionals, managers and executives across six organizations in diverse industries. Porath, Gibson, and Spreitzer (2011) found decision making discretion and information sharing to be the most powerful antecedents with performance feedback, a climate of trust/respect and environmental turbulence to predict thriving as well. These four antecedents (not including environmental turbulence) explained 42% of the variance thriving across the six organizations. In sum, a person may be eager to grow and develop, but the work context may enable or squash this capacity.

### **Directions for Future Research**

Here we outline many of the opportunities that abound for further fleshing out an integrative model of human growth at work. First, researchers should strive to learn more about how people use thriving effectively as a gauge. This might involve studying thriving at work over shorter periods of time in an effort to better understand the microdynamics of thriving, particularly how it ebbs and flows over the course of the day or week or work activities, using

experience sampling or a diary method to capture assessments of thriving over time (for an example, Niessen et al., 2010). Future research should use longitudinal data to tease out the causal direction of the relationships and better address the reciprocal relationships that are posited in the original theoretical work on thriving. Research investigating thriving over the course of intense projects or transition periods would provide a better understanding of what causes variability in thriving over time and across contexts. It may be that asking people to pause at various times to assess their current level of thriving could be a kind of intervention to self-regulate their thriving to avoid burn out. Self-determination theory may be at the heart of explaining how people successfully navigate and thrive through the workday or work week as well as challenging times.

Second, recent research has found thriving to be associated with a range of benefits for employees and organizations. However, much remains to be learned about the longer-term benefits of thriving, and how the generative nature of thriving can create (not just deplete) resources to facilitate subsequent thriving and lead to sustained benefits. For example, do thriving employees co-create their work environments for enhanced subsequent thriving? Through specific work activities like microbreaks and helping others, can individuals self-generate higher levels of thriving over time (Fritz, Lam & Spreitzer, forthcoming)? In addition, we know little about the potential costs of thriving. For example, could thriving lead to unreasonable expectations that work must always be energizing? Of course every job has ups and downs.

Finally, there is much more to be learned about how thriving at work and outside of work may interrelate. Research by Porath et al. (2012) revealed that thriving at work and in non-work activities are related, but separate. Using SDT, research might explore how thriving at work, or

in non-work activities might be used to catapult more thriving in the other area. Perhaps thriving at work fuels people with positive feelings, energy, and self-efficacy that, consequently, sparks thriving outside of work, carrying over to non-work activities in meaningful (and perhaps unconscious) ways. On the other hand, maybe the competence and relatedness driving thriving at work pulls people into want to do more work, tipping the balance heavily in favor of energy and focus in work activities. Longitudinal research might provide greater insight into how people can thrive within and outside of work to achieve the best personal and professional outcomes.

### **Practical Implications**

Based on our findings, the self-determination dimensions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness are powerful facilitators of thriving. Thriving, in turn, predicts an impressive range of outcomes for people and organizations, including performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, health outcomes, burnout, career initiative, and positive adaptation. If individuals or organizations want to promote thriving, then thinking about ways to enhance autonomy, competence, and relatedness would be a great start. For individuals, it seems important that people who seek to experience more thriving should put themselves in contexts where they have a reasonable amount of decision-making discretion, feel competent in their role, and feel a sense of community, or relatedness among their colleagues. Given the enormous role that these contextual factors play in one's ability to thrive, they should play a role in deciding on person-job and person-organization fit. Too often external factors may influence job choices and other project related choices.

A great example of this is the notion of job crafting. Individuals job craft when they make proactive changes to the content and boundaries of their jobs (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Job crafters may engage in three types of crafting: *cognitive crafting*, which involves changing



task-related boundaries and mindsets, *task crafting*, which involves changing the content of work – the number, scope and type of job responsibilities, and *relational crafting*, which involves changing the quality and amount of our interaction with others while working. Job crafting offers strategies individuals can use to enhance their self-determination and subsequently their thriving at work.

For organizations, leaders can do much to design jobs to increase decision making discretion, share information, create a culture of trust/respect, and provide performance feedback. In addition, they can try to mitigate the volatility inherent in organization change. Through these levers, leaders can enhance the three components of self-determination and ultimately thriving. The research suggests that autonomy may be especially potent in the workplace. For example, more organizations offer flexible work arrangements, including more discretion over the hours worked, and where the work is completed. Some organizations, including Best Buy, have seen productivity skyrocket and retention as a result (Business Week, 2006).

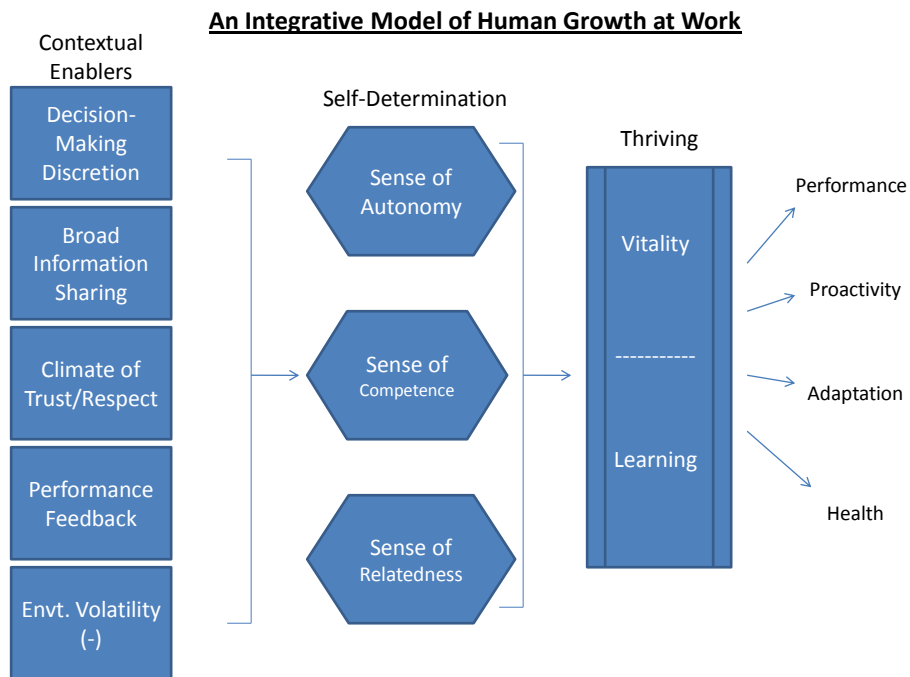
Reinforcement for work well done rather than face time at the office is likely to garner much appreciation, greater confidence, and increased thriving. Managers and peers are powerful sources for igniting feelings of competence (Daniels, 2000). Small comments and compliments go a long way in developing employee competence for greater thriving. Many companies such as Medtronic share compliments and ideas from customers as a way to build efficacy and motivation.

Finally, organizations should pay greater attention to their culture as it is critical for building feelings of relatedness, in particular. Leaders who are able to craft environments where employees feel a sense of community will benefit. Southwest Airlines and other organizations

celebrate employee birthdays and other events on a regular basis. Caiman Consulting holds nights out like Taco Tuesdays on a regular basis in addition to various contests and annual company culture building trips to fabulous destinations. The point is that many of the top, award winning cultures (and Fortune 100 Best Places to Work) started with very small programs to build a sense of community. Some firms have found that volunteering can also provide a real sense of relatedness. Orion Associates, for example, was founded to serve others and has a rich history of encouraging employees to volunteer in the community. Their efforts, as evidenced in their “River of Hope” project (established after Hurricane Katrina to assist New Orleans), have increased a sense of relatedness and pride, and greater employee thriving. All in all, greater attention by employees and their organizations to the SDT dimensions, and factors shown to facilitate employee thriving at work seem like a great investment given the known benefits of thriving at work.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have begun to flesh out the beginnings of an integrative model of human growth at work. The model identifies how the three components of self-determination (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) mediate the relationship between key elements of the social context (including decision making discretion, broad information sharing, a climate of trust and respect, and performance feedback) and thriving at work. By understanding the social embeddedness of self-determination and thriving, we can understand how organizations can enable more positive work and greater employee performance, well-being, and sustainability.

**Figure 1**

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