

**ENABLING THRIVING AT WORK:  
A PROCESS MODEL OF HUMAN GROWTH IN ORGANIZATIONS**

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## **Abstract**

Our paper pushes the frontier connecting work contexts and human growth through a focus on the conditions and processes at work that enable human thriving. We define thriving as growth in a positive capacity, manifested in greater cognitive and behavioral complexity as well as enhanced vitality/energy. We explain the importance of thriving, describe the mechanisms through which context and process enable thriving, and articulate the theoretical and practical implications of this perspective.

Work and the contexts in which work is accomplished are often blamed for their untoward consequences on individuals. A large body of research has confirmed the ways in which work contexts cause stress and contribute to health problems (e.g., French, Caplan, & Van Harrison, Wright & Cropanzano, 1998; Danna & Griffin, 1999). However, work contexts do more than generate stress and corrode health. They can enable employees to thrive and thereby can contribute positively to their health and well-being (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2003). We define thriving as growth in a positive capacity, and build off a small body of research that suggests when people have opportunities to grow at work, positive outcomes follow. For example, employees with more opportunities to grow report greater subjective well-being and health than those without similar opportunities (Ettner & Grzywacz, 2001). And when individuals lack opportunities to grow at work, they have a higher probability of being hospitalized for heart attacks (Alfredsson, Spetz, & Theorell, 1985: 378).

Because thriving may offer key insights into how work contexts can positively enable individuals, we seek to understand the process of thriving at work. We define thriving at work and articulate the mechanisms through which features of work contexts produce their salutary effects. In doing so, we shift the research away from a focus on the negative aspects of work and work contexts (e.g., stress factors) to a focus on the positive, enabling potential of work contexts.

A focus on thriving at work offers three important theoretical contributions. First, it articulates the mechanisms through which organizational contexts cultivate employee growth. It does this by identifying how the enduring organization (i.e., organizational norms) and the ephemeral elements of the organization (i.e., renewable social resources)

shape opportunities for growth through the development of psychological states and specific working behaviors. Second, a thriving lens sheds light on how individuals play a role in creating the contextual conditions for their own growth, thus making the thriving process a joint product of the context and individuals acting to architect their own work context. Third, our view of thriving will help organizational researchers understand the micro foundations of organizational structures. Through the process of thriving individuals actively participate in strengthening and altering organizational norms that shape future individual and organizational resources.

In the sections that follow, we build on prior research and synthesize several literatures to unpack a process model of thriving. We begin by defining thriving, identifying key manifestations of the construct, and developing the logical links in our model. To help bring the thriving model alive, we weave examples and quotes from research participants in a narrative study we are conducting on thriving.<sup>1</sup>

### **What is Thriving?**

In medicine, there is a diagnosis pertaining to infants and the frail elderly known as failure to thrive. Failure to thrive is indicated by an acute lack of growth – manifest in listlessness, immobility, apathy, and no appetite (Bakwin, 1949). While failure to thrive focuses on not growing, thriving then is about growth. We draw on Carver (1998) to define thriving as the psychological experience of growth in a positive capacity (i.e., a constructive or forward direction). This experience is captured from excerpts from two narratives we 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

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<sup>1</sup> Because we in the preliminary stages of data collection, we offer the examples and quotes as illustrations, rather than as formal tests of the thriving model.

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” (Pat, H10).

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” (Corrine, AWBS03).

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: 1072). 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).

As part of the development of the construct of thriving, it is important to distinguish it from related constructs. In Table 1, we summarize the distinctions between thriving and related constructs in the literature. The key point from Table 1 is that while thriving has some conceptual similarities with some of these constructs, it has important distinctions as well.

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Table 1 About Here

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While it is easy to see what growth means in a physical sense, it is more abstract to talk about the psychological experience of growth. Rather than growing in size, psychological growth emphasizes (1) complexity and (2) vitality. In terms of complexity, individuals' behavioral repertoires (Zaccaro, 2001) and belief systems become more elaborated (Carver, 1998) and differentiated (Rogers, 1961; Ryan, 1993). This elaboration and differentiation contributes to an enlarged understanding of oneself (Miller & Stiver, 1998) and the systems and environments in which one is embedded (Ryan, 1993). Yet, complexity involves more than elaboration and differentiation -- the differentiation needs to be accompanied by an integration of how the pieces fit together into a whole (Rosenberg, 1985; Jung, 1933; Kolb, 1984; Piaget, 1971; Rogers, 1961). In fact, differentiation without integration can lead to fragmentation and reduced well-being (Rafaeli-Mor & Steinberg, 2002).

Yet, becoming more complex in cognitive and behavioral terms does not guarantee thriving. If one is growing more complex cognitively and behaviorally, but feels depleted and burned out, one is not thriving because the growth excludes the affective and physiological domain. To be thriving, the increasing complexity must also be accompanied by increasing levels of vitality, or the positive feeling of having energy available to the self (Nix, Ryan, Manly, & Deci, 1999). When individuals are growing, they feel energized and alive because they are being nourished, restored, and regenerated. This energy captures the zest for life that is central to thriving (Miller and Stiver, 1998). This psychological sense of enhanced vitality is accompanied by physiological changes that translate into the experience of energetic arousal (Thayer, 1989). When people

experience heightened energetic arousal, they feel, and often are, more capable of acting (Quinn & Dutton, 2004).

In sum, thriving is a process of human growth manifest in increasing complexity AND vitality. Through increasing levels of complexity and vitality, thriving encompasses the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of human functioning. In our interviews focusing on people's experiences of thriving, interviewees described thriving as acting in new ways and accentuating the energy that was released in that learning. For example, a social worker described his continual search for new ways to help his clients who were suffering from chronic psychological illness. He described thriving as finding new ways to work around corners (the actions he uncovered that provided his client with new services), and the "oomph" (his word for vitality) that he received as he helped them (Josh, AWBS01).

### **The Thriving Process: Starting Assumptions**

Several assumptions undergird our theorizing. First, we assume that thriving occurs both in the presence and absence of adversity. Constructs such as resilience often focus on growth, but largely in the context of "bouncing back" (Carver, 1998; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). Our perspective on thriving goes beyond prior research on growth which asserts that growth occurs primarily in response to trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). We assert that thriving can play a role in the everyday experiences of employees. Rather than a rare and extraordinary occurrence, we assume that thriving is a normal and common process influenced by employees, their interactions with others and the organizational context.

Second, we assume that the contextual enablers of thriving are not merely the opposite of health-corrosive constructs such as factors that exacerbate stress. Thriving is not cultivated simply by decreasing stressors, but calls for increases in the presence of specific psychological states, behaviors, renewable social resources, and organizational norms. For example, stress research demonstrates that job insecurity, unsafe working conditions, and work overload are key causes of individual stress and strain in organizations (Kinicki, McKee, & Wade, 1996). We believe that individuals can thrive even under these onerous conditions, if the right enabling conditions and resources are present.

Third, we acknowledge that individual traits may predispose some individuals to thrive more than others. For example, individuals who are promotion-focused rather than prevention-focused may be more attracted to conditions of thriving (Brockner & Higgins, 2001). However, we expect that we can explain considerable variance in thriving at work through situational differences and the dynamics that unfold in work organizations.

While much of the research on related constructs such as subjective well-being concludes that dispositional variables explain more variance in well-being than contextual factors (Brickman & Campbell, 1971; Brickman, Coates, & Janoff-Bulman, 1978; Lykken & Tellegen, 1996), other researchers are finding increasing support for the importance of context and its effects over time (Little, 2000; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1995; Sheldon & Houser-Marko, 2001; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, and Diener, 2003).

Finally, we assume that thriving is a process that unfolds through time. The importance of treating thriving as a dynamic progression, rather than a static state, is illustrated also by recent research on life narratives. Individuals who report that their

lives have followed an upward trajectory over time report higher levels of psychological well-being than those who describe their lives in terms of relatively stable or negative courses (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Similarly, Little's social ecological model of well-being (2000) posits that individuals thrive when they are capable of pursuing core, contextually-supported personal projects over time. This type of evidence suggests that the temporally extended interactions between individuals and contexts are critical to understanding the process of thriving.

### **Toward an Understanding of Thriving**

While little research has explicitly focused on how work contexts can enliven employees and contribute positively to their growth (Harter, Schmidt, & Keyes, 2003), we have some important clues about what work contexts will increase the likelihood of employee thriving. For example, Hackman (2002) asserts that well-designed, effectively managed work teams promote the growth and well-being of team members. Turner, Barling, and Zacharatos (2002) propose that work designs that engage employees, use teams and have transformational leadership can contribute positively to employees' psychological and physical well-being. Keyes, Hysom, and Lopo (2001) extend this notion to physical health, arguing that positive health outcomes can be the result of effective leadership. Moreover, Smith, Eldridge, Kaminstein, and Allison (2002) found that organizational dynamics—including employee-organization fit, respect, fairness, and absence of discrimination—positively contributed to employee health. We build on these findings with other ideas relevant to growth in both psychological and organizational literatures to construct a model of the process of thriving at work.

## **A Brief Introduction of the Process of Thriving at Work**

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of our process model. Many organizational scholars (e.g., Rousseau, 1985; Hackman, 2003) have accentuated the importance of multilevel and cross-level theory and research. We model thriving at work as a multilevel process fueled by factors at the organizational, interpersonal, and individual levels. In effect, the reciprocal interactions of individuals and the social systems in which they are embedded interact to enable human growth in organizations. This approach is consistent with recent perspectives in developmental psychology (e.g., Ford & Lerner, 1992; Baltes, 1997; Elder, 1998; Overton, 1998; Brandtstadter, 1999; Freund, Li, Baltes, 1999; Lerner & Walls, 1999)<sup>2</sup> and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986).

The model suggests that norms are one foundation for the thriving process and influence psychological states regarding how individuals see themselves with respect to their work context (link A). The psychological states are potent because they enable individual action and interactions (link B). In turn, these actions and interactions create renewable social resources at a collective level (link C). The renewable social resources fuel the process of thriving. They are the resources created and contained within a bounded microcommunity in which an individual is working. The renewable social resources are akin to soil, sun, and water that nourish a plant's growth. These renewable social resources then feed back to strengthen the psychological states and subsequent

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<sup>2</sup> In our review of the developmental psychology literature, we discovered several key differences between the thriving model and developmental perspectives on growth. First, developmental theories predominantly focus on the complexity of thought, language and social behaviors in children and adolescents. In contrast, thriving focuses on complexity and vitality of working adults. Second, many develop treat growth as a stable outcome (for a summary, see Roberts, Caspi & Mffitt, 2001). The thriving model treats growth as a dynamic state that fluctuates over time, in part due to the influence of the renewable social resources.

actions and interactions (link D). Over time, renewable social resources can also reinforce and alter the dominant organizational norms as the resources become institutionalized and ingrained in the larger system (link E). Renewable social resources enable positive human growth – that is, thriving (links F and G). In this way, our process model reflects that powerful set of interactions between individuals and the informal social communities of which they are a part (what we call microcommunities) that house the social resources that promote thriving and in turn further nourish the community. Before we more carefully flesh out the logic for each of these linkages, we define each of the elements in the model.

### **Defining the Components of the Process Model of Thriving**

**Norms.** Norms refer to the expected attitudes or patterns of behavior sanctioned by a system. Norms generally embody an organization’s values, what members of a group or organization view as important, and reflect a group or organization’s “culture” (O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996: 165). In effect, norms serve as informal rules that employees adopt to regulate and regularize individuals’ behaviors. Once established, norms act as powerful social influence mechanisms by specifying the parameters of expected and appropriate behaviors and beliefs. Scholars have often emphasized the control and influence roles of group norms, pointing out that members who consistently violate established norms risk the disapproval of other organizational members and, ultimately, compromise their ability to be effective at work (Jackson, 1966; Hackman, 1992; O’Reilly & Chatman, 1996). For example, a middle manager at one social service center described, “We had a rule. If you were going to speak badly about a group, we don’t want you here... We don’t know what your life situation has been but the people

here don't need to hear about what other people did. So we have respect for one another" (Corrine, AWBS03). While norms do serve a social control function, research has also demonstrated how they can create the social fabric that shapes the individual experience of work (Carr, Schmidt, Ford, & DeShon, 2003; Hackman, 2002; Kopelman, Brief, & Guzzo, 1990).

We propose that thriving is more likely in the presence of three sets of norms (we will describe these norms in more detail below). First, norms favoring flexible decision structures allow those with the most relevant and specific knowledge to make decisions and resolve problems (Wruck & Jensen, 1994). Second, norms favoring broad information sharing involve the widespread dissemination of knowledge about the organization and its environment. Third, norms of trust and respect refer to expected patterns of interaction that communicate honesty and affirmation of the self and others' value as individuals (Campbell, 1990; Dutton, 2003a).

**Psychological States.** Psychological states reflect how an individual experiences his or her context. As shown in Figure 1, we focus on three critical psychological states for thriving: autonomy, competence, and social worth. Autonomy and competence are basic psychological needs in Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory (1985, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000).<sup>3</sup> Their theory regards human beings as active, growth-oriented organisms (Deci & Ryan, 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, individuals with social worth have a sense

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<sup>3</sup> Deci and Ryan's third element, relatedness, we capture in the renewable social resources part of our model.

that they are worthy and valuable as human beings. Both sociologists and psychologists have asserted that individuals have a basic need to feel worthy and valuable, and that interactions with others often contribute to these perceptions (James, 1890; Mead, 1934; Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Crocker & Wolfe, 2001; Steele. 1998).

**Working Behaviors.** Three sets of working behaviors are particularly important to the thriving process: (1) focusing on tasks, (2) exploring, and (3) heedful interrelating. In order for employees to thrive at work, they must concentrate on and meet their work responsibilities. If individuals do not attend to their role requirements, their thriving will not be sustained because their autonomy is likely to be taken away by the organization.

However, individuals who are thriving do not just focus on getting the task done, but also focus on exploration. Exploration involves experimentation, risk-taking, discovery, and innovation that help people to stretch in new directions and grow (March, 1991). The office manager in a large non-profit describes exploration as “stretching” and “getting out of your comfort zone – even when I don’t think I can really do that” (Helen, H05).

Finally, when individuals are thriving, they operate in sync with those around them through heedful interrelating. Heedful interrelating happens when people understand how their job fits with that of others to accomplish the goals of the system. People look out for one another by subordinating their idiosyncratic intentions to the effective functioning of the system (Weick and Roberts, 1993). For example, one interviewee described how she needed to subordinate her desire to get things done with helping the people she worked with to feel valued,

It was like being able to grasp the best of people and use it. [My clients] had always been active but I believed that it was their center and they

needed to be involved... A lot of people live alone. A lot of people didn't have a family. They didn't even get to their churches... To know that they were needed, to know that there was something valuable for them to do was really important. Every day you learn something from them... (Corrine, H06).

When individuals are thriving, they balance the combination of a task orientation with exploration of new ways of working, at the same time keeping in mind what others need to accomplish the goals of the system.

**Renewable Social Resources.** Renewable social resources refer to shared endowments of the informal group in which an individual is embedded. They are social in the sense that that they are properties of the collective—created by joint interactions of people in some bounded microcommunity in which an individual is embedded. These microcommunities are akin to the idea of Fort's (1996) mediating institution, which facilitate face-to-face interaction that nourishes specific virtues. While families and religious institutions are common mediating institutions, any group that fosters interdependence, personal contact and collective goals can serve as such an institution.

In addition to being embedded in microcommunities, renewable social resources are capable of being restocked or restored, through joint thought, emotion, or action. For example, an in depth study of a physician billing department in a community hospital found that members in the unit interacted in ways that cultivated positive emotions of gratefulness and enabled heedful interrelating that fueled employees' sense of competence and prompted people to move forward even when facing personal and business setbacks (Worline, Dutton, Frost, Kanov, Lilius, & Maitlis, 2003; Dutton, 2003b). Following Feldman (2003), we see renewable social resources emerging from the practice of work. These resources are produced endogenously in the work context, as

opposed to being something that is provided to a unit from an outside group (Feldman, 2003; Worline et al., 2003).

Four renewable social resources are part of the process of thriving. First, shared knowledge reflects knowing how things work in context. While we can talk about shared knowledge as entity, our sense of how it works in the thriving process is much more consistent with the idea of shared knowledge as constituted in the actual doing of the work (e.g., Orlikowski, 2002). A library custodian described how “we came up with a system of different procedures that we go through in solving problems” (Henry, L02). For him, talking about the doing of the work helped to develop a shared understanding of how he (and other member so the unit) would problem-solve.

Three other social resources, not traditionally considered as part of a unit or group’s resource set, provide additional inputs to the thriving process: positive meaning, positive emotion and positive connections. Positive meaning involves finding worth or positive value in work, colleagues, or the organization (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). One interviewee talked about being at her very best when she is “doing something vital and important to others” (Corrine, AWBS03). This sense of positive meaning fueled her desire to do the work, and to pay attention to others on the job. Positive connections refer to high-quality ties or bonds between individuals (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003), resembling what sociologists typically call embedded ties (e.g., Granovetter, 1973; Uzzi, 1997). One person talked about “bonding, building rapport and trust” (Josh, AWBS01) as features that helped him to thrive. Finally, positive emotions include the feelings of joy, contentment, gratitude, serenity, and love (Fredrickson, 2003). Our argument is that different units or micro-communities cultivate different levels and types of shared

positive emotions which also contribute to the thriving process.

Although understanding the components in the model is important, ultimately, we claim that thriving arises from the generative dynamics regarding how norms affect individuals' psyche and behaviors, how individual behaviors create important social resources that together fuel the thriving process. In order to explain the role of these components in the thriving process, we now turn to the rationale for the links in Figure 1. For each link, we identify the logic and empirical findings (if any) that support that link.

### **How Organizational Norms Enable Psychological States (Link A)**

Link A posits that organizational norms influence how individuals think, feel, and behave in an organization (link A). This link is important because organizational norms only affect behavior through the way that an individual experiences and acts on those norms. In other words, a person's perception of the context is a social construction – contextual factors cannot be disembedded from the psychological meaning given to them by the individual (Deci and Ryan, 1987: 1033). Thus, it is critical to understand how an individual experiences the contexts of which they are part. We look at each of the three norms in Figure 1 in succession.

**Effects of Flexible Decision Structures.** One respondent stressed the importance of flexible decision structures for her personal thriving, “I have the freedom to make decisions on my own ... Our funders have a belief in us and they allow us to make decisions [and] plan programs without having to run every little thing past them” (Corrine, AWBS03). These flexible decision structures matter because they enhance feelings of autonomy, competence, and social worth.

First, when decisions flow to the people who have the specific knowledge or expertise to make a decision, regardless of their position in a hierarchy, the individuals who make these decisions feel more autonomous. The creation of operating dynamics that shift decisions to the person who currently has the answer to the problem at hand (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999) helps individuals to feel more in control over their work -- they have choices about what they do and how they do it. In support of this link, Spreitzer (1996) found that when units had norms favoring decentralization of decision authority, employees reported feeling more autonomous.

Second, norms that support flexible decision structures also help individuals to feel more competent. Being part of organizational decisions can help individuals build new skills and feelings of efficacy (Spreitzer, 1996). Finally, norms that support flexible decisions structures also confer a greater sense of social worth because individuals are implicitly valued for what they contribute to organizational decision making.

**Effects of Broad Information Sharing.** Broad information sharing affects both competence and social worth. Norms that favor broad information sharing directly enhance feelings of competence by enabling individuals to increase their knowledge base, quickly uncover problems and issues as they arise, and to integrate and coordinate actions. When information is disseminated more broadly, individuals can adjust to suboptimal solutions and increase their understanding of how the system works, thereby increasing their sense of competence. Armed with broader information and the “big” picture, individuals can focus on larger organizational contributions, instead of focusing on narrow tasks (Weick & Roberts, 1993). For example, Spreitzer (1996) found when work units had broad access to information, individuals felt more competent in their work.

For example, one interviewee who had transitioned to a self-managing team described their norm of information sharing, “Before information came from my boss. Now my customers can come directly to me with what they need” (Henry, L02).

**Effects of Norms of Trust and Respect.** Norms of trust and respect affect autonomy, competence and social worth. When interactions are characterized by trust, individuals are more likely to grant autonomy to others (what Mayer, Davis and Schoorman (1995) call risk taking in relationships). In trusting connections, people feel free to be authentic (Dutton, 2003). Building on Asch (1952), Campbell (1990) argues that respectful interaction is the foundation of socially achieved knowledge and is critical for fueling individuals’ competence. Competence is reinforced when people feel trusted to make good decisions (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). As Weick (2002) argues, the combination of trust and self-respect increases the kind of requisite variety it takes to surface key information and build competence. Interacting with respect strengthens social worth by helping individuals feel valued by others. Norms that support trust and respect send the message that people are capable of adding value. Through every day interactions of trust and respect (Goffman, 1956), individuals learn to see themselves as valuable and worthy members of the organization in the eyes of others (Dutton, 2003a).

One interviewee articulated his team’s norms of trust and respect, “If I have a problem with a teammate, I talk to him. If we can’t work it out ourselves, we take it to the table as a team. If we can’t resolve it, we bring it to our coach” (Henry, L02).

Another person described how it denoted respect when her boss acted just as another team member who would scrub toilets or run the vacuum (Helen, H05).

In summary, Link A describes how the norms of the organization shape individuals' experiences in the organization. These experiences shape how people behave, which comprises Link B, the next link in the process of model of thriving.

### **How Individual Psychological States Influence Work Behaviors (Link B)**

The extent to which a person believes he or she has autonomy, competence, and social worth, shapes the actions one takes within the system. These psychological states affect the degree to which individuals have a task focus, explore, and interrelate heedfully as described below.

Feelings of autonomy and competence encourage individuals to focus on their tasks (Wood & Bandura, 1989; Frese, Kring, Soose, & Zempel, 1996; Parker & Sprigg, 1999). When people feel autonomous and capable of mastering job demands, they are more likely to behave proactively and persistently in applying their skills to the job at hand (Bandura, 1988). For example, one interviewee described how having the autonomy that comes with “space” to do what he thinks is best increases his potential to get his work done well (Josh, AWBS01). Individuals who perceive that they have little autonomy to choose work strategies or influence working conditions—or who have doubts about their capabilities—will slacken their efforts prematurely and settle for mediocre results (Wood & Bandura, 1989).

The agency implicit in feeling autonomous also promotes individual exploration behaviors. Autonomous individuals are more likely to embrace change and try new things (Spreitzer, 1995). In addition, as a sense of competence increases, individuals are better able to respond effectively in unfamiliar or challenging situations which fuels exploration and experimentation with new behaviors (Bunderson & Sutcliffe, 2002).

Finally, when individuals feel autonomous and competent to control or act on the job demands that arise, they are more likely to feel responsible for the outcomes of the larger system (Parker & Sprigg, 1999) and will be more likely to interrelate heedfully with others. That sense of responsibility will lead to a range of integrative behaviors that extend beyond the boundaries of their specific work roles (Parker, Wall, & Jackson, 1997; Parker & Sprigg, 1999). Further, they will be more likely to interrelate in a heedful manner because they see how their works fits into the overall scheme of things. In addition, social worth will also contribute to more heedful interrelating -- the more that individuals feel socially valued, the more they will want to reciprocate by valuing others through heedful interrelating (Weick & Roberts, 1993).

As indicated in Figure 1, Link B is a bi-directional arrow. Individuals' work behaviors also shape their subsequent psychological states. Effective task focus, exploration with new ways of working (including the ability to make and recover from mistakes), and heedful interactions subsequently reinforce an individual's sense of competence and social worth, as well as one's perceived autonomy to make choices relevant to one's work (Sternberg & Kolligian, 1990). In addition, how individuals act in the larger system can contribute to a bank of social resources on which individuals can draw as needed to enable their thriving. This is the essence of Link D, which is described below.

### **How Working Behaviors Create Social Resources (Link C)**

Social resources are created as a product of how people interrelate as they do their work. Unlike physical and financial resources, which are depleted as they are used, social resources are renewable (Worline et al., 2003). For example, as individuals interact, they

can enhance the quality of their connections, gaining trust, flexibility and generating knowledge. Below we describe the logic for how each work behavior in the model can create social resources.

**Task focus.** First, as people become task focused, they are likely to increase their knowledge as they learn the best way to get work done. Second, task focus can also facilitate the creation of positive meaning. For example, a task focus is critical to flow experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), which are inherently meaningful. Thus, when individuals are highly focused on their work, the engagement itself may lead to a sense of positive meaning. Third, when people are focused on the task, they are more likely to experience positive moods because they are accomplishing something (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Fourth, with a task focus members are likely to accomplish successful exchanges which increase positive emotion between the successfully exchanging partners (Lawler & Yoon, 1998). Finally, research on conflict suggests that a lack of task focus will undermine positive connections. It may be difficult for workers in organizations to establish positive connections if they are not getting work done. Conflict may ensue as supervisors and coworkers begin to resent individuals who fail to concentrate on their work; such conflict is highly detrimental to interpersonal connections (Hackman & Morris, 1975; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). In this way, a task focus can promote positive connections as well as prevent corrosive connections.

**Exploration.** There are several ways that exploration creates resources. First, exploration increases the knowledge in the system. Knowledge is a byproduct of an individual's striving to understand something new. Thus, when workers engage in exploration, they increase the amount of knowledge available in an organization. Indeed,

Lee, Edmondson, Thomke, and Worline (2004) found that exploration at work fostered learning for the whole system. Second, exploration can also lead to positive emotions. This relationship is demonstrated by the positive feeling that accompanies an “aha” experience when you learn something new through experimentation (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1995; Ryff, 1989). Third, exploration activities can also develop positive collective meaning (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). As individuals explore new activities at work, they are able to change the physical boundaries of their work and create additional sources of meaning. Through exploration, people can discover ways to transform psychological boundaries in favor of increasingly meaningful work construals. And finally, exploration allows workers to find individuals with similar values, interests, or identities who support their self-images (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), which cultivates positive connections between like-minded individuals.

**Heedful Interrelating.** Renewable social resources are also constituted as individuals relate heedfully with others as they go about their work. For example, increased system knowledge results when individuals undertake actions that extend beyond their narrowly defined roles (Parker & Sprigg, 1999). In addition, the more individuals are attentive to and supportive of each others’ behaviors, the more positive connections, emotions, and meaning will result (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003). This sort of heedful interrelating is reflected in the story of one participant in our research:

My father had had a major stroke. and I was the caregiver for my dad. And I had a supervisor who allowed the phone calls from caregivers, from doctors, from nurses. He just had an incredible tolerance because he knew what it was going to take to keep my dad home in home care. Their recognition of my care giving duties and their allowing me my flexibility made me want to do even more for the center... (Corrine, AWBS03).

If individuals act in isolation without understanding how they and their co-workers contribute to each other and to the functioning of the unit and system as a whole, it may be difficult for them to create positive connections or positive emotions because people are working without taking into account what others need to work effectively and what it takes to accomplish the overall goals. For example, Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) demonstrated that when employees perceive that their coworkers treat them fairly and care about their well-being, they experience more frequent positive moods. Similarly, research on organizational citizenship behavior, prosocial organizational behavior, organizational spontaneity, and contextual performance (e.g. Brief & Motowidlo, 1986; Organ, 1988; George & Brief, 1992; Motowidlo & Van Scotter, 1994) relates aspects of heedful interrelating to positive moods. For example, George and Bettenhausen (1990) found a positive relationship between group prosocial behavior and leaders' positive moods. In sum, heedful interrelating can create a set of renewable social resources that fuel the process of thriving at work.

As shown in Figure 1, these renewable social resources feed back to two other components of the model: (1) individual psychological states and work behaviors (link D) and the norms of the organization (link E). Because they are not central to our story on thriving (they are more distal to the thriving process as shown by the arrows in the Figure), we do not focus much attention on them, but instead attempt to provide a basic understanding of how they operate. First, as the social resources become stronger over time they serve as an important form of relational, emotional and instrumental scaffolding that reinforces the psychological experience of individuals at work and their subsequent work behaviors. For example, positive connections are expected to reinforce

feelings of social worth and heedful interrelating. Knowledge is expected to increase feelings of competence and a task focus and exploration behavior.

Second, over time the renewable social resources eventually become embedded as organizational norms. Norms develop from interactions (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1985). Over time, as renewable social resources spread, norms develop and may become institutionalized in routines and processes. For example, organizations with strong positive connections have interactions that imply a value of mutual respect (Dutton, 2003a). Consequently, norms of respectful interaction newly develop or are strengthened. Similarly, we consider shared knowledge as an important social resource. As members contribute to and access shared knowledge, their behaviors help establish the presence of a norm of broad information sharing. Moreover, the continuous expression of positive emotions helps build norms for flexible decision-making (Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998).

### **How Renewable Social Resources Affect Thriving (Link F)**

Thriving is about growth in a positive capacity as manifest in vitality and complexity. The four renewable resources can fuel employee thriving at work.

**Knowledge.** Shared knowledge facilitates the complexity inherent in thriving. As individuals glean more information and a more nuanced understanding about how things work, they develop a more integrated picture of the system helping them to become more complex. For example, a secretary described how she didn't

“have to keep getting up to go run and get [her boss]... [Instead,], I was just able to do it. To be able to run a report with a technicalities without having to get her. Being able to do it in a timely matter all by myself felt really good (Mary, H14).

Moreover, increased complexity can help individuals both to recognize more situations in which they can apply their knowledge (Weick et al., 1999) and can enable them to recombine their existing knowledge in new ways to solve problems.

**Positive meaning.** Positive meaning increases feelings of vitality. Individuals search for meaning in their lives (Frankl, 1962) and in their work (Brief & Nord, 1999; Pratt and Ashforth, 2003; Wrzesniewski, 2003). Collective positive meaning supports the thriving process in several ways. First, positive meaning helps people keep their energy even amidst setbacks and threats by helping them reassess their priorities and goals in ways aligned with what is important to them. For example, an ombudsperson described how the meaning she experiences in her work provided the determination

“to keep going no matter what the difficulties in life might be ... you are continuing on. I made a difference and helped clients... giving them something they are missing” (Bridget H12).

Positive meaning helps individuals “reappraise an event as an opportunity for growth rather than a loss” (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larsen, 1998: 563). Second, positive meaning increases intrinsic motivation, which also fuels energy by guiding people to direct their actions toward that which is significant in their lives (Baumeister, 1991). Thus, meaning energizes people to grow and develop because their work has purpose and significance to them.

**Positive connections.** In the course of doing their work, individuals cultivate relationships with other people that create the connectivity (Losada & Heaphy, 2003) that makes work feel vital (Miller & Stiver, 1997). When in high-quality connections, people feel enhanced vitality (Nix, Ryan, Manly & Deci, 1999; Dutton, 2003a). High-quality connections are associated with physiological changes in the neuroendocrine,

cardiovascular and immune systems that contribute to an enhanced sense of aliveness in the moment and enhanced capacity to act (Reis & Gable, 2003; Heaphy & Dutton, 2004). Thus, positive connections create a broad bandwidth of emotional space for individuals to thrive. For example, one respondent described how her positive connections across domains made her feel vital.

“We knew we needed money to do the program. We had a slim budget. And I went to my family and friends. They know what I do. They heard about it all the time ... It forged a group that would say ‘[Sam] do you need something now?’ ‘Yeah, we need to raise some more money.’ ‘OK. We’ll start. Get the rest of the people.’ We saw a merging of the [people] in the program, the community around it and then our own families. And to me it was a real high. My whole life connected in that sense” (Corrine, AWBS03).

**Positive emotions.** Shared positive emotions develop as members of a collective come to develop mutually shared moods in the course of executing their tasks (Bartel & Saavadra, 2000; Sandelands & St. Clair, 1993). Positive emotions heighten motivation (Hackman, 1992) and increase readiness to act (Forgas, 1992) which contribute to feelings of positive energy. For example, a receptionist described how “feeling loved... having warm feelings, understanding, and compassion” inspired her want to work harder (Esther,H06). With the aid of positive emotions, people recover more quickly from setbacks and negative emotions to sustain their energy for thriving (Fredrickson, 1998). Positive emotion also contributes to the complexity inherent in thriving. Positive emotions lubricate mental efficiency and help people make more complex judgments and become flexible in their thinking (Isen, 1999). These findings are informed by Fredrickson’s (2003) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. When individuals experience positive emotions, their attentional focus broadens, helping them to become more cognitively and behaviorally complex.

In summary, our dynamic, multilevel process model of thriving builds links between organizational norms, renewable social resources, and psychological states and action as enablers of human thriving. In the next section of the paper, we discuss the implications of the process model for theory and practice and suggest ways to complicate the model in future research.

### **How Individual Psychological States and Behaviors Affect Thriving (Link G)**

Earlier, we noted that individuals' ways of working shape their subsequent ways of being (psychological states), which feed back to shape their ways of working. This reciprocal relationship makes it difficult to disentangle the discrete effects of psychological states and behaviors on thriving. What we do know is that humans are vulnerable to passivity (Ryan & Deci 2000: 68), but under social-contextual conditions that support the development of competence, autonomy, and self worth, individuals are more inclined toward proactivity, vitality, and mastery. For example, McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman (2001) found that individuals who reported high levels of personal autonomy and competence in their life narratives, were also likely to perceive high levels of self-growth (cognitive and behavioral complexity). Moreover, effective task focus, exploration and experimentation with new ways of working (including the ability to make and recover from mistakes), and interrelating heedfully can fuel efficacy (Bandura, 1988) which contributes to a sense of vitality and agency to pursue future endeavors.

### **Discussion**

Our goal has been to develop a framework for explaining the conditions under which work contexts can have positive effects on human thriving--when individuals

experience the psychological growth of a positive capacity. We noted that although much is known about the negative effects of work and work contexts on individuals, very little is known about the positive role work organizations can play in enabling thriving. Our paper contributes to the sparse, but growing, literature on how work can contribute to positive human outcomes. In our discussion, we reiterate what we believe to be the key theoretical and practical implications of our model and offer directions for a future research agenda on thriving.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications of a Thriving Model**

Our paper makes a number of theoretical contributions. The growing focus on positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003) seeks to understand generative dynamics in human systems. Our focus on thriving clearly fits within this domain, and offers a theoretically-grounded process model suitable for empirical testing.

While the term “thriving” appears frequently in popular lexicon (i.e., a cursory title search returns an abundance of books entitled “Surviving and Thriving” in a variety of contexts from finding a job, buying a house, playing the stock market), researchers have not rigorously explored the process of how employees thrive in a work context. Our process model adds much-needed substance to the thriving construct by carefully defining it as growth in a positive capacity, manifested in increasing complexity and vitality.

Beyond the important exercise of defining thriving, our paper makes a more general theoretical contribution in developing a systematic model of how, why, and when individuals experience thriving at work. Our paper adds value by articulating a set of

theoretical mechanisms that explain how contexts and individuals can affect human growth. Although it is widely recognized that individual experiences in organizations are jointly influenced by characteristics of individuals and contexts, little theory and research recognize both factors as important co-determinants of behavior (Colarelli, Dean, & Konstans, 1987). The model we build focuses on the contextual conditions that enable psychological states and behaviors that fuel engines for growth and vitality. However, our model is not contextually deterministic. We also show how thriving individuals are not just enabled by their context but also are active shapers of their own context. When thriving, individuals behave in ways that create shared social resources that further enable their thriving. In this way, thriving is a process of co-creation of context -- individuals alone and with others create additional cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and relational capacities that contribute to their growth and development.

A third theoretical contribution is that organizational scholarship tends to emphasize performance outcomes, at the expense of considering social and public objectives (Walsh, Weber, & Margolis, forthcoming). We take seriously the idea that organizations are social entities as well as economic ones. Given these responsibilities, we find it incumbent to understand the conditions under which individuals grow and develop capabilities to function better in an increasingly complex world (Walsh et al., forthcoming).

Fourth, our study breaks conceptual ground by reformulating production value. Most economists agree that knowledge economies differ from goods-producing economies. If we accept that previous industrial economic indicators may provide an inadequate account of the state of nations in a knowledge economy (David, 1999, as cited

in Barley & Kunda, 2001), it is quite possible that the vitality of the workforce may be an important economic indicator and a way to conceptualize value in a postindustrial world. If so, our process model can provide some insight to organizational theorists about how this alternative production value is created and the underlying logic of organizing to achieve it (Barley & Kunda, 2001).

Our process model of thriving also offers insights for practice. Some might suggest that thriving is a luxury at a time when the economy is in recession, downsizing is almost a norm, and times are financially difficult. Wouldn't a better understanding of how to cope be more appropriate? Against this view, we suggest that now is precisely the time to think about thriving at work. During stressful times, organizations are subject to threat rigidity (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981), in which they restrict resources and exert tight control—often to their demise. Our process model of thriving offers a way for organizations to counteract the threat-rigidity cycles. Our model shows how individuals can co-create renewable social resources that can fuel their thriving, even when material resources like money and materials are limited and/or scarce.

A better understanding of how individuals thrive at work may also offer some insights into how organizations can reduce health care costs. If thriving can be linked to more positive employee health and well-being, organizations can save millions of dollars in health care costs. The non-profit/non-partisan National Coalition on Health Care estimates that the average total cost to organizations for health care benefits rose 14.7% in 2002, at a time when general inflation hovered around 2%. By understanding how work contexts enable thriving, we hope to demonstrate how organizations can improve the health of their employees while saving on medical expenses.

## **Complicating the Model in Future Research**

While we have covered a lot of detail with our process model, space limitations prevent delving into other important aspects of thriving. In this section, we delineate several important areas for future research that will result in a more complex understanding of thriving. First, prior research has shown that dispositions are potent and consistent predictors of subjective well-being (Diener & Lucas, 1999). It may also be that there are some dispositions that are more prone to thriving. Our current model focuses on contextual enablers of thriving, but future research should identify dispositions that may be associated with greater propensity for thriving (hardiness may be an example). In addition, future research must also articulate how interactions between dispositional and contextual factors play out in the thriving process (Lucas et al., 2003).

Second, our process model of thriving assumes that organizational norms and renewable social resources can reinforce each other to enable thriving. However, organizations are more complex than this assertion suggests. There may be limits on how many social resources can be created in an organization. The organization or even job requirements may regulate the amount of positive emotion. For example, bill collectors have to be tough in their interactions with customers (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991) and check-out clerks have to be efficient rather than relationship-focused in their work (Rafaeli, 1989). Our model does not currently account for limitations of social resources inherent in the kind of work an organization does--nor does it address the potential for there to be negative outcomes from increased resources being allocated to thriving.

Third, our process model of thriving offers clues about how work contexts can lead to enhanced health, but future research must extend our model to link thriving with human health. We know a great deal about overcoming disease and infirmity. Work and the contexts in which it is accomplished are often blamed for their toxic effects on human vitality and health (e.g., Danna & Griffin, 1999; Spector, Dwyer, & Jex, 1988; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Wright & Bonett, 1997; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998; Potter, Smith, Strobel, & Zautra, 2002; Vigoda, 2002; van der Ploeg, Doreesteijn, & Kleber, 2003). And job stress is reported to be at an all time high. For example, A 1992 United Nations Report labeled job stress "The 20th Century Disease," and a several years later, the World Health Organization called job stress a "World Wide Epidemic." The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) reports that stress costs American businesses more than \$300 billion annually due to lost hours from absenteeism, reduced productivity, and workers' compensation benefits. However, we know much less about how work contexts can enable positive health, wellness, and positive functioning (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Some initial research has indicated that thriving may be an important psychological precursor to enhancements in employee health (Bergland & Kirkevold, 2001). Building the logic for this linkage is a fertile future direction for our thriving model.

Fourth, future research needs to examine unit-level models of thriving. While our process model recognizes the importance of renewable social resources of the collective, the preponderance of the model's logic addresses how context affects *individuals* and not units. Future research need to develop a better understand how unit and organizational thriving works.

Fifth, future studies should undertake a critical review of some of the assumptions manifest in the perspective proposed here. Some scholars may see these ideas as totalitarian. Wilmott (2003, p. 77) for example, asserts that promoting allegiance to a particular set of norms is “ethically dubious” not only because it reduces practical autonomy, but also because it systematically suppresses alternative ideas and practices. We are not trying to colonize individuals’ affective domains (Wilmott, 2003), or constrain variety (in fact we are trying to enhance it), nor are we suggesting that employees adopt particular ways of thinking. Rather, we are simply suggesting that a particular set of socio-contextual conditions are more salutary for individuals (and possibly organizations and societies) than others.

Sixth, in the thriving process, employees create renewable social resources through both assigned and voluntary activities. The literatures on organizational citizenship behavior (Organ, 1988), prosocial organizational behavior (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986), and organizational spontaneity (George & Brief, 1992) describe voluntary employee behaviors that create renewable social resources in organizational contexts. Accordingly, future conceptual and empirical work should draw on these literatures to examine the linkage between these voluntary actions and the renewable social resources in our model.

Finally, the boxes and arrows in the thriving model (Figure 1) might imply that thriving is a mechanistic and static construct. It might imply that we can assess a person’s thriving at a particular point in time. Instead we need to operationalize thriving as a within-person upward trajectory. For example, two people might be at the same level of growth in complexity and vitality but if one person is on a downward trajectory

(becoming less complex and vital over time), then that person is not thriving. Just examining thriving at a single point in time cannot capture the notion that thriving is a process that must be examined over time within a specific context.

### **Conclusion**

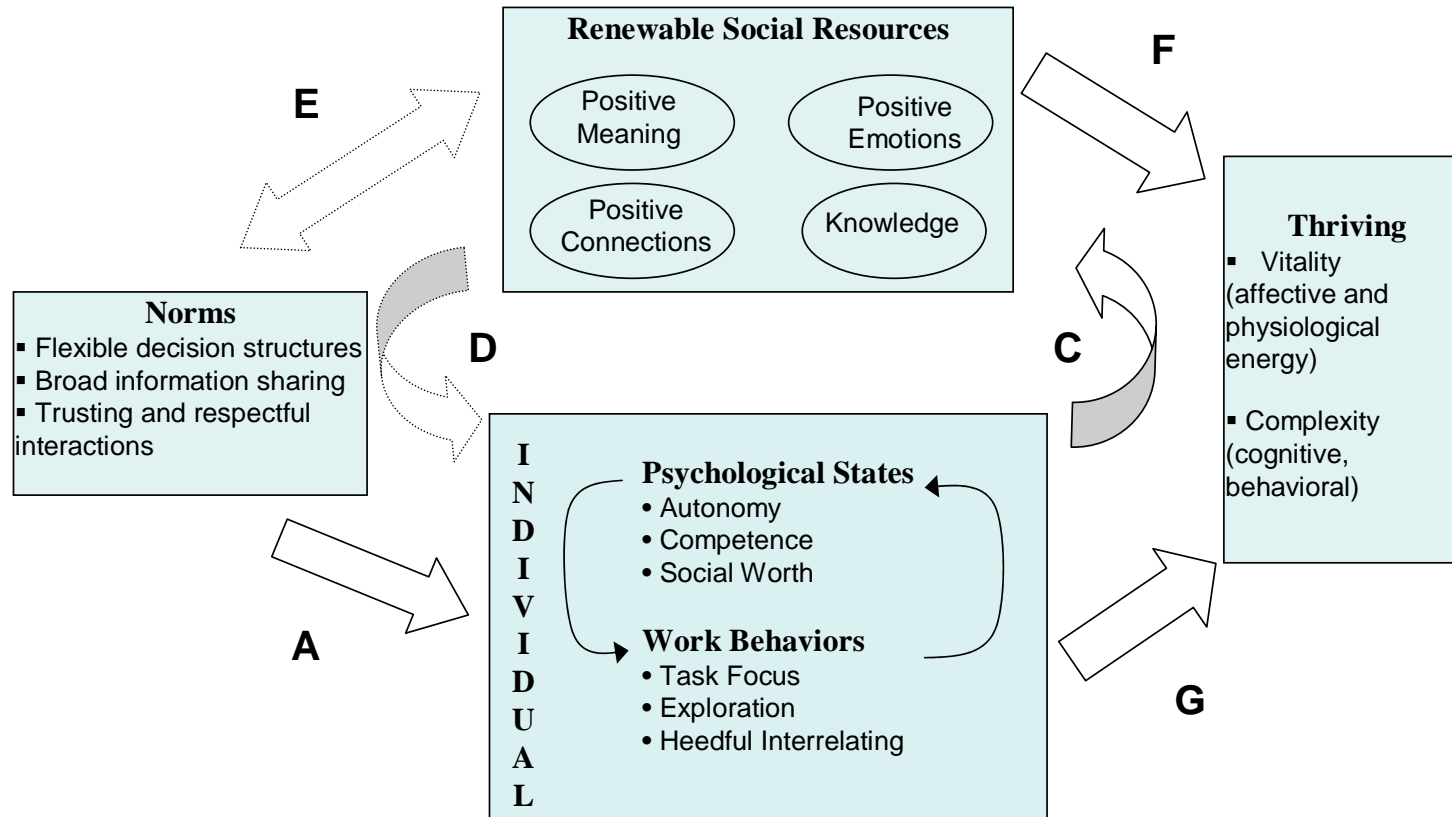
In this paper, we call attention to the paucity of research on work contexts and health and make the case for why scholars ought to pay more attention to how work contexts can enable individual growth. Thriving is the psychological experience of growth of a positive capacity and is an important precursor to employee health and well-being. We developed a process model of thriving that is dynamic and multilevel. Organizational norms cultivate individual psychological states that enable a set of adaptive working behaviors. These behaviors bolster the renewable social resources in the system, which further energize and cultivate positive psychological states and working behaviors. The renewable social resources and individual psychological states and work behaviors jointly enable individuals to thrive at work.

**Table 1**  
**Distinctions Between Thriving and Related Constructs**

<b>Subjective Well-being</b>	Subjective well-being (SWB) is thought to reflect a general area of scientific interest (Diener et al., 1999), rather than a single construct. It is defined as a broad grouping of phenomena that includes people’s emotional responses (i.e., positive/negative emotions), domain satisfactions (i.e., work, family, health, finances, etc.), and overall judgments of life satisfaction (i.e., current life, past life, future life, etc.) (Diener et al., 1999). In brief, subjective well-being is concerned with how and why people experience their lives in positive ways (Diener, 1984), and is distinct from thriving, which focuses more specifically on growth as a positive capacity. Subjective well-being then, is a likely outcome of thriving.
<b>Psychological Well-Being</b>	Ryff’s theory of psychological well-being (1989) identifies several core dimensions of well-being that overlap conceptually with elements of our process model of thriving. As described in the paper, her dimension of personal growth—a sense of continued growth and development as a person—is very similar to our definition of thriving. Some of her other dimensions are similar to different enablers in our process model. Her dimension of self-awareness (positive evaluations of oneself) is conceptually similar to what we refer to as social worth. Purpose in life, the belief that one’s life is purposeful and meaningful, encompasses what we refer to as positive meaning. Positive relations with others, or the possession of high-quality relationships, are conceptually similar to what we refer to as positive connections. Environmental mastery, the capacity to manage one’s life and surrounding world, is similar to what we refer to as competence. Finally, her construct of autonomy is analogous to ours. Our thriving model differs from Ryff’s psychological well-being because rather than treating all of these components as indicators of well-being, as Ryff does, our model focuses on the personal growth component and articulates how the other components are enablers of growth.
<b>Flourishing</b>	Flourishing tends to be described as positive mental health – a state in which an individual feels positive emotion toward life and is functioning well psychologically and socially (Keyes, agenda for mental health). Flourishing is embodied in several of the elements of our process model of thriving, but does not explicitly refer to growth in a constructive capacity.
<b>Resilience</b>	Resilience refers to the capacity for adaptability, positive functioning, and competence (Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003). Resilience involves rebounding from adversity. While resilience has significant conceptual overlap with thriving, thriving can occur outside a context of adversity.
<b>Flow</b>	Flow is a highly enjoyable psychological state that refers to the “holistic sensation people feel when they act with total involvement in the activity” to the point of losing awareness of time, their surroundings, and

	<p>all other things except the activity itself (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975: 36). As such, flow does not explicitly involve the human growth that is central to thriving—one can be totally immersed in the work without necessarily growing.</p>
<p><b>Self-actualization</b></p>	<p>The desire for self-fulfillment and the tendency to become in actuality in what a person is potentially: to become everything that one is capable of becoming (Maslow, 1998, p. 3). Accordingly thriving may be one indicator that one is on the path to self-actualization. We share with Maslow that belief in the potency of work organizations as sites for human growth.</p>

## A Process Model of Thriving at Work



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