

A field study of German employees



Employee well-being is one of the most important outcomes in the workplace and needs to be further explored in relation to psychological flexibility (Roche et al., 2026). Particularly, investigating flexibility and inflexibility as two separable aspects of adaptive and maladaptive self-regulation provides valuable insights (Doorley et al., 2020). This study adds to the literature (and extends the findings of Howell and Demuynck, 2021 on students samples) by...

- ## Model

Results

Table 2

Correlation and regression coefficients for the associations of the MPFI composite scores with functional, and perceived well-being

	Relatedness		Isolation		Growth		Stagnation	
	<i>r</i>	β	<i>r</i>	β	<i>r</i>	β	<i>r</i>	β
flexibility	.185**	.140*	.051	.167**	.195**	.156*	-.029	.116*
inflexibility	-.211***	-.175**	.409***	.451***	-.193**	-.153*	.535***	.565***

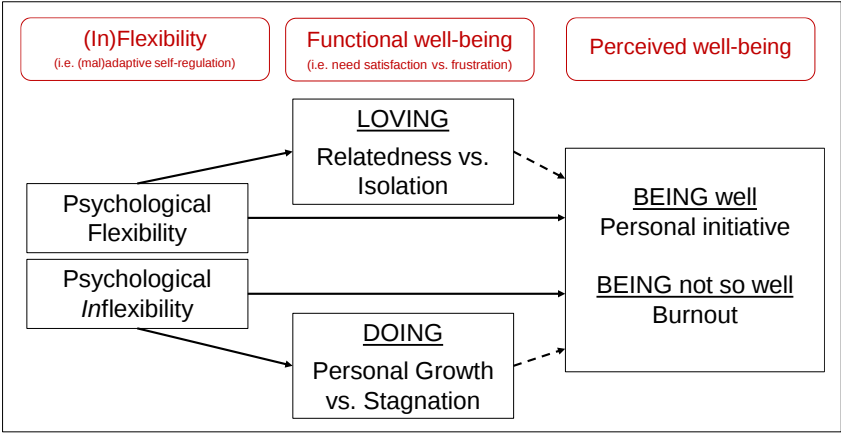
	Personal initiative		Burnout	
	<i>r</i>	β	<i>r</i>	β
flexibility	.344***	.335***	-.257***	-.167**
inflexibility	-.120	-.034	.396***	.354***

Note: Pairwise deletion, Pearson correlations: $n=244-274$, regression: $n=243-274$, *: $p < .05$, **: $p < .01$, ***: $p < .001$.

The correlation between flexibility and inflexibility is $r = -.256$ ($p < .001$).

Exploratory analyses of the MPFI subfactors show no consistent patterns. Most remarkably, *Committed Action* is significantly related to behavior-oriented indicators (i.e., DOING, personal initiative).

Figure 1
Research model (adapted from the needs-based framework of employee well-being by Martela, 2025)



Data was collected as part of a cross-sectional study of 278 German employees with at least 20h/w of working (62.3% female, 37.3% male, 0.4% non-binary). Participants' average age was 36.18 ($SD = 13.53$). About 5.7% had no vocational training, 20.8% were still in vocational training or college, 28.0% had vocational training at a low and medium level, 2.2% at a higher level (e.g., master craftsmen), 38.7% obtained a university or technical college degree, and 1.8% a doctoral degree, respectively (with 2.8% other qualif.). The majority of the employees worked in the service sector (74.3%), 13.5% and 1.4%, respectively, in the industrial and craft sector, and 10.8% in public services.

Table 1
Instruments, descriptives and Cronbachs' alpha

Variable (short description)	Instrument, item example	nb. item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>
Flexibility (i.e., flexible mode of experiencing and acting)	Multidimensional Psychological Flexibility Inventory MPFI (Rolfes et al., 2018; German: Ackermann & Newe, 2023), „I was very in touch with what is important to me and my life“	30	3.61	0.61	.945
Inflexibility (i.e., rigid mode of experiencing and acting)	Multidimensional Psychological Flexibility Inventory MPFI (Rolfes et al., 2018; German: Ackermann & Newe, 2023), „When times got tough, it was easy to forget about what I truly value“	30	2.82	0.83	.959
Relatedness (i.e., satisfied need to feel related to others at work)	Eudaimonic Workplace Well-being Scale EWWS (Bartels et al., 2019, interpersonal dimension, reduced); „I feel connected to others within the work environment“	3	3.77	0.96	.878
Isolation (i.e., frustrated need to feel related to others at work)	Connaughton & Daly, 2004, reduced; “I often feel disconnected from what is happening on my team or in my firm.”	3	2.09	1.20	.946
Growth (i.e., satisfied need to feel a sense of accomplishment and learning at work)	Personal Growth (Turban & Yan, 2016); “I feel that I’ve learned a lot at work that has made me a more capable person.”	3	3.84	0.99	.859
Stagnation (i.e., frustrated need to feel a sense of accomplishment and learning at work)	Bradley-based Stagnation Scale BSS (Van Hiel et al., 2006, subscale stagnation in work); „I don’t have the feeling that I am on the right track to accomplishing my career goals.“	8	2.40	0.94	.847
Burnout (i.e., feelings of exhaustion and disengagement)	Oldenburg Burnout Inventory OLBI (Demerouti et al., 2002); „After my work, I regularly feel worn out and weary”	16	2.78	0.65	.831
Personal initiative (i.e., taking an active, self-starting approach to work and persisting in overcoming barriers)	Personal initiative (Frese et al., 1997); „Whenever something goes wrong, I search for a solution immediately.“	7	3.77	0.68	.832

Note: $n = 243\text{--}278$, all items were rated on 5-point-Likert scales.

Increments of the MPFI composite scores beyond LOVING and DOING

Table 3
Stepwise regression analyses predicting personal initiative and burnout from flexibility and inflexibility, controlling for LOVING

	Personal initiative		Burnout	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Relatedness	.375***	.304***	-.265***	-.211***
Isolation	.072	.025	.262***	.200**
Flexibility		.289***		-.171**
Inflexibility		.008		.226***
<i>R</i> ²	.124	.201	.195	.286
<i>F</i>	16.922***	14.989***	29.135***	23.832***

Note: *: $p < .05$, **: $p < .01$, ***: $p < .001$.

Table 4
Stepwise regression analyses predicting personal initiative and burnout from flexibility and inflexibility, controlling for DOING

	Personal initiative		Burnout	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Growth	.209**	.145*	-.305***	-.267**
Stagnation	-.198**	-.287***	.429***	.384***
Flexibility		.346***		-.170**
Inflexibility		.151*		.096
R²	.107	.214	.354	.395
F	14.443***	16.275***	65.918***	39.079***

Discussion

It takes two to tango! Both, flexibility and inflexibility independently contribute to employees' functional and perceived well-being. Particularly, both aspects of functioning can explain further variance in burnout beyond LOVING, and in personal initiative over and above DOING. At the same time, their intercorrelation is rather weak. This supports the notion that flexibility and inflexibility are separable qualities of functioning or self-regulation (Roche et al., 2026). Inflexibility shows strong and positive associations with need frustration (isolation, stagnation) and burnout, representing a kind of a need-frustration pathway (Martela, 2025). However, the results for flexibility do not fit into the (opposite) need-fulfilment-pathway. Directly comparing flexibility with inflexibility, its relevance for the different indicators of employee well-being is weaker (except for personal initiative), however, it can explain a higher amount of unique variance in perceived well-being beyond need frustration and need satisfaction.

Practical implications: Fostering psychological flexibility and reducing psychological inflexibility are important ways to enhance employee well-being, with the latter might even be more promising with regard to intervention effects. Future research might choose a task-specific approach to investigate differential patterns of flexibility and inflexibility (e.g., routine vs. novel, autonomous tasks).

Limitations: As this study is cross-sectional, no implications regarding causal effects between the study variables are permitted.

References

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