BUILDING ENGAGED HUMAN CAPITAL: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF JOB CRAFTING IN THE SERVANT LEADERSHIP–WORK ENGAGEMENT RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

Human capital constitutes a key pillar of the competitiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). To strengthen this pillar, SMEs increasingly develop strategies aimed at enhancing Work Engagement (WE) and adopt contemporary approaches to human capital management, such as Servant Leadership (SL). These practices promote proactive employee behaviors, including Job Crafting (JC). Although prior research has established a positive relationship between Servant Leadership and work engagement, the mediating role of Job Crafting in this relationship remains insufficiently explored. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), this study examines the effect of Servant Leadership on Work Engagement, with Job Crafting serving as a mediating mechanism. Using the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) approach, we analyzed data from 342 employees in small and medium-sized enterprises. The findings reveal that Job Crafting (JC) significantly mediates the relationship between Servant Leadership (SL) and Work Engagement (WE). This study advances the theoretical understanding of Job Crafting (JC) and Work Engagement (WE), while offering practical insights into how Servant Leadership (SL) can enhance the engagement and vitality of human capital within SMEs.

Key words:
Job Crafting, Servant Leadership, Work Engagement, SMEs, Human Capital

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INTRODUCTION

In today's business environment, human capital is one of the most important factors for the success of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). SMEs face many challenges, such as limited resources and a lack of expertise (Badri et al., 2025; Prokop et al., 2025) . Therefore, these enterprises are intensively developing strategies to promote work engagement (WE), which is defined as a positive, fulfilling state of mind associated with work, represented by vitality, dedication and absorption (Gürbüz et al., 2024; Zeshan et al., 2025) . One of the current and effective approaches to human capital management is servant leadership (SL), which focuses on meeting the needs of employees, developing their abilities and promoting their well-being (Ghlichlee & Motaghed Larijani, 2024; Quan & Van Dierendonck, 2025). According to self-determination theory, servant leadership (SL) involves creating a supportive work environment that fulfils basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness). This significantly increases intrinsic motivation and work engagement (Altuniji et al., 2025; Costantini et al., 2025). In addition, it encourages proactive employee behaviour, such as job crafting (JC), i.e. reshaping work to better align tasks with individual needs and preferences (Badri et al., 2025; Clinton et al., 2025) .

Despite an extensive number of studies, there remains a significant gap in understanding the role of job crafting (JC) as a mediator between Servant Leadership (SL) and Work Engagement (WE), especially in the context of small and medium-sized enterprises, which have different structural and cultural conditions compared to large companies. Most research to date has focused on large or listed companies, while SMEs face highly specific organisational constraints and challenges. Therefore, the mechanisms that apply within large organisations may not be directly transferable to SMEs (Quan & Van Dierendonck, 2025). Furthermore, it is unclear to what extent job

crafting (JC) actually mediates the link between servant leadership (SL) and work engagement (WE) in this context, as current studies often examine only the direct relationship or other mediating mechanisms (Jehanzeb & Mushtaq, 2025; Mostafa et al., 2025). These ambiguities pose a challenge for research, which should clarify how servant leadership (SL) stimulates proactive employee behaviour (JC) and how this behaviour subsequently influences their work engagement (WE), thereby expanding knowledge about the dynamics of human capital in SMEs.

The research therefore examines the mediating role of Job Crafting (JC) in the relationship between servant leadership (SL) and work engagement (WE). The empirical part is based on a questionnaire survey of 342 SME employees, with data analysis performed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), which allows for the testing of complex mediating relationships. This approach makes it possible to capture the complex interrelationships between organisational resources, individual proactive behaviour and work outcomes (Gürbüz et al., 2025; Zeshan et al., 2025) .

This study expands our knowledge of how servant-oriented leadership (SL) encourages proactive employee behaviour and work engagement (WE). The results show that job crafting (JC) plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between servant leadership (SL) and work engagement (WE), confirming its position as a key mechanism for activating intrinsic motivation and meaningfulness of work. Practical recommendations are based on detailed evidence of how servant leadership (SL) can increase employee engagement (WE) by promoting proactive behaviour, which is key to effective human capital management in an SME environment.

1.1 Core constructs and theoretical foundations

In current research on organisational behaviour, attention is increasingly shifting from pathological phenomena to positive work states and the contextual factors that support them. Among the most significant outcome variables is work engagement (WE), which is defined as a positive, fulfilling state of mind related to work, characterised by vitality, dedication and absorption (Gürbüz et al., 2025; Zeshan et al., 2025) . Work engagement (WE) is considered a key indicator of employees' psychological well-being and a significant predictor of performance, innovative behaviour and organisational success (Jehanzeb & Mushtaq, 2025).

In terms of antecedents of work engagement, job resources, including leadership quality, play a crucial role. Servant leadership (SL) is an ethically oriented leadership style in which leaders prioritise the needs, development and well-being of employees over their own interests (Ghlichlee & Motaghed Larijani, 2024; Quan & Van Dierendonck, 2025). Serving leadership (SL) is perceived as an important job resource as it provides employees with support, autonomy and opportunities for personal growth, thereby creating a supportive work environment conducive to positive work attitudes (Fröhlich et al., 2025; Mostafa et al., 2025).

However, in addition to contextual resources, work engagement (WE) is also influenced by the active role of the employees themselves. One of the key proactive behaviours is job crafting (JC), which refers to the deliberate modification of work tasks, relationships and cognitive perceptions of work in order to achieve a better fit between work and individual needs, abilities and values (Clinton et al., 2025; Olya et al., 2024). In particular, approach-oriented job crafting (JC), focused on seeking resources and challenges, is associated with positive work outcomes (Manzanares et al., 2024; Xu et al., 2024).

The theoretical framework that integrates the influence of leadership resources, proactive behaviour and work engagement is self-determination theory (SDT). SDT's requirement is that intrinsic motivation and positive work states arise when basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied (Altuniji et al., 2025; Costantini et al., 2025). This framework allows us to explain how the organisational context and individual proactivity together shape employee engagement.

1.2 Servant leadership as a contextual resource

Servant leadership (SL) is considered in the literature to be one of the most important contextual resources at work, as it combines ethical leadership, support for development and empowerment of employees (Quan & Van Dierendonck, 2025). Leaders who apply servant leadership (SL) approach, create an environment of psychological safety and trust that supports the autonomous functioning of employees and their intrinsic motivation (Ruiz-Palomino et al., 2025).

In accordance with SDT, servant leadership (SL) contributes to the satisfaction of all three basic psychological needs. Support for autonomy is manifested in the delegation of authority and trust in employee decision-making, competence development through coaching and feedback, and relationality through quality interpersonal relationships (Fröhlich et al., 2025). Fulfilling these needs leads to higher intrinsic motivation, which is a direct predictor of work engagement (Clinton et al., 2025). Based on this theoretical framework, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1: Servant Leadership (SL) has a positive direct effect on Work Engagement (WE).

1.3 Job crafting as an agentic mechanism

Job crafting (JC) represents the active role of employees in shaping their own work experience and is considered a key mechanism through which employees utilise available work resources (Manzanares et al., 2024). Job crafting (JC) involves seeking out structural and social resources and taking on new challenges that increase the meaningfulness of work and promote personal growth (Xu et al., 2024).

From the perspective of Conservation of Resources Theory (COR), Job Crafting (JC) is a resource gain strategy that leads to the accumulation of psychological resources such as self-confidence, a sense of competence, and meaningfulness of work (Badri et al., 2025). These resources subsequently support the emergence of a positive spiral of resource acquisition, which manifests itself in higher levels of work engagement (WE).

While at the same time, job crafting is closely linked to SDT, as it allows employees to actively satisfy their needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Costantini et al., 2025). Employees who have the opportunity to reshape their work show higher intrinsic motivation and engagement. On this basis, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H2: Servant Leadership (SL) has a positive direct effect on Job Crafting (JC).

H3: Job Crafting (JC) has a positive direct effect on Work Engagement (WE).

1.4 Job crafting as a mediator between servant leadership and work engagement

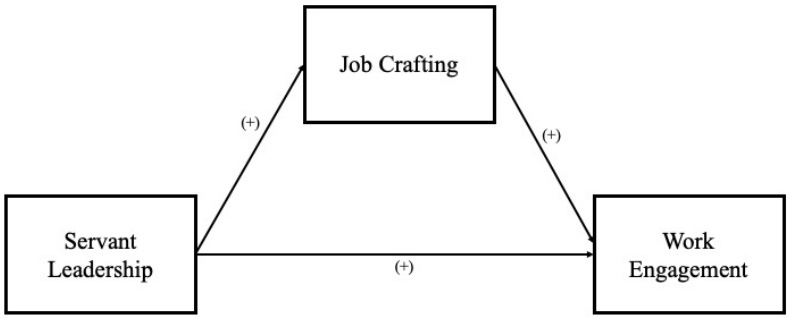
Although servant leadership (SL) provides employees with significant work resources, the mere existence of a supportive context does not automatically lead to higher work engagement (WE). Current research indicates that individual proactivity plays a key role in transforming organisational resources into positive work outcomes (Gürbüz et al., 2025; Zeshan et al., 2025).

In this context, job crafting (JC) represents a behavioural path through which employees actively use the resources provided by servant leadership (SL). Servant leadership (SL) creates motivational conditions in line with SDT that encourage engagement in job crafting (JC), and this process subsequently leads to higher work engagement (WE). Empirical studies confirm that job crafting (JC) mediates the relationship between various organisational antecedents and Work Engagement (WE), which supports its theoretical relevance in the context of servant leadership (SL). Based on these arguments, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H4: Servant Leadership (SL) has a positive indirect effect on Work Engagement (WE) through Job Crafting (JC).

The comprehensive hypothetical model can be expressed in the diagram shown in Figure 1.

15 Figure 13: Hypothetical model



16 Source: Processed by the authors

2. PROBLEM FORMULATION AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants and data collection

We conducted our research among employees of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) who are facing the challenge of transitioning to modern technologies that are shaping and will increasingly shape work design and work practices. We collected 342 responses from respondents in Central Europe who are employed on a permanent basis in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). These employees originate from Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. Data collection took place in two waves. In the first wave, we collected data from Austria, the Czech Republic and Poland through the MNForce research agency. In the second wave, we collected data through the Survio.com platform in Slovakia. We compiled the distributed questionnaire based on the adopted methods of measuring the individual variables that make up our hypothetical model. These adopted measurement methods were verified through numerous studies(e.g.: Geldenhuys et al., 2021; Kolářová et al., 2016; Moreira et al., 2020; Navarro-Abal et al., 2023).

To determine the minimum sample size, we used the results of **F tests** - Linear multiple regression: fixed model, R^2 deviation from zero in the G*Power programme. The input data consisted of the effect size f^2 , which was equal to 15, the probability of error $\alpha = 0.05$, and the number of predictors = 2.

Analysis: A priori: Compute required sample size

Input: Effect size $f^2=0.15$

A err prob=0.05

Power(1-β err prob)=0.95

Number of predictors = 2

Output: Noncentrality parameter $\lambda = 16.050000$

Critical F=3.0837059

Numerator df=2

Denominator df=104

Total sample size=107

Actual power=0.9518556

The results revealed that at least 107 measurements are required to achieve a 95% confidence level. In this case, the type of test

used to calculate the minimum sample size depended on the method used to test our hypothetical model.

2.2 Variables and how they were measured

Scales taken from verified and renowned studies were used to measure individual variables. This procedure ensures the necessary reliability and confidence that the constructs have undergone a critical process of verification and renovation.

We measured **Servant Leadership (SL)** using a 28-item scale validated in research by Grobler & Flotman, (2020) and Kolářová et al., (2016). An example item reads as follows: "My supervisor sets aside time for personal conversations." Respondents had the option of responding using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree" and 5 indicates "strongly agree."

Job Crafting (JC) was measured using a 15-item scale that was tested in studies by Geldenhuys et al., (2021) and Slemp & Vella-Brodrick,(2013). An example item reads as follows: "I introduce new approaches to improve my work." Respondents had the option to respond using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates the response "almost never" and 5 indicates "very often."

We measured **Work Engagement (WE)** using the 17-item UWES-17 scale. This is a unified and general tool for measuring employee engagement. It has been used in research by, for example, Moreira et al., (2020), Navarro-Abal et al., (2023) and Wojcik-Karpacz, (2018). An example item reads as follows: "I feel happy when I work intensively." Respondents were able to respond using a five-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates "almost never" and 5 indicates "very often".

We evaluated the internal consistency of the items selected for measurement using Cronbach's alpha. The results of the internal consistency measurement of the selected items achieved an excellent level, which ultimately represents the reliability of the measured variables. Servant Leadership (SL) Cronbach α = 0.964. Work Engagement (WE) Cronbach α = 0.962. Job Crafting (JC) Cronbach α = 0.929. Specific questionnaire questions are listed in the appendix.

2.3 Statistical analyses

The data obtained from the questionnaire survey were analysed using the partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM) method. The method was chosen based on its ability to estimate models in terms of understanding individual hypothetical relationships (Ringle et al., 2023). In addition, the method was chosen because the theoretical model we proposed is complex, robust, and proposes a higher-order construct (J. Hair et al., 2023). The SmartPLS 4 statistical software was used to perform the method (Sarstedt et al., 2024). The PLS-SEM implementation process itself consists of two basic steps. The first is the measurement model and the second is the path model, which expresses the resulting relationships and compares them with the bootstrapping results (Sarstedt et al., 2024).

The reliability of the model was verified using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability (rho_a, rho_c), with the value having to exceed 0.700. Validity was tested in terms of convergent and discriminant validity (J. F. Hair et al., 2024). Convergent validity was confirmed by the AVE test (>0.500). Discriminant validity was verified by the HTMT test (<0.85), the Fornell-Larcker criterion (FL < $\sqrt{AVE}$) and cross-loadings, where each indicator had a higher loading in its own variable than in others (Sarstedt et al., 2021).

The second step was bootstrapping testing within the path model. When testing five variables, we used 5,000 bootstrapping samples (Magno et al., 2024). The PLS-SEM method works with confidence intervals at $p<0.05$ and T-statistics <1.64. We further examined the coefficient of determination R^2 and the predictive power of the model Q^2 predict. A value of $Q^2 > 0$ confirms the predictive ability of the model. Comparison of prediction errors (RMSE, MAE) with a naive model (LM_RMSE, LM_MAE), where it is necessary that the RMSE and MAE values do not exceed the values of the naive model LM_RMSE and LM_MAE in most cases.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Measurement model

The reliability test results indicate reliable internal consistency of the data obtained using validated variable measurement scales. Specifically, in Cronbach's alpha test, the results reached levels >0.700. Composite reliability tests (rho_a, rho_c) also achieved values >0.700. Convergent validity was tested using the AVE test, where individual variables achieved the required level of >0.500. An overview of the results is provided in Table 1.

17 Table 7: Reliability and convergent validity

	Cronbach's alpha	(rho_a)	(rho_c)	(AVE)
JC	0.928	0.930	0.938	0.518
SL	0.964	0.965	0.966	0.508
WE	0.962	0.965	0.966	0.627

18 Source: Processed by the authors using SmartPLS 4

In addition to convergent validity, we also verified divergent validity, which we tested using the Heterotrait-monotrait test (HTMT) and the Fornell-Larcer criterion test. The results of the HTMT test revealed that all items examined did not exceed the threshold value of >0.85, thus meeting the necessary criteria that reject internal correlation between individual variables. The test results are shown in Table 2.

19 Table 8: Heterotrait-monotrait ratio test

	JC	SL	WE
JC			
SL	0.628		
WE	0.666	0.671	

20 Source: Processed by the authors using SmartPLS 4

To verify divergent validity, we also performed the Fornell-Larcer criterion test. The results are verified using correlation analyte values, which must not exceed the square root of the AVE test for individual variables. In our case, the results reject a high internal correlation between the variables under investigation, thus meeting the criteria for the second step within PLS-SEM, namely the path analysis test. The results of the FL test are shown in Table 3.

21 Table 9: Fornell-Larcer criterion test

	JC	SL	WE
JC	0.720		
SL	0.604	0.712	
WE	0.633	0.654	0.792

22 Source: Processed by the authors using SmartPLS 4

3.2 Path Model

The second step in PLS-SEM is the analysis of the Path Model, which we use to test the support for the established hypotheses. In connection with the testing itself, we compared the results with the results of bootstrapping samples, which were performed in the body of n = 5,000. The results of the Path coefficient testing are shown in Table 4.

23 Table 10: Path coefficient and hypothesis testing

	Original sample	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T statistics	P values	Supported/Not Supported
H1: SL -> WE	0.428	0.427	0.051	8.425	0.000	Supported
H2: SL -> JC	0.604	0.607	0.044	13.652	0.000	Supported
H3: JC -> WE	0.375	0.377	0.054	6.896	0.000	Supported
H4: SL -> JC -> WE	0.226	0.229	0.037	6.137	0.000	Supported

24 *Source: Processed by the authors using SmartPLS 4*

The results of path coefficient testing revealed support for the established hypotheses. Specifically, we found that servant leadership has a direct positive impact on job crafting, with a path coefficient of 0.604. The results of bootstrapping testing showed a value of 0.607, which indicates a robust construct of the given relationship. The significance level p = 0.000 demonstrates the statistical significance of the tested relationship and supports H2. Furthermore, the results showed a positive direct effect of servant leadership on employee engagement, with a path coefficient of 0.428. The bootstrapping result was 0.427, which also demonstrates the robustness of this relationship. The significance level reached a value of p = 0.000, which proves statistical significance and thus supports H1. Furthermore, the results revealed that job crafting has a direct positive impact on employee engagement. Specifically, the path coefficient result reached a value of 0.375 and the bootstrapping result 0.377, confirming the robustness of the construct. Furthermore, the significance level reached a value of p = 0.000, confirming statistical significance and thus supporting H3. Finally, we tested the mediating role of job crafting in the relationship between servant leadership and employee engagement. The results showed that servant leadership has a specifically indirect positive effect on employee engagement through job crafting. Specifically, the result of the specifically indirect effect showed that the path coefficient reached a value of 0.226. The bootstrapping result reached a value of 0.229, which demonstrably proves the robustness of the given construct. This relationship is also supported by the value p = 0.000, which confirms statistical significance and thus supports H4.

In addition to the path coefficient, we also verified the predictive power of the model within the sample under study. We verified this power using the coefficient of determination R^2. The results revealed that servant leadership (SL) explains 36.5% of the total variability of job crafting (JC R^2= 0.365). This result points to the mediating effect of job crafting (JC) in the examined construct. On the other hand, job crafting (JC) explains up to 51.7% of the total variability of work engagement (WE R^2= 0.517). These results point to the predictive power within the sample under study. The results are shown in Table 5.

25 Table 11: Predictive power of the model within the sample

	R-square
JC	0.365
WE	0.517

26 *Source: Processed by the authors using SmartPLS 4*

In addition to the predictive power within the sample, we also tested the predictive power outside the sample using the Q^2predict test. As part of the test, we compared the RMSE and MAE model values with the values of the naive LM_RMSE and LM_MAE models. The test results are shown in Table 6.

27 Table 12: Predictive power of the model outside the sample

	Q^2predict	RMSE	MAE	LM_RM	LM_MA
CC_2	0.201	1.090	0.872	1.137	0.893
CC_3	0.197	1.110	0.897	1.111	0.887
CC_4	0.163	1.069	0.851	1.090	0.868
CC_5	0.155	1.036	0.828	1.007	0.802
SC_1	0.188	1.035	0.821	1.009	0.784
SC_2	0.173	1.244	1.025	1.273	1.028
SC_3	0.201	1,196	0.992	1.248	1.017
SC_4	0.185	1,176	0.967	1.234	1.002
SC_5	0.170	1.091	0.899	1.103	0.878
TC_1	0.252	1.056	0.865	1.060	0.853
TC_2	0.151	1.109	0.899	1.114	0.898
TC_3	0.194	1.137	0.923	1.154	0.908
TC_4	0.232	1.112	0.917	1.146	0.918
TC_5	0.092	1.110	0.897	1.120	0.906
EE_1	0.350	0.952	0.745	0.987	0.760
EE_10	0.240	1.134	0.915	1.185	0.953
EE_11	0.240	1.045	0.813	1.054	0.801
EE_12	0.255	1.026	0.805	1.052	0.819
EE_13	0.247	1.001	0.788	1.043	0.806
EE_14	0.182	1.110	0.902	1.089	0.848
EE_15	0.199	1.034	0.789	0.992	0.758
EE_16	0.356	0.968	0.755	0.999	0.758
EE_17	0.257	1.080	0.827	1.099	0.848
EE_2	0.291	1.013	0.775	0.990	0.743
EE_3	0.156	1.092	0.862	1.085	0.851
EE_4	0.315	0.973	0.754	1.013	0.780
EE_5	0.246	1.043	0.783	1.083	0.832
EE_6	0.216	1.079	0.865	1.115	0.888
EE_7	0.372	0.989	0.815	1.008	0.803
EE_8	0.293	1.069	0.851	1.085	0.850
EE_9	0.230	1.057	0.819	1.097	0.851

28 *Source: Processed by the authors using SmartPLS 4*

The results of testing the predictive power within the sample revealed that approximately half of the values of the tested items of individual variables do not exceed the values of the naive LM_RMSE and LM_MAE models. These results indicate the moderate to moderately strong predictive power of the hypothetical model.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine the effect of servant leadership (SL) on work engagement (WE), with job crafting (JC) serving as a mediating mechanism. The results provided clear support for all tested hypotheses. Servant leadership (SL) showed a strong and statistically significant positive effect on job crafting (JC), suggesting that leaders oriented towards serving others create conditions that support proactive employee behaviour. At the same time, a direct positive effect of servant leadership (SL) on work engagement (WE) was also confirmed, highlighting its importance as a contextual work resource. The results further showed that job crafting (JC) has an positive and significant impact on work engagement (WE), confirming its role as a key behavioural mechanism supporting positive work states.

A key finding of the research is the confirmation of the mediating role of job crafting (JC) in the relationship between servant leadership (SL) and work engagement (WE). The indirect effect was statistically significant and robust, suggesting that servant leadership (SL) increases employee engagement (WE) not only directly but also indirectly by supporting their proactive job crafting (JC). The predictive power of the model was rated as moderate to strong, with servant leadership (SL) explaining a significant portion of the variability in job crafting (JC) and the combination of servant leadership (SL) and job crafting explaining (JC) more than half of the variability in work engagement (WE).

The results support the basic requirements of self-determination theory (SDT), according to which a work environment that supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness is associated with higher intrinsic motivation and positive work states. The findings suggest, while at the same time, that job crafting (JC) is a behavioural mechanism through which employees actively respond to supportive leadership behaviour and use it to optimise their work experience. The contribution of the study thus lies in confirming the suitability of SDT as a theoretical framework for examining the relationships between leadership style, proactive behaviour and work engagement (WE), without the ambition to conceptually expand this theory.

From a practical standpoint, the results imply that organisations can encourage their employees to be more engaged at work by creating an environment that aligns with the principles of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Servant leadership (SL) is a leadership style that can increase employees' intrinsic motivation and their willingness to engage in job crafting (JC) by promoting autonomy, competence and quality interpersonal relationships. The practical implications of these findings are the need to give employees room for initiative, encourage their active participation in shaping work tasks, and create conditions that legitimise proactive behaviour. Such an approach allows organisations not only to increase work engagement (WE), but also to use limited resources more effectively by activating employees' intrinsic motivation.

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