

**Engagement and burnout of union representatives: Investigating activism  
at the workplace with the Job Demands-Resources Model**

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## **Abstract**

Activism of workplace union representatives has been considered as an important element of an ‘organizing approach’ to union renewal. The present study adopts the job demands – resources (JD-R) model as the theoretical framework to examine how the accompanying role demands and resources influence the psychological state-of-activism of union representatives, through analyzing their relationship with burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) and engagement (vigor and dedication). Antecedents of burnout and engagement of Belgian union representatives in industry are investigated (N=610). Linear regression modeling using self-reports provide evidence for the central assumptions of the JD-R model. External demands of inter-role conflict and quantitative role overload determine burnout, but can be balanced with role resources, especially support and appreciation from the membership. Engagement of union representatives is facilitated/stimulated by the availability of resources at the workplace like time, security and influence and again social support. These resources play a less important role in situations of high internal role demands (ambiguity and complexity). The practical implications of these findings are discussed.

## **Introduction**

Union representatives at the workplace play a key intermediating role in a performing collective industrial relations system. They are an important link between the 'logic of membership' and the 'logic of influence' of a trade union (Schmitter & Streeck, 1999; Prott, 2004). Strong union militants at the workplace are considered as an important explanatory factor for the success or failure of national union movements. The loss of power and presence at the company level is considered as an important factor for negative union membership trends (Hancké, 1993; Ebbinghaus, Göbel & Klaus, 2011). In other words: a well functioning union team at the workplace that is committed to keep doing this shopfloor activism is defined as an important asset for union revitalization (Fiorito, Gall & Martinez, 2011).

This union activism at workplace level is today confronted with a range of challenges (Danford, Richardson & Upchurch, 2003). Economic globalization, technological revolution and other developments have changed the workplace context where these union representatives have to act. Corporate governance is reorganized and has become more complex and less transparent. Decision making is transnationalized and networked. Innovation and restructuring became a recurrent aspect of business management. At the same time, the rank-and-file has become more skilled and communicative. Expressive and other forms of individualism are on the rise. Differentiated demands and new issues are raised. Employers are on the offensive and counterbalance union power with new forms of direct participation. Confronted with these challenges, pressure increases on union representatives and activists at the workplace (Pilemalm et al. 2001). Increased pressures in a situation that is inherently defined as stressful, because the practice of industrial relations is by definition characterised by conflict and change (Bluen & Barling, 1988).

In this paper we consider these presumed changes and their effect on union militancy by applying an organizational psychological perspective. Recent calls within the 'union renewal' literature have been made to re-examine this strand of literature (Gall & Fiorito, 2011). The focus has in this regard been on the union commitment/union participation literature. Antecedents of union activism at the micro-level are investigated. We propose to look to another type of organizational psychology, namely about psychological well-being, work engagement and burnout. We believe that it is within the union activism and renewal debate just as important to look not only to questions on 'why and how people get actively involved in the union at the workplace', but also on what factors determine a continuous engagement as

union representatives at the workplace: what determines ‘vitality’ or ‘activism’ of union representatives in the workplace. The paper adopts for this purpose the job demands – resources (JD-R) model to the role of union representatives at the workplace. Antecedents of burnout and engagement of Belgian union representatives in industry are investigated. In other words, the activism of these representatives is investigated by looking to the negative and positive component of this ‘being active’. Burnout – mental fatigue and cynicism towards the conducted role of union representative – and engagement – vigor, dedication and feeling of pride – are analyzed by applying the general job demands-resources model of these issues.

### **Theoretical framework**

Psychological well-being at the workplace and phenomena like stress and burnout have gained considerable importance in current work environment studies (Barling, Kelloway & Frone, 2005; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). New theories and insights have been developed. Although it is recognized that industrial relations can be stressful and have strainful effects, the issue has nevertheless been generally overlooked by organizational psychologists (Francis & Kelloway, 2005). The key references date from the early 90s and can largely be traced back to one special issue of the Journal of Organizational behavior (1993). These studies adopted mainly role theory and concentrated on the negative process in which job demands of being a union representative/activist at the workplace are assumed to induce psychological costs which, in turn, elicit burnout. Role ambiguity, conflict and overload were defined as sources of stress and burnout. A moderating effect of social support was established (Tetrick & Fried, 1993).

In other words: these studies concentrated mainly on the negative psychology – stress or burnout - of being a union activist at the workplace. They furthermore investigated almost exclusively the link between demands of the activist role and these negative outcomes. the ambiguities or overload in the set of activities that are expected to be performed. From a perspective of re-vitalization, it seems important not only to focus on pathologies like burnout, but also to the positive psychology of enthusiasm and engagement. Whereas burnout mainly refers to emotional exhaustion (mental fatigue) and cynicism (a distant attitude towards one’s role) in the psychology of work, job engagement is mainly defined by vigor (mental energy) and dedication (strong involvement and feelings of pride). Recent studies in the psychology of work have showed that it is a fruitful strategy to take these positive experiences at work into account when preventing ill-health and stimulating well-being at

work (Bakker et al., 2008). Previously, these psychological models that explain stress and strain in the workplace, established already the importance of a ‘balanced’ approach. The negative effects of high demands can be (im)balanced with elements of control (JDCmodel of Karasek, 1979) or rewards (ERI model of Siegrist, 1996).

The Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R) is the recent lot of these psychological models (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bakker, Demerouti & Verbeke, 2004). It is meanwhile a well-established theoretical model that provides a comprehensive assessment on how employees’ working conditions may affect their health and well-being at work. It has also as point of departure that job strain is the result of a disturbance of the equilibrium between the demands employees are exposed to and the resources they have at their disposal. The JD-R theory furthermore includes not only negative aspects but also positive job characteristics and their motivation-enhancing effects. Finally, it provides a more flexible and comprehensive approach. The JD-R model assumes that every occupation has its own specific risk factors that lead to job stress. A broad variety of work aspects can be taken into consideration, but according to the JD-R theory, these characteristics can always be aggregated into two broad higher-order categories: job demands and resources. Based on these ‘heuristic’ advantages, the JD-R model is adopted in this paper to the role of union activist at the workplace. There is increasing evidence that the model is valid to the area of volunteer work (Lewig et al., 2007; Huynh et al., 2011; Huynh, Metzger & Winefield, 2011; Cox, Pakenham & Cole, 2010). As such, our paper is an extension of these studies to a specific type of volunteer work, namely union activism at the workplace.

As already stated, the JD-R model assumes as a starting point two different ‘balancing’ psychological processes: (1) an energetic process in which job demands are assumed to induce psychological or physiological costs which, in turn, elicit burnout, and (2) a motivational process in which job resources are assumed to have motivational potential that enhance engagement.

Within the JD-R model, job demands are defined as those aspects of work that require sustained physical or psychological effort or skills (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). They may become stressors when they require a high degree of effort, in which case they can be associated with costs such as burnout, here in casu emotional fatigue with, energy depletion in and cynicism towards the deployed role of union activist at the workplace. There are many possible demands of relevance to the role of union activist/representative at the workplace.

The meta-analysis of Lee and Ashforth (1996) examined the role stress literature within a working context and found that work demands such as role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload were associated with the emotional exhaustion component of burnout. An organizational role can be defined as the set of activities that are expected to be performed by an employee occupying a certain position in the organization (i.e. the role incumbent) (Kahn et al., 1964). Often however, role incumbents are confronted with unclear information about role expectations or incongruity of the different role expectations. The former situation is referred to as 'role ambiguity', the latter as 'role conflict' (Gilbert et al. 2011). When role incumbents, thirdly, experience time pressure or when a role is perceived as too difficult, one speaks about 'role overload'.

Nandram & Klandermans (1993) detected in their Dutch study of stress experienced by union representatives elements of role conflict (intra-sender conflict) and role overload (qualitative) as determinants of burnout. Shirom & Mayer reported also higher levels of role overload and conflict for union representatives. Martin & Berthiaume (1993) concluded that the role of a union representative at the workplace is generally ambiguous. This role ambiguity is signaled as an important factor of burnout in other volunteer studies.

Job resources, on the other hand, refer to those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that (a) are functional in achieving work goals, (b) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, or (c) stimulate personal growth and development' (Bakker et al., 2005). It is assumed in the JD-R model that job resources have motivational potential and lead to high job engagement, i.e. doing the job of union activist with vigor and dedication. Job resources may play either an intrinsic motivational role because they foster individual growth, learning and development, or they may play an extrinsic motivational role because they are instrumental in achieving goals. Social support, feedback and decision latitude are often mentioned as such job resources within the JD-R research tradition. They contribute to goal attainment and the fulfillment of basic human needs as autonomy, competence and relatedness.

Although this resource-engagement dimension is undervalued in research on the psychology of prolonged union activism at the workplace, some references can be found for hypotheses construction. Perceived social support is probably the most well known situational variable that has been proposed as potential job resource (Cohen & Wills, 1985). It has also been identified as an important moderator of industrial relations stress (Francis & Kelloway, 2005).

In the context of a union representation at the workplace, support can come from the rank-and-file, the union organization and the employer. Referring to the logic of membership of a union representation at the workplace, one can hypothesize that support from the rank-and-file, the colleague-workers is the most important form of support. Another important resource seems efficacy. In this regard we can refer to the logic of influence. Influence on managerial decision-making may be defined as a key instrument of obtaining goals and as such being an important resource of extrinsic motivation for union representatives. Next, we hypothesize that the two important facilities, legally provided to union representatives, namely (sufficient) paid time off to fulfill the representational functions and (feelings of) protection against dismissal, are important resources. Finally, following Kelloway, Catano & Carroll (2000) we estimate that union commitment – strong union beliefs - is also an important motivational resource that acts as a buffer to distress.

A final aspect of the JD-R model is its buffering assumption. In addition to the main effects of job demands and job resources, the JD-R model proposes that the interaction between job demands and job resources is important for the development of job strain and motivation as well. More specifically, it is proposed that job resources may buffer the impact of job demands on job strain, including burnout (Bakker, Demerouti & Euwema, 2005; Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). It is claimed that several job resources can play the role of buffer for several different job demands in relation to burnout. It is furthermore claimed that job resources have particularly an impact on engagement when demands are high. Which demands and resources play a role, depends on the specific characteristics that prevail. These interaction effects will also be tested in the context of the present study.

## **Hypothesis**

Burnout and engagement are in the present study investigated as the two separate, but interconnected psychological states of ‘activism’ of union representatives at the workplace. Burnout refers to the negative state of mental exhaustion and cynicism towards its own representational role. Engagement is defined as a positive, fulfilling state of mind that is characterised by vigor, dedication and feelings of pride. The analysis uses the Job Demands-Resources model, developed in the context of occupational well-being, to examine the role-related antecedents of burnout and engagement in being an active union member (militant and/or official union representative) at the workplace. Drawing on the main propositions of the JD-R model, we hypothesize the following:

1. Role demands (inter-role conflict; role ambiguity; quantitative role overload; qualitative role overload) are positively related with burnout and negatively or not related with engagement.

2. Role resources (support by the rank and file; support by the union secretary; support by the union organization; support by the employer; influence on management decisions; adequate legal protection; adequate available time; union beliefs) are positively related with engagement and negatively or not related with burnout.

3. In line with the dual process and cross-link theory of the JD-R model, it is predicted that (negative) role demands determine stronger burnout and (positive) role resources determine stronger engagement.

4. Available role resources buffer/moderate the negative relationship between established role demands and burnout (interaction effect).

5. Role resources have particularly an impact on engagement when role demands are high (interaction effect).

Based on the meta-analysis from Brewer & Shapard (2004) we control these hypotheses testing with a years-of-experience variable. We assume that seniority as union representative has a small negative correlation with especially burnout.

## **Methodology**

### **Procedure and Participants**

The data in this paper originate from a Belgian quantitative survey of a representative sample of 610 union representatives in industry. All of them are members of the biggest Belgian trade union organization (ACV). About half of respondents has an effective mandate in one of the official Belgian consultative bodies at company level (Works Council; Committee for Prevention and Protection at Work or Union Delegation), the others are deputy members of one of these consultative bodies or have no specific mandate. The sample was drawn random from the union file and the response was relatively high (34 percent). The sample was checked and where necessary weighted for age, gender, language (region) and sector.

## **Measures**

For the present study the presence of role demands, role resources, burnout and engagement was determined in terms of the union militants' perceptions (i.e. the inquiry yielded subjective assessments of the experience of each stressor, recourse or reaction). The respondents mostly were exposed to a number of statements, and asked to indicate how well these fitted their situation.

### ***Role demands***

Three specific role demands were measured: (1) inter-role conflict, defined as incompatibility between contrasting roles that a single person plays; (2) role ambiguity, comprised of uncertainty about what actions to take to fulfill the expectations of the role; and (3) role overload, viewed as the extent to which time and resources prove inadequate to meet expectations of commitments and obligations to fulfill a role (Örtqvist & Wincent, 2006).

The measure of the first demand focused on the multiple role with union militants must play: as union representative, as employee and as a family member). These roles may conflict, and in these situations one can speak of inter-role conflict. **Inter-role conflict** (i.e. incompatibility between contrasting roles), was assessed using two items: 'the extent union activity is combinable with usual work' and 'the extent union activity is combinable with a personal life'.

Role ambiguity was measured using three items and role overload using five items. Union militants responded to these items on five-point Likert scales with anchor points ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Each measure was determined by summing the responses to the items. Higher scores for these two measures corresponded to higher levels of role ambiguity and role ambiguity.

Items of the **role ambiguity** measure required union militants to assess the extent to which they were uncertain about the responsibilities of their union role and expectations entertained by others. Three items were used: 'I'm not always sure what the members expect from me'; 'I know exactly what my role as union representative means' and 'I'm unclear as to what my union and militants expect from me'.

**Role overload** was, like said, first measured using five items and, subsequently, using two sub-scales, namely quantitative and qualitative role overload. Items of the quantitative role

overload measure focused on the workload/time ratio. That is, an union militant experiences quantitative overload when he or she feels that there is much to be done but little time to do it in. Items of the qualitative role overload measure assessed the perceived difficulty of the union militants' tasks. Finally, we developed an index of total role stress by the average cross-scale scores of the different demands.

For all demands we constructed an ten-point scale (10 = maximum stress) and the validity of all scales was checked. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients were 0.63 for inter-role conflict, 0.50 for role ambiguity and 0.66 for role overload (0.62 for quantitative and 0.57 for qualitative role overload). Factor analysis confirmed that all items of inter-role conflict and role ambiguity load on one factor and that all items of role overload load on two factors (quantitative and qualitative role overload). The unidimensionality of each scale was so confirmed.

### ***Role resources***

Five kinds of role resources were included in the questionnaire: role support (from the rank-and-file, the union organization and the employer), influence on management decisions, adequate legal protection, adequate available time and union beliefs.

Union militants have at least four sources of **role support**: their colleagues (the rank and file and other workers), the union secretary and the union organisation itself. Social support by colleagues was measured with an five-item scale: three items refer to the rank and file specifically, two are related to all workers. Examples of the first type are, 'as militants we form a close group' and 'the cooperation in the militant core is good'. An example of the second type is, 'workers are strongly involved with the union'. The support from the second course of support, the union secretary, was measured by presenting a number of statements about the duties of the secretary (support, availability, help, advice, etc.). Support from the trade union organisation thirdly, was questioned by an evaluation of the union militants of nine general forms of support they receive. Support from the employer finally, was measured with two items: 'the employer has a positive attitude towards trade unions' and 'how often do you deal with positive appreciation from the employers side'. All items are scored on an ten-point scale (10 = high support).

The **influence on management decisions** was assessed with a seven-item scale for measuring the extent to which the union militants may affect such decisions. The following topics are

dealt with: purchasing power, safety and health, working hours, work organization, education and training, the impact of reorganization and restructuring and the overall business strategy. The variable **union beliefs** was measured with seven items about the core union ideology. Examples are: ‘employees still have to struggle for an equal position in society’ and ‘in our society employers are enriching on the backs of the workers’. Satisfaction with the **legal protection** and satisfaction with the available time finally, were directly questioned, with only one item.

All scales were constructed with an ten-point scale (10 = maximum resource) and the validity of all scales was checked. The scales ‘support by the union secretary’ and ‘support by the trade union organization’ both have a very high Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficient (0.94). Other Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients were 0.88 for ‘influence on management decisions’, 0.72 for ‘social support by the rank and file’ and 0.63 for ‘union beliefs’. Factor analysis confirmed that all items of each scale load on one factor. The unidimensionality of each scale was so confirmed.

### ***Engagement and burnout***

Engagement was measured using five items and burnout using four. Union militants responded to these items on five-point Likert scales with anchor points ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. Each measure was determined by summing the responses to the items. Higher scores for these two measures corresponded to higher levels of engagement and burnout.

As said, **engagement** is based on the affective reactions that union militants have toward their situation. Five statements were being used. Examples are: ‘I am proud of what I do as a trade unionist’ and ‘In my activities as a militant, I feel fit and strong’. The present study investigated only one of both core dimensions of **burnout** (exhaustion and cynicism). Only the central component of burnout, emotional exhaustion, was assessed in the questionnaire. Four statements were being used. Examples are: ‘I’m not as enthusiastic as ever about my activities as a militant’ and ‘The activities that I undertake as union representative are not mentally exhausting for me’.

For both stress symptoms we constructed an ten-point scale (10 = maximum reaction) and the validity of all scales was checked. Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients were 0.80 for

engagement, and 0.67 for burnout. Factor analysis confirmed that all items of engagement and burnout load on one factor. The unidimensionality of each scale was so confirmed.

## **Results**

In a first step, an exploratory principal factor analysis was performed on all the evaluation questions used. This factor analysis confirmed the previously defined concepts. In line with the suggestions made by Mortelmans & Dehertogh (2008), restrictive summated scales were computed for the found factors in order to include observations with some missings but delete observations with multiple missings on the items. This method also keeps the ten-point scales and thus facilitates the interpretation of the results. Correlations between the different variables are given in table 1.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and correlations between the variables, as well as the internal consistencies of the scales included in the analyses. As can be seen from this table, not all scales show good reliabilities. Especially role ambiguity, qualitative role overload and support by the employer score rather low (Cronbach's alpha coefficients lower than ,60).

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alphas and correlations (N = 610)

variable	mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1 years of being an active member	12,1	9,9	-															
2 inter-role conflict	3,1	1,8	0,00	(,63)														
3 role ambiguity	4,1	1,5	-0,22 ***	0,11 ***	(,50)													
4 quantitative role overload	5,1	1,7	0,05	0,22 ***	0,37 ***	(,62)												
5 qualitative role overload	5,0	1,8	0,16 ***	0,00	0,03	0,35 ***	(,57)											
6 number of effective mandates	1,2	1,1	0,24 ***	0,01	-0,27 ***	-0,01	0,05	-										
7 support by the rank and file	6,1	1,5	0,07	-0,24 ***	-0,40 ***	-0,14 **	0,05	0,07	(,72)									
8 support by the union secretary	7,7	1,6	-0,07	-0,17 ***	-0,15 ***	-0,09 *	0,00	0,06	0,29 ***	(,94)								
9 support by the union organisation	7,0	1,5	0,00	-0,20 ***	-0,28 ***	-0,15 ***	0,00	0,05	0,38 ***	0,55 ***	(,93)							
10 support by the employer	3,5	2,3	0,05	-0,17 ***	-0,11 **	-0,01	0,07	0,05	0,20 ***	0,14 **	0,13 **	(,57)						
11 influence on management decisions	4,8	2,1	0,17 ***	-0,07	-0,30 ***	0,01	0,20 ***	0,19 ***	0,39 ***	0,11 *	0,22 ***	0,30 ***	(,88)					
12 adequate legal protection	-	-	0,14 **	0,10 *	0,01	0,12 **	0,09 *	0,05	-0,06	-0,16 ***	-0,15 **	-0,20 ***	0,02	-				
13 adequate available time	-	-	-0,07	0,19 ***	0,13 **	0,09 *	0,11 *	-0,09 *	-0,14 **	-0,07	-0,16 ***	-0,11 *	-0,08	0,15 **	-			
14 union beliefs	7,2	1,2	0,09 *	-0,01	-0,13 **	0,05	0,18 ***	0,03	0,08 *	0,04	0,01	-0,09 *	0,03	0,18 ***	0,19 ***	(,60)		
15 engagement	6,7	1,4	-0,03	-0,33 ***	-0,26 ***	-0,08 *	0,13 **	0,08	0,42 ***	0,18 ***	0,24 ***	0,19 ***	0,33 ***	0,05	0,03	0,17 ***	(,80)	
16 burnout	3,7	1,7	0,17 ***	0,37 ***	0,23 ***	0,45 ***	0,17 ***	0,08	-0,34 ***	-0,24 ***	-0,27 ***	-0,06	-0,03	0,14 **	0,07	0,00	-0,34 ***	(,67)

Note. Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficients are listed on the diagonal; \*p< ,05 \*\*<,01 \*\*\*<,001

Nearly all demands (inter-role conflict, role ambiguity, quantitative and qualitative role overload) are positively related to each other, with the highest intercorrelations found between quantitative role overload and role ambiguity. An exception is the number of effective mandates that union representatives have, which is negative related to quantitative role overload. Furthermore most of the resources are positively related to each other. This is true for all forms of support (rank and file, union secretary, union organisation and employer), the influence that union representatives have and union believe. Adequate legal protection and adequate available time on the other hand are negatively related to other resources.

Firstly, all demands are positively related with burnout and most of them (except qualitative role overload) are negatively related with engagement. This confirms partly hypothesis 1. Secondly, all resources are positively related with engagement and most of them (except adequate legal protection) negatively or not related with engagement This confirms partly hypothesis 2.

### **Multiple regression results**

Two separate multiple regressions were performed on the relation between demands and resources on the one hand and burn-out and engagement on the other hand. Both regression analyses were performed in three steps. In a first step, the control variables seniority as militant and a first group of variables were introduced in the model. For the regression on burnout were this the demands; for the regression on engagement were this the resources. In the second step both demands and resources were introduced into the model. In the third step we included multiple interaction effects between resources and demands.

Focusing first on the different R-square values given in table 2 and 3, we see that the models are able to explain a good proportion of the variation in burnout and engagement. The third step of each model accounted for respectively 39,56 percent of the variation for burnout and 31,84 percent of the variation for engagement.

Table 2 Regression on burnout: role demands role resources

	burnout					
	step 1		step 2		step 3	
	beta	sign.	beta	sign.	beta	sign.
<b>1. background variables</b>						
seniority as militant	0,03	***	0,02	**	0,02	**
<b>2. role demands</b>						
inter-role conflict	0,28	***	0,23	***	-0,07	-
role ambiguity	0,12	*	-0,02	-	-0,02	-
quantitative role overload	0,33	***	0,34	***	0,47	*
qualitative role overload	0,03	-	0,04	-	0,05	-
number of effective mandates	0,10	-	0,09	-	0,09	-
<b>3. role resources</b>						
support by the rank and file			-0,23	***	-0,41	**
support by the union secretary			-0,11	*	0,01	-
support by the union organisation			-0,09	-	-0,09	-
support by the employer			0,00	-	0,00	-
influence on management decisions			0,04	-	0,04	-
adequate legal protection			0,12	-	0,11	-
adequate available time			-0,21	-	-0,20	-
union beliefs			-0,03	-	-0,04	-
<b>4. interaction effects</b>						
inter-role conflict x support by the rank and file					0,02	-
inter-role conflict x support by the union secretary					0,02	-
qualitative role overload x support by the rank and file					0,02	-
qualitative role overload x support by the union secretary					-0,03	-
<b>R Square</b>	0,3246		0,3900		0,3956	

\*p<,05 \*\*<,01 \*\*\*<,001

Table 3 Regression on engagement: role demands role resources

	engagement					
	step 1		step 2		step 3	
	beta	sign.	beta	sign.	beta	sign.
<b>1. background variables</b>						
seniority as militant	-0,01	***	-0,02	**	-0,02	**
<b>2. role demands</b>						
inter-role conflict			-0,20	***	-0,44	***
role ambiguity			-0,09	-	-0,09	-
quantitative role overload			-0,03	-	-0,02	-
qualitative role overload			0,06	-	-0,28	*
number of effective mandates			0,05	-	0,05	-
<b>3. role resources</b>						
support by the rank and file	0,27	***	0,21	***	-0,23	-
support by the union secretary	0,02	-	0,00	-	0,00	-
support by the union organisation	0,04	-	0,03	-	0,04	-
support by the employer	0,05	-	0,05	*	0,06	-
influence on management decisions	0,12	***	0,10	**	0,11	-
adequate legal protection	0,19	-	0,30	*	0,00	-
adequate available time	0,23	-	0,36	**	0,58	*
union beliefs	0,16	**	0,13	*	0,13	-
<b>4. interaction effects</b>						
inter-role conflict x support by the rank and file					0,05	*
inter-role conflict x support by the employer					0,00	-
inter-role conflict x influence on management decisions					0,00	-
inter-role conflict x adequate legal protection					0,10	-
inter-role conflict x adequate available time					0,00	-
inter-role conflict x union beliefs					-0,06	-
qualitative role overload x support by the rank and file					0,00	**
<b>R Square</b>	0,2173		0,2921		0,3184	

\*p< ,05 \*\*<,01 \*\*\*<,001

Using the outcomes of the multiple regression analysis we check the validity of our hypotheses. Our first hypothesis is confirmed in step 2 of both multiple regressions. All significant role demands are positively related with burnout and negatively or not related with engagement. This is true for inter-role conflict and quantitative role overload in the regression on burnout (in step one role ambiguity is also related); and for inter-role conflict and qualitative role overload in the regression on engagement.

Also hypothesis two is confirmed as we find that all significant resources are positively related with engagement and negatively or not related with burnout. For the multiple

regression analysis on burnout this is true only for support by the rank and file and support by the union secretary. For the multiple regression analysis on engagement this is true for almost all variables (support by the rank and file; support by the employer; influence on management decisions; adequate legal protection; adequate available time and union beliefs).

Conformation for hypothesis three, which predicted that (negative) role demands determine stronger burnout and (positive) role resources determine stronger engagement, is more difficult to find. For what burnout regards, quantitative role overload has indeed the strongest relation with the central variable ( $\beta = 0,34$ ). On the one hand, both support by the rank and file ( $\beta = -0,23$ ) and support by the union secretary ( $\beta = -0,11$ ) have a weaker relation with burnout. The relation between inter-role conflict and support by the rank and file with burnout is equally strong ( $\beta = -0,23$ ). For what regards engagement, we only find one significant demand (inter-role conflict,  $\beta = -0,20$ ). Both effects of support by the rank and file ( $\beta = -0,21$ ), adequate legal protection ( $\beta = -0,30$ ) and adequate available time ( $\beta = -0,31$ ) are indeed stronger. But on the other hand the effect of support by the employer ( $\beta = -0,05$ ), the influence that union representatives have on management decisions ( $\beta = -0,10$ ) and of union beliefs is less strong ( $\beta = -0,13$ ).

Hypothesis 4 and 5 are partly confirmed as we found only two significant interactions between role demands and role resources in the regression on engagement. In the regression on burnout we don't find such interaction effects. Finally the interaction effect between inter-role conflict and support by the rank and file is rather small.

## **Discussion**

The present study used the JD-R model as the theoretical framework to examine how the accompanying role demands and resources influence the psychological state-of-activism of union representatives, through analyzing their relationship with burnout (exhaustion and cynicism) and engagement (vigor and dedication). This activism of workplace union representatives has been considered as an important element of an 'organizing approach' to union renewal (Peetz, Webb & Jones, 2002). What can we conclude about this examination of the JD-R model to the role of union representatives?

In our results we detect in the first place the expected relationships between job demands/resources and burnout/engagement. We detect especially a strong positive relationship between inter-role conflict and quantitative role overload and feelings of burnout.

Inter-role conflict, role ambiguity and qualitative role overload have a negative relationship with engagement. It is especially support of the rank-and-file, which has a negative relationship with burnout. A range of role resources have the expected positive effect on engagement: support by the rank-and-file; support by the employer, influence on management decisions, adequate time and protection and union beliefs. The fundamental balance model in the occupational health literature – here applied by the JD-R approach – seems also to have relevance to interpret (and solve) activism problems of union representatives at the workplace.

In relation to the dual process idea of the JD-R model, we see in the results that the significant resources explain a larger extent of the variance in engagement than the included demands. The opposite conclusion can be made for the obtained results on burnout. A poorly designed role (inter-role conflict) and chronic work overload (quantitative role overload) exhaust the mental and physical resources of a union representative fulfilling his/her role. Job resources have motivational potential and lead to high engagement, vigor and dedication. Supportive worker-colleagues seem key in this regard. It is furthermore apparent in the results that mainly the workplace-related resources have impact. Time, protection and influence at the workplace are coming up in the analysis as other important resources besides support by the rank-and-file.

However, cross-links can be detected. We see especially that a range of job demands play also an important role as determinants of engagement and less a role in explaining levels of burnout. In this regard, a recent refinement of the JD-R model seems important to be mentioned. Van den Broeck et al. (2010) differentiated two categories of job demands: challenges and hindrances. Hindrances had positive effects on burnout (exhaustion) and negative effects on engagement (vigor). Challenges had no effect on burnout and were much more related to engagement. We can read in our results the same tendencies. The external job demands (work overload and inter-role conflict) relate in particular to burnout. The more internal, qualitative demands (complexity; lack of clarity) seem to have more to do with the engagement dimension.

We found in our results the least confirmation for the JD-R model in relation to the buffer and interaction effects. The model predicts that especially in a situation of high demands the availability of certain job resources is very important. We did not find this type of interaction effect in our analysis of burnout. Studies of the JD-R model have furthermore shown that job resources have particularly an impact on engagement when demands are high

(Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In our analysis we obtain an interaction effect for engagement, but it runs in a different way. Resources are important to stimulate engagement of union representatives. However, in situations of high inter-role conflict and/or qualitative role overload the motivational role diminishes (see table 4).

Table 4 Mean scores on engagement for nine groups.

inter-role conflict	high	5,2	6,5	7,0
	average	6,4	6,7	7,5
	low	6,6	7,2	7,8
		low	average	high
		support by the rank and file		
qualitative role overload	high	6,1	6,9	7,9
	average	6,1	6,8	7,2
	low	6,1	6,5	7,3
		low	average	high
		support by the rank and file		

### Limitations and further research

Although the study provided support for the application of the JD-R model in a motivational role context of union representatives at the workplace, some caveats are warranted.

We adopted the core elements of the JD-R model. However, new insights are emerging on the nuances and details of the model. Crawford, LePine & Rich (2010), as well as Van den Broeck et al. (2010) differentiated two categories of job demands: job challenges and hindrances. Job challenges represent demands that do deplete limited resources but, nevertheless, offer the opportunity to secure gains. This prospect of gains partly replenishes mental energy. An example is quantitative workload. Job hindrances deplete resources without attracting additional gains. Examples are role ambiguity and emotional overload. Applying this differentiation also to the workplace role of union representatives could bring more refinement. Further refinement could also be obtained by adding personal traits to the modeling. A series of studies have added these types of personnel resources (Xanthopoulou et

al., 2006) to the JD-R model in an occupational setting, using concepts like self-efficacy or regulatory focus (Brenninkmeijer, 2010). An important element of further research, besides refinement, would certainly also be in what kind of organizational settings that we trace to a lower or higher extent the investigated job demands and resources. What is the role of a (trustful) industrial relations climate between employer and union representation? How important are home-family interferences?

The most obvious limitation is that we used a cross-sectional design. This means that we can't draw firm conclusions regarding the causal ordering among studied variables. Thus, longitudinal research and cross-lagged model testing are encouraged. Nevertheless, the relationships have been analyzed according to the established relationships between stressors (job demands and resources) and occupational strain. As all data were gathered through self-reports, common method variance might contaminate the results. Extending the tested model with objective and lagged measurement of 'quitting' as union representative could already be an important step forward to tackle these limitations.

The present study focused on a specific sample of union representatives, namely in industry. The established relationship between job demands, resources and the activist dimensions could be specific for this group of union representatives. However, the analysis established relationships that have already been mentioned in the literature of industrial relations stress. Note furthermore that our predictions are in line with the theoretical arguments and causal relationships formulated by the JD-R model. Our conclusions confirmed however not the interaction effects as proposed by the model. These interesting, but particular results desire confirmation.

Finally, the study has been conducted in Belgium. This country has an organized system of collective industrial relations, whereby a union representation at the workplace is institutionalized with an elaborated statutory system of information and consultation rights (Van Gyes et al., 2007; Van Gyes, Segers & Henderickx, 2009). This particular setting may have influenced the results. Future studies could explore the generalisability of our results to other institutional settings of industrial relations and countries.

### **Conclusion and practical implications**

Activism of workplace union representatives is an important element of an 'organising approach' to union renewal (Peetz, Webb & Jones, 2002). In relation to this central function

of activism the present study learns that it is not only important to look how one becomes an active union member at the workplace, but also how one remains an active union member. Applying the JD-R model to this 'active' role of the union representative learns that this is a mental process that can be subdivided in two cross-linked dimensions, namely an energetic (no exhaustion) and motivational (engagement). Union revitalization shall to be successful also have to recognize the psychology of 'being an activist' at the workplace, which can be hampered by feelings of mental exhaustion and stimulated by feelings of vigor and dedication. How the work/role of a union representative is organized and supported can make a difference in this mental pattern of union activism at the workplace.

Further testing and refining of the JD-R model in this context shows furthermore that resources are an important factor in the functioning of union representatives at the workplace. These resources are mostly confined to the workplace itself (support from co-workers; recognition by and influence on the employer; time and protection against dismissal). Possible higher demands can be balanced, when resources are available/increased.

Clear rules and agreements on how the role of union representative can be combined with especially the main job tasks at work and the prevention of excessive work load (by division of work?) are important external demand factors in the prevention of burnout. It is not so much about working less for the union per, but more about finding a correct sort of balance between the union role and the rest of one's job tasks at the workplace. Internal job challenges like uncertainty (role ambiguity) and complexity (qualitative role overload) should be contained as they can lead to a lower level of day-to-day engagement as union representative. These types of 'overload' could be tackled by specific, complexity and ambiguity reducing types of training.

Last but not least, a sense of community is a very important factor that contributes to engagement and when union representatives lose a positive connection with others in the workplace, they are at an increased risk of burnout. The amount of social support by workers-colleagues seems key in the continued functioning of union representatives. From the perspective of the 'organising' union renewal perspective, this leads to a paradoxical situation. Activism of union representatives is defined as important for the 'organizing' effort to built support from a rank-and-file to the (local) union. This activism is however depending on the level of support one gets from others at the workplace. In other words: creating support and obtaining respect have to go hand-in-hand. A rank-and-file that wants an 'active' and

‘engaged’ union representation shall have to show appreciation. The development of these moments/forms of appreciation is important.

Support of membership; paradox in the organising perspective; look also the other way round; members appreciation; what raises support; sense of community

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