**1. Introduction**

Previous literature has provided ample evidence for the positive outcomes of trait gratitude, which has been linked to enhanced life satisfaction, lower levels of anxiety and depression (see Portocarrero et al., 2020, for a meta-analysis), as well as higher levels of prosocial behavior (see Ma et al., 2017 for a meta-analysis), among other benefits. Although fewer studies addressed the correlates of gratitude in organizational contexts, it has been reported, for example, that grateful employees are at a lower risk for burnout (e.g., Guan & Jepsen, 2020), have better friendships and higher levels of affective well-being at work (Badri et al., 2022), report higher levels of job satisfaction (Chen et al., 2023) and perceive their careers to be more successful (Zhang et al., 2023). In their recent review, Locklear et al. (2022) noted that most studies focused on the relational and well-being consequences of trait gratitude. Consequently, in order to fully understand the implications of thankfulness in the workplace, it is important to also ask - in what ways do other organization members or the organizations as a whole gain from employees’ dispositional gratitude?

Given the importance that companies have always placed on achieving high productivity, in this study we aimed to expand the current knowledge on gratitude in the workplace by examining how it relates to employees’ task and contextual performance. A very limited number of studies explored job performance as a potential outcome of trait gratitude (Cortini et al., 2019; Li et al., 2022). Moreover, we add to the literature by exploring whether work motivation might serve as an underlying explanatory mechanism in the relation between trait gratitude and job performance. Building on the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), we argued that grateful employees are more likely to develop more autonomous types of motivation, which in turn positively affect their job performance. In the following subsections, we elaborate on these ideas, providing theoretical and empirical support for the relation between trait gratitude, work motivation, and job performance.

**1.1 Employees’ Trait Gratitude and Job Performance**

In this study, we differentiate between task and contextual performance. Task performance covers formally assigned duties that relate to the conversion of raw materials into goods and services, or to the provision of support for these processes. Contextual performance includes activities which go beyond the requirements of one’s role and contribute to the overall effectiveness of an organization through their beneficial effects on the work environment(Viswesvaran & Ones, 2000).

Personality traits, alongside other individual differences such as cognitive abilities, have been shown to be important predictors of employees’ job performance (e.g., He et al., 2019). In this study we argued that gratitude could be one of the personality traits which positively impact employees’ performance. Prior theoretical and empirical work seem to suggest that grateful employees might attain better job performancee. For example, McCullough et al. (2001) argued that gratitude is a moral affect, meaning that it enhances one’s prosociality. People who are more grateful have an increased predisposition to repay the benefits they received, by engaging in altruistic behaviors which are directed not only towards their benefactor, but also towards third parties (Portocarrero et al., 2020). To extrapolate to organizational contexts, we might expect employees who are more grateful to seek to improve their performance as a way to reciprocate the company for the opportunities it provides.

Most previous research examined the link between state gratitude or work-specific gratitude and employees’ job performance (e.g., Cain et al., 2019). Fewer studies explored whether trait gratitude might also be related to job performance. Cortini et al. (2019) found that gratitude was positively associated with job performance. However, the authors did not make the distinction between task and contextual performance. More recently, Li et al. (2022) found that trait gratitude was positively related with self-reported OCBs. However, this study did not evaluate employees’ task performance. There is a need for more research regarding the relation between gratitude and both task and contextual performance, in order to be able to determine whether gratitude influences them in a similar way or whether its impact depends on the type of job performance which is taken into consideration. Moreover, as previous studies were cross-sectional, these studies do not offer very strong evidence for causality. Our study adds to the literature by investigating the relations between trait gratitude and job performance through a longitudinal design. In line with previous literature, we hypothesized that employees’ trait gratitude would prospectively predict higher levels of task and contextual performance.

**1.2 Employees’ Motivation and Job Performance**

According to the SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2017), motivation can take various forms, from amotivation to intrinsic motivation. Between these two extremes, there are different types of extrinsic motivation, which involve a gradually increasing degree of internalization (for a short description, please see Table 1).

A central proposition within the SDT is that the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness) will foster more internalized forms of motivation, whereas the frustration of the same needs will result in amotivation or controlled motivation (Ryan and Deci, 2017). In the workplace, it is important to create environments which satisfy employees’ basic psychological needs and promote their autonomous motivation, as employees who are more autonomously motivated perform better. In line with this idea, meta-analytic evidence indicated that amotivation was negatively related to job performance, external regulation had no significant relationship with performance, whereas introjected and identified regulation, as well as intrinsic motivation, predicted job performance positively (Van den Broeck et al., 2021). Moreover, the same meta-analysis found that external regulation was negatively related to organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB), whereas introjected and identified regulation and intrinsic motivation were positively linked to OCB. Although research on the relationship between motivation and performance is extensive, several aspects still require further investigation. For example, the latest meta-analysis could not estimate the effect of amotivation on OCBs because there was a lack of studies linking these two variables. Aligning with the suggestions provided by Van de Broeck et al., we aimed to measure not only the quality of employees’ motivation, but also its quantity (i.e., amotivation). Consistent with the SDT (Ryan and Deci, 2017) and existent empirical evidence, we hypothesized that amotivation would be negatively related to both task and contextual performance, whereas external regulation would be negatively linked to contextual performance. Moreover, we expected introjected, identified regulation and intrinsic motivation to be positively related to both types of performance.

**1.3 Employees’ Gratitude and Motivation**

In order to explain how trait gratitude might impact employees’ work motivation, we draw on recent theoretical contributions proposing that there is value in linking research in personality traits with the SDT (Ryan et al., 2019). Specifically, it has been suggested that not only do certain personality traits develop over time as a function of basic psychological need satisfaction or frustration, but also personality might impact the need-based experiences in a positive or negative manner. According to Ryan et al., there might be a number of mechanisms through which personality traits influence one’s basic psychological needs satisfaction. For instance, personality traits might contribute to the way people appraise external events. While some people might be more likely to evaluate situations as threatening, others have a tendency towards noticing the beneficial impact of external events. Moreover, individuals who are characterized by certain personality traits might create and/ or select environments that are more likely to help them satisfy their basic psychological needs. In this paper, we argue that gratitude is a trait that determines employees to (a) perceive their work environments in a more positive manner and to (b) select/create work environments that are more likely to lead to psychological needs satisfaction, thus positively affecting their motivation.

First of all, we draw on previous work which described gratitude as “a wider life orientation towards noticing and appreciating the positive in the world” (Wood et al., 2010). Because grateful people have a number of cognitive biases which make them focus their attention on the positive side of things, we argue that employees who are more dispositionally thankful might tend to perceive their jobs in a more favorable manner. In fact, gratitude was shown to be positively related to perceived job resources and negatively related to job demands (Nicuță et al., 2023). In other words, grateful employees tended to concentrate more on the job resources that were available to them (e.g., opportunities for development) and to minimize the difficulty and/ or frequency of the demands (e.g., time pressure). In turn, other studies indicated that job resources satisfy employees’ basic psychological needs, thus creating the premises for autonomous motivation (De Cooman et al., 2013).

Moreover, we argue employees might through their behaviors choose and/or craft work environments that are more likely to fulfill their basic psychological needs. For example, previous work has shown that gratitude is an important ingredient in communal relationships (Algoe. 2012). It is therefore possible that grateful employees build positive, caring relationships with their colleagues, which make the work environment more pleasant and the work activities more intrinsically motivating. Further, because grateful individuals are less likely to pursue materialistic values (Polak & McCullough, 2006), they might search for jobs that bring them meaning and intrinsic joy, prioritizing these over merely pursuing high remuneration.

To our knowledge, the few studies that explicitly linked trait gratitude to motivation were conducted on samples of students and indicated that those who were higher in gratitude tended to report lower amotivation and higher autonomous academic motivation (King et al., 2018; King et al., 2023). The results regarding the link between gratitude and controlled motivation were mixed: one study reported a non-significant relation, whereas the other indicated a positive correlation between these variables. Given the characteristics of these samples, the generalizability of the results to employees is limited. Moreover, in this study, we also aimed to examine the link between gratitude and motivation at a more granular level, by going beyond the controlled and autonomous categories and estimating the relations between gratitude and each type of work motivation. This was especially relevant seeing that it might help us better understand the mixed results that were reported by previous studies. We suspect that gratitude might be negatively related to external regulation and positively related to introjected regulation, which might lead to an overall non-significant association with controlled motivation. On the one hand, seeing that grateful employees are less materialistic (Polak & McCullough, 2006), they should be less motivated by external (financial) rewards and punishments (i.e., they should have lower extrinsic regulation). On the other hand, gratitude could accentuate one’s predisposition towards introjected regulation. Empirical research suggests that feeling grateful might lead to negative emotions such as guilt, indebtedness and discomfort (Walsh et al., 2022), which are mechanisms through which introjected regulations are maintained.

To summarize, building on previous literature, we hypothesized that trait gratitude would prospectively predict lower amotivation and external regulation, while being a positive predictor of introjected and identified regulation, as well as intrinsic motivation.

**1.4 The Mediating Role of Motivation in the Relation between Gratitude and Job Performance**

Previous research investigated a number of possible mediating mechanisms in the relation between gratitude and job performance. Cortini et al. (2019) reported job satisfaction only partially accounted for the relation between dispositional gratitude and job performance. This result seems to indicate that there may be other variables which could play a role as mediators in this relation. Li et al. (2022) found that psychological availability mediated the *combined* effect of trait gratitude and task significance on OCB. However, this study did not seek to specifically examine mediators for the relation between trait gratitude and OCB. Consequently, more work is needed in order to understand why employees who are more dispositionally grateful tend to have better job performance.

According to the SDT (Deci et al., 2017), motivation can serve as a mediator in the relation between individual differences and work behaviors. Consistent with this idea, a recent study found, for example, that autonomous motivation mediated the relation between psychological capital and employees’ innovative behavior (Blasco-Giner et al., 2023). In line with this theoretical framework, in this study, we chose to explore whether motivation could also act as a mediator for the association between gratitude and performance. In general terms, we expected that gratitude would promote more autonomous forms of motivation (e.g., identified regulation), which in turn would promote increased levels of both task and job performance. Given the lack of previous studies, no specific hypotheses were formulated.

**2. Method**

**2.1 Participants and Procedure**

The study was approved by the institutional Research Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited by undergraduate Psychology students in exchange for extra credit in the Work Psychology course. They completed the measures twice, approximately 10 weeks apart, using a secure online platform. Initially, 305 employees agreed to participate in the study. Out of them, 246 (80.65%) also completed the measures two and a half months later and were included in the final sample. Participants were aged between 20 and 73 years (*M*age = 36.89, *SD* = 11.36). They had an average tenure of 7.57 years in their current organizations (*SD* = 7.62) and worked in various fields (education, healthcare, IT, hospitality etc.). Other characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 2.

**2.2 Measures**

For all measures used in this study, items were scored on 7-point scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 7 = *completely agree*). The internal consistency coefficients for all the scales are displayed in Table 1.

***2.2.1 Trait Gratitude***

Gratitude was measured using the Gratitude Questionnaire (McCullough et al., 2002). The six items of the questionnaire measure the frequency, intensity and density of gratitude in one’s life (e.g., “If I had to list everything that I felt grateful for, it would be a very long list.”).

***2.2.2 Work Motivation***

Employees’ motivation was evaluated with The Multidimensional Work Motivation Scale (Gagné et al., 2015). The questionnaire has 19 items and assesses five types of work motivation: amotivation, extrinsic regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and intrinsic motivation (e.g., “I don’t know why I’m doing this job, it’s pointless work.”). Each subscale comprises 3 items, except for extrinsic regulation (6 items) and introjected regulation (4 items).

***2.2.3. Job Performance***

Job performance was measured using a self-report version of the Job Performance Scale (Goodman and Svyantek, 1999). The scale assesses task performance (9 items; e.g., “I perform well in the overall job by carrying out tasks as expected”) and contextual performance (7 items; e.g. “I assist my colleagues with their duties”).

**3. Results**

**3.1 Associations Among the Study Variables**

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the main variables are displayed in Table 1. At both measurement times, gratitude was positively related to task and contextual performance, introjected and identified regulation, as well as intrinsic motivation. Gratitude was also negatively related to amotivation and extrinsic regulation. Both task and contextual performance were negatively related to amotivation and positively linked to introjected and identified regulations and intrinsic motivation. Contextual performance was unrelated to extrinsic regulation. Task performance and extrinsic regulation were negatively related at T1, but not at T2.

**3.2 Results of the Path Analysis Testing the Hypotheses**

The tested model had acceptable fit indices, χ2 (42) = 120.14, *p* < .001, Robust CFI = .948, RMSEA = .08, 90 % CI [.07, .010]. The model explained 59.1% of the variance of T2 task performance and 55.3% of the variance of T2 contextual performance. T1 gratitude negatively prospectively predicted more amotivation (β = -.07), while being positively linked to T2 introjected (β = .16) and identified regulation (β = .10). The effect of T1 gratitude on T2 intrinsic motivation was marginally significant (β = .07, *p* = .051). Identified regulation (T2) was a positive predictor of task performance (β = .44). Intrinsic motivation (T2) was positively linked to contextual performance (β = .44). T2 identified regulation mediated the effect of T1 gratitude on T2 task performance, whereas T2 intrinsic regulation mediated the prospective effect of gratitude on contextual performance.

**4. Discussion**

Previous research has documented the beneficial effects of trait gratitude on employees’ well-being (e.g., Guan & Jepsen, 2020). However, fewer studies sought to investigate how dispositional gratitude might impact employees’ behavior in the workplace. Considering the limitations of prior literature, the aim of this study was twofold. First, we examined whether trait gratitude might predict employees’ task and contextual performance over time. Second, we built on the SDT () and we investigated whether motivation might account for the potential effect of thankfulness on performance.

The results suggest that trait gratitude is positively associated with job performance. Similar results were reported by two previous studies, who found that grateful employees are more likely to have improved overall job performance, as well as more OCBs (Cortini et al., 2019; Li et al., 2022). However, none of these studies had concomitantly investigated the effect of trait gratitude on both task and contextual performance. This result aligns with the view that gratitude is a moral affect which prompts reciprocity (McCullough et al., 2001). It seems that the prosocial tendencies that are characteristic of grateful people extend beyond interactions with other individuals to encompass organizations as well. Future studies might investigate potential moderators in the relation between gratitude and performance. For instance, Ren et al. (2023) recently found that grateful employees take charge more in the workplace when they have high role breadth self-efficacy. In a similar way, we might expect gratitude to be more strongly linked to contextual performance in employees who feel confident that they have the competence to make positive contributions in their organizations.

Correlation analyses further indicated that amotivation was negatively correlated to both task and contextual performance, extrinsic regulation was negatively linked to task performance, whereas introjected and identified regulations, together with intrinsic motivation, were all positively related to both task and contextual performance. This result is in line with the SDT (Deci et al., 2017), as well as previous meta-analytical evidence (Van den Broeck et al., 2021) suggesting that the more mature (i.e., internalized) the motivation is, the higher the likelihood that the employees will demonstrate good performance. However, when all types of motivation were concomitantly evaluated as predictors of job performance in the path analysis, only identified regulation remained a significant predictor of task performance, whereas intrinsic motivation was the only significant predictor of contextual performance. This finding seems to suggest that, in this sample of Romanian employees, identified regulation and intrinsic motivation serve slightly different roles in relation to job performance. When employees perceive their work to be important and meaningful, they are more likely to put effort in their jobs and excel in meeting their job demands, but they will not necessarily go the extra mile in order to help the organization. Because intrinsic motivation is the type of motivation which is most strongly linked to employee well-being (Van den Broeck et al., 2021), employees who derive intrinsic motivation from their work might simply have more energetic and emotional resources to also engage in more extra-role behaviors. However, these findings must be interpreted with caution, given the limited sample size, which might lead to false negative errors. Some paths that did not demonstrate statistical significance in the current study might have been statistically significant, were the sample larger.The analyses further indicated that trait gratitude was linked to employees’ motivation both cross-sectionally and over time. Specifically, gratitude was negatively related to amotivation, a result which is consistent with those recently reported by King et al. in a sample of students. In line with the idea that grateful people are more prone to notice and value the positive aspects around them (Wood et al., 2010), it might be that employees who are higher in gratitude perceive the workplace in a more favorable manner, which makes them less predisposed to lose interest in their jobs. Further gratitude was positively linked to introjected motivation, indicating that grateful employees could feel an inner pressure to put effort in their jobs, possibly as a way to reciprocate in response to the benefits which are provided to them by their companies. This result is in line with previous studies indicating that experiencing gratitude could lead to a motivation which is only partially self-directed, by prompting feelings of indebtedness and guilt (Walsh et al., 2022). The positive relation between gratitude and identified regulation, as well as intrinsic motivation could be interpreted in a number of ways. First, it could be due to the fact that thankful employees might concentrate more on the aspects of their jobs that render the work interesting and meaningful. Second, as previously argued in the introduction, it might be that grateful people actively search for jobs which are more intrinsically rewarding or intentionally craft enjoyable work environments through their behaviors. Future studies might examine the exact mechanisms through which employees’ gratitude leads to different types of motivation. For example, perceived job resources and/ or the satisfaction of employees’ basic psychological needs might account for the impact of gratitude on motivation.

An important finding of our study was that the relation between gratitude and task performance was fully mediated by identified regulation. In other words, higher levels of gratitude resulted in more identified regulation, which in turn led to improved task performance. The results also seem to suggest that intrinsic motivation could mediate the relation between gratitude and contextual performance. However, seeing that the longitudinal effect of gratitude on intrinsic motivation was only marginally significant, this indirect effect requires additional testing by future studies. These findings are in line in previous theoretical (Deci et al., 2017) and empirical (e.g., Blasco-Giner et al., 2023) work indicating that motivation, along with basic psychological needs, could account for the effect of individual differences on employee performance and well-being. Future studies could investigate whether work motivation might also link employees’ trait gratitude to other possible outcomes, such as absenteeism or turnover intentions, which were not previously studied in relation to gratitude.

From a theoretical standpoint, the current research extends the nomological network of gratitude in the workplace and suggests that gratitude could be examined through the lenses of the SDT. From a practical perspective, the results of the present study point to the fact that there is value in developing and applying interventions aimed at increasing employees’ gratitude. If these interventions were to demonstrate a positive influence on the quantity and quality of employees' motivation, as well as their performance, organizations could reap important benefits. Nevertheless, given that these findings are preliminary, further research is required before they are applied in organizational settings.

Despite contributing to a better understanding of the implications of gratitude in the workplace, this research is not without limitations. First, we used a self-report measure of job performance. Seeing that employees show a leniency bias when evaluating their own performance (Heidemeier & Moser, 2009), future studies might consider including other-report or objective measures of performance. Moreover, future research might also investigate the link between gratitude and other dimensions of performance, such as creative performance. Second, although the design of the study included two measurements, which allowed us to control for previous levels of employee motivation when testing the hypotheses, a three-wave longitudinal design would have been superior in assessing the mediating role of motivation. Third, the characteristics of our sample (Romanian employees, the majority of which were women and highly educated) limit the generalizability of the results. Although conducting the study in an Eastern European context can be perceived as a strength, as it bring more diversity in gratitude research, future studies will need to investigate whether these findings can be replicated in other cultures.

To conclude, the results of the present research indicate that grateful employees tend to be more autonomously motivated in the workplace, which in turn makes them more likely to improve their performance. Although more research is needed in order to establish whether gratitude has an impact on objective performance indicators, these findings are promising in that they suggest that the implications of gratitude in the workplace might extend beyond just promoting employees’ well-being and a positive outlook on the work environment.

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