

# Examining the Relationship between Work Autonomy and Intragroup Conflict: A Case Study of the Financial Services Industry in Taiwan

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*Abstract:* The services sector—an essential pillar of Taiwan’s economy—accounts for 59.2% of the country’s employment and 63.2% of the national GDP. With individualism gaining momentum, many people employed in the booming services sector are seeking autonomy in their workplaces, where increased interaction time among colleagues underlines the importance of collaboration. Conflicts are inevitable in these interactions, particularly in today’s diversified society that embraces different ideas and values. Building on prior studies of intragroup conflict, we construct a model that depicts the relationship between financial services workers’ work autonomy and intragroup conflict. A questionnaire survey of workers in Taiwan’s financial institutions is conducted and 266 valid samples are collected. The empirical results obtained through structural equation modeling tests and analysis indicate that work autonomy negatively affects intragroup conflict.

*Key-Words:* work autonomy, intragroup conflict, financial services industry, service management

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## 1 Introduction

Latest statistics from the Executive Yuan (Taiwan) conveys that the service sector accounts for 63.2% of Taiwan’s national GDP and 59.2% of the total employment. The service sector is an essential pillar of Taiwan’s economy and competitive in the international market. With a booming service sector, Taiwan’s society recognizes the importance of diversity and adaptation. Generally, traditional Confucianism prompts people to cherish the harmonious relationship between themselves and their significant others. On the other hand, under the impact of individualism, people also seek self-determination and independence.

Indeed, people employed by a company weigh between individual needs and group interests under the influence of their tendencies toward individualism or collectivism. Conflicts may also arise due to the differences in their understandings. As documented by several studies, some employees align themselves closely with their organizations and work unremittingly for shared values and commitments. As they regard everyone in the organization as themselves, there is no self-interest and conflict of interests. On the contrary, employees with different rights, obligations, and interests will inevitably clash with each other as

they pursue their interests and demonstrate their values. Such motivations would compromise interpersonal relationships and cooperation. Therefore, for Taiwan’s booming service sector that embraces autonomy with diversified orientations, it is crucial to understand how service sector employees’ level of work autonomy—the extent to which they could carefully measure the related costs and outcomes for deciding on the shared visions and values through coordination—would significantly correlate with the development of the intragroup conflict.

Nevertheless, few studies have examined the relationships between work autonomy and intragroup conflict. Jehn & Mannix suggest that intragroup conflict can be effectively mitigated by group value consensus, including valuing autonomy and adaptability [3]. Work autonomy is addressed only as part of the group value that affects intragroup conflict. It is not a quantitative study that examines the correlation between various dimensions of work autonomy and intragroup conflict. In other words, the relationship between work autonomy and intragroup conflict has not been sufficiently examined in detail. This study aims to examine whether, in business management practices, granting employees the autonomy of

work method, scheduling, and criteria could mitigate clashes in interpersonal relationships through internal communication and consultation, thereby promoting consensus in work content, goals, and plans, which in turn reduce intragroup conflict. We first construct relationship models for various dimensions of work autonomy and intragroup conflict and then determine the logical relationship between the dimensions.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Work Autonomy

In 1971, Hackman & Lawler [4] proposed the theory of job characteristics based on the task attributes suggested by Turner & Lawrence. The theory describes job characteristics in six dimensions, including autonomy. It suggests that employees who perceive having variety, autonomy, identity, and feedback in their work have better job performance and higher job satisfaction. Zhou et al. indicated that job autonomy predicted employee's self-development [2]. Hackman and Oldham proposed the theory of job characteristics in 1976 [1], in which they defined work autonomy as the extent to which organizations grant individual freedom, independence, and discretion in arranging work and deciding how to work. Work autonomy was regarded as one of the five core characteristics of work. According to the job characteristics model, Robbins describes the five core dimensions of work: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback [8].

Therefore, autonomy is an essential factor among the five motivational characteristics that could affect individuals' ownership of work outcomes. Different leadership styles have different ways of assigning power, and the forms of autonomy are also different. Spreitzer proposes that work autonomy is the authority that allows employees to arrange their work schedule independently and freely, and to decide how to complete the work [13]. Iverson et al. explain that work autonomy is self-control over the environment and provides some methods that can be applied. As defined by Hackman and Oldham [1] and Breugh [6], work autonomy refers to the degree of independence and freedom that individual employees have regarding their work methods, schedules, and criteria. In addition, work autonomy implies that employees have a significant say in the work schedule and decision-making procedures. Douglas and Zivnuska suggest that work autonomy reflects an individual's perceived degree of action choice and control [14].

According to past researches, work autonomy can

be measured in three dimensions [5,15]:

- (a) Work method autonomy: refers to the extent to which an employee is free to choose the method of completing a work.
- (b) Work scheduling autonomy: represents the extent to which an employee controls the schedule, sequence, and timing of work activities.
- (c) Work criteria autonomy: refers to the extent to which an employee can modify or set target performance metrics.

### 2.2 Intragroup Conflict

In human society, the opportunities of working together facilitate interactions, while conflict is often a dynamic process in which two interdependent parties perceive negative emotions due to conflicting opinions or hindered goals [16]. Serious conflicts may worsen relationships among members and adversely affect performance due to negative emotions toward each other. As McCarter et. al stated intragroup dynamics in management studies views conflict as a contingency process that can benefit or harm a group based of characteristics of the group and context [17].

Intragroup conflict represented the dysfunction that can exist within a team and is likely to lead to negative outcomes, including poor functioning and performance [18]. Jehn also regards conflict as a situation in which team members have conflicting views toward each other or interpersonal antagonism [19, 20]. The above feelings are felt at the individual level. The conflict at the team level refers to the situation in which an individual and team have incompatible perceptions or emotions about the goals [21]. Jehn & Mannix define team conflict as when an individual perceives disputes, incompatible expectations, or uncompromising desires from others in the team [3]. Passos & Caetano define team conflict as team members' perception and feelings of disagreement with others' decisions or actions for achieving the team's goals [21]. They focus on interpersonal conflict within an organizational team and examine the effects of interpersonal cooperation and conflict within a team.

On the other hand, conflict may occur at different levels, including intra-individual conflict, intragroup conflict, and intergroup conflict [22]. In addition, Priem & Price classify conflicts into social-emotional conflicts, including interpersonal disputes, and task-related conflicts, which cover all non-interpersonal conflicts [23]. Jehn [19] classifies

conflict into task conflict and relationship conflict. Jehn examines two types of conflict [19]:

(1) Task conflict: conflict caused by disputes among team members over their views, conceptions, and judgments of tasks. (2) Relationship conflict: incompatibility among members, such as tension, hostility, and annoyance among partners. Task conflict can be used to predict daily work performance [19], while relationship conflict is negatively correlated with productivity, job satisfaction and reduces employees' team loyalty and satisfaction [22].

Then, in the qualitative study, Jehn identifies three types of conflict [20]. In addition to the above task and relationship conflict, process conflict has been recognized as "controversies about aspects of how task accomplishment will proceed...issues of duty and resource delegation such as who should do what or how much should one get" [26].

### 2.3 Research Framework and Hypotheses

For the research questions and purposes, we use the research framework as presented in Figure 1. In the framework, the independent variable is work autonomy, which covers three dimensions: work method autonomy, work scheduling autonomy, and work criteria autonomy. The dependent variable is intragroup conflict, which also has three dimensions: relationship conflict, task conflict, and process conflict.

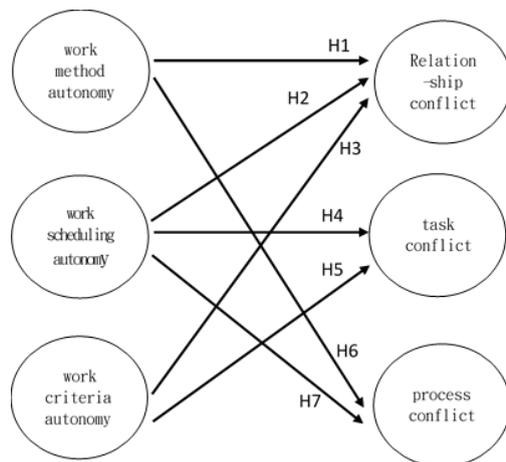


Fig.1: Conceptual Model

Whereas (1) work autonomy covers work method autonomy, work scheduling autonomy, and work criteria autonomy [12]. (2) Breugh defines work method autonomy as the degree of freedom to choose the method to complete the work; work scheduling autonomy as the degree of control over the schedule, sequence, and time of work activities;

and work criteria autonomy as the extent to which target performance metrics could be modified or developed as one deems fit [6]; (3) Hackman & Lawler suggest that a more autonomous job can bring higher motivation and satisfaction to employees; and it therefore could enhance their positive emotions and reduce their negative emotions accordingly [4]; (4) Social psychological experiments suggest that negative emotional state can prevent positive spontaneous behaviors such as cooperation or mutual assistance[24], thus generating situations of personal conflict; (5) Empowering the work team with the autonomy for deciding work method, controlling work process, and developing work criteria could stimulate positive emotional states to reduce the psychological distance between employees, thereby mitigating interpersonal antagonism or incompatibility within an organization, such as perceived relationship conflicts in terms of emotions, for example, resentment, tension, frustration, annoyance, and misfit. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: work method autonomy is significantly and negatively related to relationship conflict.
- H2: work scheduling autonomy is significantly and negatively related to relationship conflict.
- H3: work criteria autonomy is significantly and negatively related to relationship conflict.

Moreover, according to the structure exchange theory of Blau, all human relations can be expressed through a balanced model of giving and receiving [25]. People can obtain value and approval through interaction with others and make rational decisions in the process. Therefore, in an organization that grants work scheduling autonomy and work criteria autonomy, members in the organization would act in reciprocity to find common values and optimum solutions in operational procedures and criteria. They could avoid the task conflict in terms of different opinions, ideas, and conceptions on work contents and targets.

As for the relationship between work autonomy and process conflict as one dimension of intragroup conflict, process conflict relates to how the work could be completed. It occurs in executing the work and represents employees' disagreement on the means to complete the work, the ownership of responsibilities, and the allocation of work and resources [3,19]. Employees who have work method autonomy would decide on the means to complete the work by selecting the most favorable

solution and consensus after carefully weighing possible costs and consequences of the methods in the principle of reciprocity. Moreover, according to the interaction theory, employees who have work scheduling autonomy would seek consensus and avoid opposition by adjusting and integrating the process and sequence of work execution continuously through interaction. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: work scheduling autonomy is significantly and negatively related to task conflict.

H5: work criteria autonomy is significantly and negatively related to task conflict.

H6: work method autonomy is significantly and negatively related to process conflict.

H7: work scheduling autonomy is significantly and negatively related to process conflict.

### 3 Research Methodology

#### 3.1 Operational Definitions and

##### Measurement Tools of Research Variables

In this study, work autonomy refers to “the degree of control or discretion a worker can exercise concerning work methods, work scheduling, and work criteria” [6]. Work autonomy is discussed in three dimensions: (1) Work method autonomy: refers to the extent to which an employee is free to choose the method of completing a work; (2) Work scheduling autonomy: represents the extent to which an employee controls the schedule, sequence, and timing of work activities; (3) Work criteria autonomy: refers to the extent to which an employee can modify or set target performance metrics [6,15]. For measuring the work autonomy of team members, the Work Autonomy Scale developed by Breugh & Becker [15] was used. The Likert five-point scale was used to measure the respondents’ degree of agreement to each statement item as “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neutral,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.” The higher the degree of agreement, the higher the degree of work autonomy that employees perceive.

Intragroup conflict refers to the situation that team members perceive “that they hold discrepant views or have interpersonal incompatibilities” [3,19]. It covers three dimensions: (1) Relationship conflict: refers to the interpersonal opposition or incompatibility between team members, such as perceived resentment, tension, frustration, annoyance, and misfit,

(2) Task conflict: refers to team members’ different opinions, ideas, and conceptions on work

contents and targets. (3) Process conflict: relates to how the work could be completed. It occurs in executing the work and represents team members’ disagreement on the means to complete the work, the ownership of responsibilities, and the allocation of work and re- sources [3,19]. The Intragroup Conflict Scale revised by Jehn & Mannix [3] was used to measure the degree of conflict among employees. A Likert five-point scale was also used to measure the degree of agreement of respondents to each statement item as “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “neutral,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.” The higher the degree of agreement, the higher the degree of intragroup conflict.

#### 3.2 Sample and Procedures

The hypotheses were tested empirically by collecting data from employees of the financial services industry in Taiwan. In this study, the target respondents included the banking staff. According to the National Income Report compiled by the Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, Executive Yuan (Taiwan), Taiwan’s economy comprises three major sectors of agriculture, industry, and service. The service sector covers 12 sub-sectors, including wholesale and retail, hotels and restaurants, transportation, storage and communications, finance and insurance, real estate and rental business, professional services, scientific and technical services, education services, health care and social welfare services, culture, sports and leisure services, and government services providers. The sector’s gross national product (GNP) is as high as \$8,505,866 million, accounting for 71.5% of the total GNP. The service sector is the most important in Taiwan’s economy and is associated with the most common type of business activities.

In daily work, employees in the financial service sub-sector rely on cooperation to enhance the organization’s overall effectiveness and improve the overall performance. Staff conflict that occurs within the bank may affect the working attitude of the staff, cause them to reduce their effort, and decrease overall productivity, which are all detrimental to the entire department or organization, the work team, and even the employees themselves. Therefore, it is worth investigating whether there is a relationship between work autonomy and intragroup conflict among financial service practitioners. This study conflict objectively while avoiding errors related to a single-source sample. Of the 290 questionnaires collected from the 305 questionnaires sent out, 24 were deemed invalid

due to incomplete answers and 266 were deemed valid, with an effective recovery rate of 95%.

### 3.3 Methodologies for Data Analysis

To test the hypotheses proposed in this study, we carried out the following data analyses using SPSS and LISREL packages.

- (1) Descriptive statistics analysis: to describe the distribution of basic data of individuals in the study sample.
- (2) Cronbach's  $\alpha$  reliability analysis: in this study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was used to measure the reliability of measurement tools such as the work autonomy and intragroup conflict scale to confirm their internal consistency.
- (3) Correlation analysis: Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was used to analyze the variables to understand the correlation, strength, and direction of the correlation between the three dimensions of work autonomy and intragroup conflict. The aims to explore the issues related to work autonomy and intragroup conflict among financial service workers. A survey was conducted in Taiwan using a combined questionnaire covering both work autonomy and intragroup conflict. Respondents were asked to fill in the questionnaire according to their conditions to reflect their perception of work autonomy and intragroup conflict faithfully. All question items were translated to Chinese through the back-translation technique. Senior researchers with expertise on the subject matter reviewed the questionnaire to ensure proper translation without ambiguity. In collecting the data, we tried to measure the relationship between work autonomy and intragroup results were used as input data for LISREL analysis.
- (4) Collinearity analysis: a multicollinearity test was used to detect the collinearity among the variables (work autonomy and intragroup conflict), and variable inflation factors (VIF) and variance ratios were used for judgment. When VIF is greater than 10, it indicates that the variable has collinearity with other observed variables. In terms of the variance ratio, the coefficient of any two variables close to 1 could suggest collinearity between the variables.
- (5) Structural equation modeling (SEM): to examine the linear relationship between the variables and test the causal model between the explicit observable variables and the unobservable latent variables. In this study, the LISREL model was used for data analysis to verify the causal relationship between the

variables in this study (work autonomy and intragroup conflict), and then to determine the degree of fit of the overall model, that is, the degree of fit between the theoretical framework and observed data.

## 4 Research Findings

### 4.1 Descriptive Statistics

There are 266 respondents to the survey questionnaire. The majority of participants age from 21 to 35 years old with university diploma; the ratio between female and male is 85 (about 32%) and 181 (about 68%).

### 4.2 Reliability and Validity

In this study, Pearson correlation coefficient and collinearity analysis were used to detect the correlation and collinearity among the three dimensions of work autonomy (work method autonomy, work scheduling autonomy, and work criteria autonomy) and the three dimensions of intragroup conflict (relationship conflict, task conflict, and process conflict). The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and correlation coefficient matrices of each variable are listed in Table 2. The non-diagonal value of the matrix represents the pair-to-pair correlation coefficient of the variables. The larger the coefficient value is, the stronger the correlation between the variables. The diagonal presents the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients for the dimensions of the variables. When Cronbach's  $\alpha > 0.7$ , reliability is deemed as high. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the Work Autonomy Scale used in this study is 0.89, 0.88, and 0.86 for the three dimensions, respectively, indicating good reliability. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the Intragroup Conflict Scale is 0.89, 0.89, and 0.90 for the three dimensions, respectively, indicating good reliability.

Table 2. The correlation coefficient and reliability matrix for the dimensions of the variables

	Work Method Autonomy	Work Scheduling Autonomy	Work Criteria Autonomy	Relationship Conflict	Task Conflict	Process Conflict
Mean	3.649	3.581	3.491	2.516	2.592	2.590
S.D.	0.803	0.823	0.888	0.871	0.844	0.824
Work Method Autonomy	(0.89)					
Work Scheduling Autonomy	0.817*	(0.88)				
Work Criteria Autonomy	0.670*	0.702*	(0.86)			
Relationship Conflict	-0.330*	-0.429*	-0.376*	(0.89)		
Task Conflict	-0.309*	-0.409*	-0.333*	0.847*	(0.89)	
Process Conflict	-0.291*	-0.367*	-0.314*	0.821*	0.846*	(0.90)

Note: \* P values < 0.05; The numbers in brackets are Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values.

On the other hand, before the principal analysis of hypothesis testing, this section will conduct confirmatory factor analysis based on the three scales of work autonomy and intragroup conflict. The Work Autonomy Scale covers three dimensions: "work method autonomy," "work scheduling autonomy," and "work criteria autonomy," each of which comprises three measurement indicators. Statistical analysis indicates that for the three dimensions of work autonomy, the composite reliabilities (CR) of study constructs ranged 0.70–0.90, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. The Intragroup Conflict Scale covers three dimensions, namely "relationship conflict," "task conflict," and "process conflict," which also comprise three measurement indicators. For the three dimensions of intragroup conflict, the composite reliabilities (CR) of study constructs ranged 0.70–0.90, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.70. These values indicated adequate internal consistency of multiple indicators for each model construct. As for convergent validity, factor-loading coefficients of the CFA were above the minimum standard of 0.50. Each average variance extracted (AVE) value exceeds the recommended threshold of 0.50, reflecting convergent validity. Moreover, we also assessed discriminant validity by comparing the square of the correlation parameters with the AVE. The square root of each AVE value exceeded the correlation coefficients between constructs, providing sufficient, discriminant validity. Overall, each construct fit the required criteria and indicated that the scale had reliability and validity.

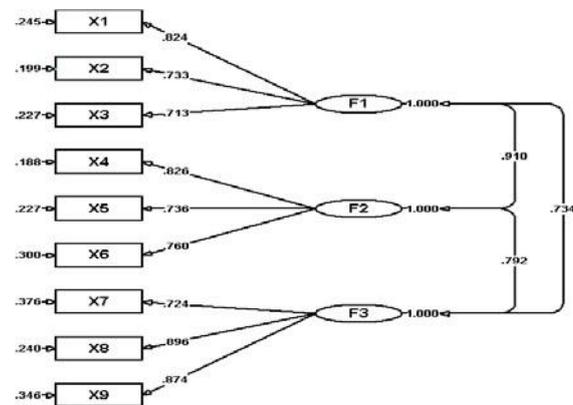


Fig.2: Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model diagram of work autonomy

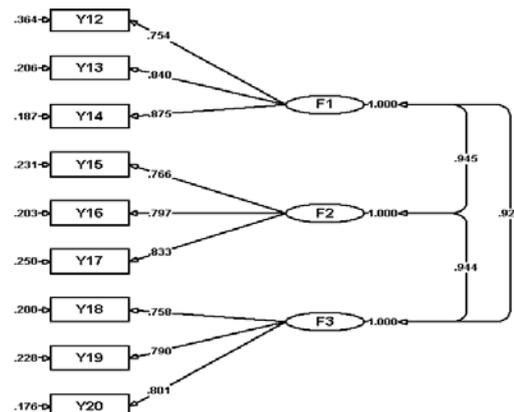


Fig.3: Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model diagram of intragroup conflict

At the level of  $\alpha = 0.05$ , both the estimation parameters of work autonomy and intragroup conflict are significant. In terms of model fitness tests,  $\chi^2/df$ , GFI, AGFI, RMR, RMSEA, and other fitness indicators were all met. Relevant data are summarized as Table 3.

Table 3. Fitness of confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model

Fit index	Cut-off value	Goodness of fit	
		Work autonomy	Intragroup conflict
$\chi^2/df$	< 3.0	2.82 (Acceptable)	2.73 (Acceptable)
GFI	> 0.8	0.95 (Acceptable)	0.95 (Acceptable)
AGFI	> 0.8	0.90 (Acceptable)	0.90 (Acceptable)
RMR	< 0.05	0.03 (Acceptable)	0.02 (Acceptable)
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.08 (Acceptable)	0.08 (Acceptable)

Finally, a multicollinearity test was used to detect the collinearity among the variables (the three dimensions of both work autonomy and intragroup conflict), and VIF values and variance ratios were used for judgment. Where VIF greater than 10 indicates that the variable has collinearity with other observed variables. In this study, VIF values are all less than 10, indicating no collinearity between each variable dimension.

### 4.3 Measurement Structure Model

The main purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between work autonomy and intragroup conflict for employees in the financial service subsector. After hypotheses formulation, research design, data collection, and analysis, the three dimensions of work autonomy were tested against the three dimensions of intragroup conflict for identifying the causality between the dimensions. On completion of the auditing of measurement scale reliability by Cronbach's  $\alpha$  and CFA, the model with 6 hidden variants and 18 observed variants is analyzed in structural model SEM. In other words, structural model SEM is used to verify the hypothesis. We used LISREL 18.0 to carry out an overall measurement model test to assess the reliability and validity of the latent variables in the model. The fit indices of the structural path model results are as follows:  $\chi^2/df = 2.14$ ,  $GFI = 0.84$ ,  $AGFI = 0.81$ ,  $RMR = 0.04$ ,  $RMSEA = 0.07$ . Estimated coefficients in structural model have statistical meaning at the significance level of 5%. In summary, against the evaluation criteria of basic and overall fitness, the results of this study are ideal. Therefore, the fitness of the overall model of this study is ideal, and the causal path diagram is indicated in Figure 4.

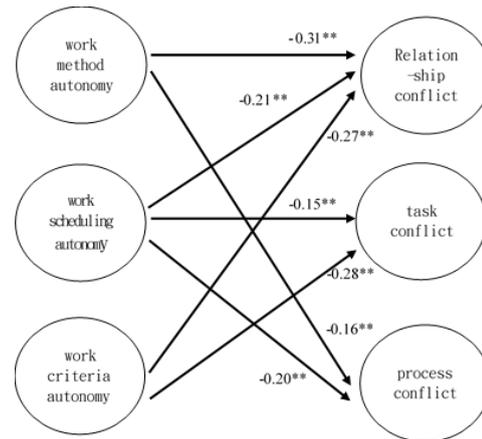


Fig. 4: SEM Results

## 5 Conclusion

In the past, the relationship between work autonomy and intragroup conflict has not been quantitatively examined with a serious of deduction. This study has discussed the importance of work autonomy in financial services staffs and the relationship between the intragroup conflict. These results have important implications for theory and practice in the banking sector in Taiwan that we outline below.

The hypotheses and test results suggest that: with accepted H1, H2, and H3, work autonomy is significantly and negatively related to relationship conflict. For bank employees, the results imply that when they perceive that their team has the autonomy to decide work method, control work process, and develop work criteria, they would have favorable emotional states with shorter psychological distance from the bank, thereby avoiding the occurrence of relationship conflict.

With accepted H4 and H5, work scheduling and criteria autonomy is significantly and negatively related to task conflict. The results imply that bank employees who have autonomy in work scheduling and criteria would behave in reciprocity to find common values and optimal solutions, thereby mitigating task conflict effectively. With accepted H6 and H7, work scheduling and criteria autonomy is significantly and negatively related to process conflict. The results imply that bank employees have autonomy in work method and scheduling would seek consensus by adjusting and integrating the method, process, and sequence of work execution continuously through interaction, and avoid incompatibilities in work method, process, and allocation of work and resources, thereby reducing the occurrence of process conflict. According to the literature review, extant studies on intragroup conflict mainly focus on the conflict's

effects on performance while ignoring the behavioral changes of individuals in an organization. Therefore, examining the relationship between work autonomy and intragroup conflict, this study proposes a new area that deserves attention, and the results expand the knowledge base for work autonomy and intragroup conflict.

Moreover, according to the study results, giving financial service workers in Taiwan work autonomy could reduce the likelihood of conflict among employees. The strategy of improving overall job performance by avoiding intragroup conflict through work autonomy is essential. According to Hackman & Oldham's theory of job characteristics, by giving work autonomy, managers could motivate team members to demonstrate the work mindset of pursuing consistent targets, reduce internal conflict behaviors, thereby effectively improving job performance and quality [4]. The mechanism is precious for the financial service subsector. However, according to Teresa, giving work autonomy should not be a mere rhetoric. In some cases, while claiming that employees are empowered with autonomy, managers effectively depend on specialists to plan all the process details. Therefore, we suggest that organizations should engage their employees in management so that employees could make work plans after self-evaluation and coordination. Relevant training and education are also needed to enhance teamwork and interaction, which are crucial to a decentralized organization. Managers must develop a sound work autonomy framework by taking their companies' actual positions into consideration, including their employees' talents and contributions. With the guidelines, work teams empowered with work autonomy could develop an active, aggressive, and self-adaptive mindset, which is conducive to develop ownership and trust, thereby minimizing conflicts between the employees.

Finally, we have the following suggestions for further relevant studies: (1) With a cross-sectional study, we could not examine the evolution and interactions of the variables over time and have a deeper understanding of their causality. Therefore, longitudinal field studies and controlled laboratory experiments could be carried out in the future to enhance the understanding of the causal relationships between the variables. (2) This study is based on financial services workers. Given the differences between the sectors and business models, the results of this study may not necessarily apply to other sectors or business models. Therefore, future studies should target other industries with high degree of work autonomy and

intragroup conflict such as Taiwan's tourism or high-tech enterprises that may have many beneficial effects [26]. (3) We suggest future studies should combine other variables or innovative methods to examine the mediation effect, even the impacts of intellectual resource management [26,27].

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#### Contribution of Individual Authors:

CHE-CHENG CHANG has organized and executed the research model, carried out the literature review, and presented the research conclusion.

SHU-HSIEN HUANG was responsible for the data collection and statistics.

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