

# Recovery in occupational health psychology and human resource management research: An Interview with Prof. Sabine Sonnentag and Prof. Ute Stephan

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## Abstract

While academic research on recovery was rather segregated between occupational health psychology and management research at the beginning of the 20s century and streams of research developed independently, recent developments hint at a closing divide and better integration

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of recovery research across disciplines. This for example becomes evident in publications of researchers across the traditional outlets within both fields, as well as increasing close collaborations of researchers firmly rooted in one of the fields. In preparation of this special issue, the editors were interested in whether this development represents a convergence or even a true merging of research in these different disciplines. We therefore interviewed Prof. Sabine Sonnentag as expert from occupational health psychology research and Prof. Ute Stephan with expertise in management research. Both are excellent and world-famous researchers in their disciplines. We discussed the current state, the advances during the last years, and the future directions of recovery research in their respective fields. We also talked about their perspectives on integrative topics and about specific issues in both domains that might stimulate a new *recovery management research agenda*.

### **Keywords**

expert, human resource management, interview, recovery, psychology, recovery

More than one century ago, researchers from occupational health psychology and management research developed an increasing interest in studying human recovery from work-related stress. For instance, one might remember early studies from German psychologist Otto Graf (1893–1962) or Australian industrial sociologist Elton Mayo (1880–1949) on the link between employees' rest breaks and work performance. While streams of research have developed rather independently within the disciplines, with up-and-downs in research activity during the 20s century, there is a rising interest in recovery particularly within occupational health psychology since the 1990s. The COVID-19 pandemic and the associated disappearance of physical boundaries between work and private life for a majority of workers during telework, has further spurred interest in recovery processes in scientists and workers alike (De Bloom, 2020). The research output has seemingly exploded since the 90's, especially in the top-tier journals such as *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* or *Journal of Applied Psychology*. In our view, this body of this accumulated knowledge has also stimulated (human resource) management researchers to integrate this research in their discipline. It is still under critical discussion if this is a psychologization of HRM, thus, the dominance of psychological theorizing and scholarship in the field of HRM (Godard, 2014; Troth and Guest, 2020), and how both disciplines stimulate each other. We therefore interviewed Prof. Sabine Sonnentag as expert from occupational health psychology and Prof. Ute Stephan as expert from (human resource) management research and discussed this issue in relation to the field of recovery research.

*Sabine Sonnentag* is currently a Full Professor of Work and Organizational Psychology at the University of Mannheim, Germany (since 2010). She is a psychologist and has earned a PhD in 1991. Her research addresses the question of how individuals can achieve sustainable high job performance and remain healthy at the same time. She studies recovery from job stress, proactive behavior, and self-regulation at work. So far, she has supervised 22 PhD students, published eight books and more than 120 peer-reviewed journal articles, which document her successful research career. She is a fellow of the Society of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, the Association for Psychological Science and the International Association of Applied Psychology and received the

German Psychological Society (DGPs) Lifetime Achievement Award in 2018. She currently is an associate editor of *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, serves as editorial board member for *Academy of Management Journal* and *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, and was also at the editorial team of *Journal of Business and Psychology* and *Journal of Applied Psychology*, to name just a few.

*Ute Stephan* is a Full Professor of Entrepreneurship at the King's College London (UK), Transcampus Professor (Organizational Psychology) at TU Dresden, Germany, and Honorary Professor at University College London and at Aston Business School (UK). She earned a PhD in work psychology at University of Marburg in 2008. Her research focuses on the relationships between culture, institutions and entrepreneurship, on social entrepreneurship and inclusive business, as well as on entrepreneurs' well-being. She has authored more than 60 scientific contributions in management journals such as *Journal of Management*, *Management Science*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, and *Journal of Business Venturing*. She is an elected board member of the GLOBE project and the International Association of Applied Psychology (IAAP), where she chairs IAAP's publication committee. She has served as editor-in-chief of *Applied Psychology: An International Review* and is currently editor at *Entrepreneurship Theory & Practice* and consulting editor of *Journal of International Business Studies*.

While we first planned to meet and interview both experts at a conference in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic forced us to switch to a written interview that we conducted in February 2021.

**Special Issue Editors:** Dear Prof. Sonnentag, most of the scholars know you from the Recovery Experience Questionnaire (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2007) and the Stressor-Detachment-Model (Sonnentag and Fritz, 2015), which both have been widely used in recovery research during the last decades but also in the studies of this special issue. Can you tell us more about when, how and why you started to research employees' recovery?

**Prof. Sonnentag:** I started to think about recovery in the late nineties of the 20th century. I have always been fascinated by research on job stress and then I became interested in the question what people are actually doing to alleviate (or even undo) the impact of job stressors so they can stay healthy – despite the daily stressors they are encountering on the job. I was (and I am still) interested in what people can do themselves, that is how they can be agentic.

**Special Issue Editors:** Dear Prof. Stephan, can you tell us a bit more how you were intrigued by the topic of recovery?

**Prof. Stephan:** I'm interested in how individuals can sustain performance and well-being in the extreme work context of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs' work is rich in stressors (high uncertainty, high workload, often loneliness and pressures of responsibility) but also well-being resources (highly meaningful work, high degrees of autonomy to name a few, see Stephan, 2018; Stephan et al., 2020). Such challenging work makes it difficult for entrepreneurs to disengage from work and find time for recovery – in essence entrepreneurs "live" the recovery paradox that Sabine Sonnentag described so well (Sonnentag, 2018). In short, I am intrigued by how we may convince individuals for whom work is all-encompassing to make time for recovery.

**Special Issue Editors:** And how has this interest in recovery developed during the years and why was this specific focus important for your research program?

**Prof. Stephan:** Having worked with economists and managements scholars, I recognized the importance to relate recovery to performance as well as to well-being. This perspective helps to broaden the reach of our research. For instance, a study where we related recovery to entrepreneurs' creativity has helped us to argue that recovery is not just a phenomenon that is important to understand for entrepreneurs' well-being (e.g. Wach et al., 2020) but that it also matters for their productivity, especially their creativity (Weinberger et al., 2018). The creativity study attracted a lot of interest and, practically speaking, it becomes easier to convince entrepreneurs to engage in self-care (recovery experiences and activities) if we can demonstrate that doing so makes them more creative. This way recovery is seen less as an additional cost (time away from the business), but as an investment in productivity.

**Special Issue Editors:** What are the most important facts OHP researchers have learned on employees' recovery during the last years?

**Prof. Sonnentag:** What we see from recovery research is that the way of how employees spend their off-job time and how they experience this time is closely related to their well-being – and it seems that it actually has an impact on their well-being. At a meta-level we see that recovery research became much more differentiated during recent years. For instance, when my team and I started to study recovery, we focused very much on single recovery activities and recovery experiences mainly during free evenings (Sonnentag et al., 2008). Now there is an increased interest in profiles of recovery experiences (Bennett et al., 2016; Chawla et al., 2020) and a lively research activity on work breaks (Bosch et al., 2018; Sianoja et al., 2018) as well.

**Special Issue Editors:** One paper in this special issue concerns the role of organizational climate on employees' recovery. What is your opinion on how organizational factors drive recovery processes and how can organizations integrate such knowledge in their HRM with the aim of developing a “culture of recovery”?

**Prof. Sonnentag:** Addressing the organizational climate is very important. Probably the immediate supervisor plays a crucial role, but also the broader organizational context is important. In order to increase our understanding of recovery (and lack thereof) we need to address implicit and explicit organizational expectations about when to work and about when to stay in contact with work. A first important step in fostering recovery is awareness that recovery is needed and that recovery processes often do not happen by themselves, but that they need to be facilitated. I anticipate that recovery will become even more difficult as more and more people work from home. How to recover in a space that has been one's office during the entire day? Of course, there are solutions, but it is not always easy and we need awareness of it.

**Special Issue Editors:** Prof. Stephan, you have done many studies on entrepreneurs' recovery during the last years. What were the specific motivation and key findings?

**Prof. Stephan:** I already mentioned our research that related objective measures of recovery (sleep) and of detachment to entrepreneurs' creativity and well-being. I am

currently investigating how recovery can be a strategy for entrepreneurs to safeguard their well-being in the Covid-19 pandemic. This is part of our global study across 23 countries on entrepreneurs' resilience and Covid-19.

**Special Issue Editors:** What are the most important challenges and research directions for recovery research in the next years?

**Prof. Sonnentag:** For me, the question of causality is always important. Is it really that recovery leads to better well-being and health – or does recovery suffer when well-being is already impaired? Or is everything just a matter of personality?

**Special Issue Editors:** Many papers in our special issue consider the topic of boundary crossing between work and private life, for instance, use of information and communication technologies, availability for work, and contagion among partners from an occupational health psychology perspective. What are important streams and results on these topics in HRM research and what do you miss in psychological research?

**Prof. Stephan:** First of all, congratulations on an excellent special issue that you put together! It covers a range of really important topics. For instance, it was great to see two studies considering social contexts, the household context and the organizational context. In general, there is a need to contextualize our research more, for example, pay more attention to how causal relationships may play out differently across contexts. Context can be the employment setting (I think we need to understand non-standard work contexts and the gig economy much better as they are rapidly expanding), type of organization (e.g. 99% of all EU businesses are small business but HRM in these businesses is rarely studied) and more appreciation of societal and country influences. These are not just opportunities for theory building, but also necessary steps for our knowledge to stay relevant and address replication concerns (or the replication “crisis”).

**Special Issue Editors:** If recovery and leisure time becomes relevant for employee performance, how can we protect workers from employers' interest in intervening with their private life?

**Prof. Stephan:** Perhaps one pathway could be to develop a recovery mindset among organizational leaders (entrepreneurs, CEOs, top management). If they recognize the value of recovery for themselves, they are more likely to grant it to their employees. Of course, we clearly cannot rely on changing mindsets of organizational leaders alone. There is an important role for health and safety directives to protect employees.

**Special Issue Editors:** Prof. Sonnentag, as an occupational health psychologist, what do you think: Is there a “psychologization of HRM” (Godard, 2014)? And if so, is this good or bad? What are the drivers and consequences from your perspective?

**Prof. Sonnentag:** Indeed, I think we are observing an impact of psychology on HRM and Godard's paper stimulated an interesting debate during which drivers and consequences have been discussed (Budd, 2020; Troth and Guest, 2020). There are positive aspects to this “psychologization” because work and organizational psychology has to offer a lot. But we have to ask: What are we missing if the psychologist's perspective gets too much weight? Within psychology, work is often seen as an individual-level or

team-level phenomenon and the broader economic and societal context is mostly neglected. And I have to admit that a focus on recovery as an approach of protecting employee health and well-being runs the risk of adopting such a “psychologized” perspective with the implicit underlying assumption that it is primarily the employees’ responsibility to protect their well-being via an optimized recovery process.

**Special Issue Editors:** As a psychologist in the field of management research, what do you think, is there a “psychologization of HRM” (Godard, 2014)?

**Prof. Stephan:** This psychologization seems less prominent here in the UK. But, yes, I think it is important for any area of research to have a balance of different disciplinary perspectives that offer complementary insights, and thus allow us to understand HRM in all its facets. In this regard psychological approaches are valuable as they bring the lived experience of employees to the fore and draw attention to well-being as an important outcome in its own right. Equally there is value in sociological, legal, economic, and many other perspectives that more prominently draw attention to power dynamics, justice considerations, trade-offs etc. I hope that HRM remains interdisciplinary in outlook and makes space for multiple perspectives.

**Special Issue Editors:** Considering recovery, what should occupational health psychologists recommend human resource management scholars and vice versa?

**Prof. Sonnentag:** Occupational health psychologists could recommend approaches that help employees to recover in a better way, for instance trainings and other intervention programs. Moreover, taking the working conditions (job stressors, autonomy etc.) into account is important because stressful work situations can make recovery particularly difficult (Sonnentag, 2018). Human resource management scholars could help psychologist to broaden their perspective, to take the broader employment context into account when addressing questions of employee health and well-being.

**Special Issue Editors:** Is there a question on recovery you still have no answer to and that keeps you ruminating at night?

**Prof. Sonnentag:** I hope that I do not ruminate too much at night! But what I really find interesting is the recovery paradox (Sonnentag, 2018) – the idea that when recovery is highly needed, it is most difficult to actually pursue recovery activities and enjoy recovery experiences. Another question I find fascinating refers to potential positive effects of not detaching from work. For instance, two experimental studies that I did together with Cornelia Niessen showed that it is mainly negative thinking about work that accounts for the detrimental effects of not detaching from work after the workday. Thinking about work in a positive way has a beneficial effect on affect (Sonnentag and Niessen, 2020).

**Special Issue Editors:** Prof. Stephan, is there a question on recovery that you still have no answer to and would like to see addressed?

**Prof. Stephan:** Many, especially in the context of entrepreneurship, where we still know very little about how to enable recovery and about the effects of recovery including for well-being and performance.

**Special Issue Editors:** Final question, what is the most valuable recovery activity you would recommend?

**Prof. Sonntag:** Of course, there are always individual preferences, different hobbies and so on. It seems that it is important to pursue an activity into which one gets fully immersed and that helps to forget anything else for a while (Hahn et al., 2012). And: Research tells us that physical exercise is an activity that usually has a high recovery potential (van Hooff et al., 2019).

**Prof. Stephan:** I find it difficult to pick one and there will be differences across individuals and jobs. When I started to research entrepreneurs' well-being, I was surprised how many entrepreneurs spontaneously mentioned the importance of high-quality sleep for their well-being. I could certainly relate to that and there is much research on sleep (including the detrimental effects of the lack of high-quality sleep). And of course, there is a range of recovery experiences and activities help enable high-quality sleep including detachment from work in the evening and exercise.

**Special Issue Editors:** Dear Prof. Sonntag and Prof. Stephan, thank you very much for answering our questions. Is there anything you would like to add for our readers related to the topic of employee recovery?

**Prof. Sonntag:** I think we should not take anything for granted, for instance that recovery "leads" to better well-being, but we need to continue to question our sometimes "naïve" beliefs, we need be open to different and unexpected findings, and we need find ways to do even better research.


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