

# Struggling with different work identities? Your work may suffer

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Few people are just one person at work. You may be both a manager and an employee. Or you may be a salesperson who represents two very different brands.

Now a new study suggests that how you juggle those different work identities may affect your job performance.

Employees who believe their different identities enhance each other are more productive than others, the study found. But workers who feel their identities are in conflict see a hit to their performance.

"We tend to think of our work role identities one at a time, as if they were completely separate," said Steffanie Wilk, co-author of the study and associate professor of management and human resources at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

"But this research shows that the interactions are important. The way we manage and think about our different roles could be affecting how well we do our jobs."

Wilk conducted the study with Lakshmi Ramarajan of Harvard University and Nancy Rothbard at the University of Pennsylvania. Their results were published in a recent issue of the *Academy of Management Journal*.

People are familiar with the concept of identity conflict and

enhancement. There's been a lot written about the tensions between the roles of women who are both mothers and employees, for example.

But this research suggests that people can have issues dealing with different identities within the workplace, Wilk said. Companies need to be more attuned to what roles they ask their employees to take on.

"If your employees feel they have to make trade-offs between different role identities in the workplace, they may not do as good a job," she said.

That's what the researchers found when they studied 763 employees of a company that managed customer service for credit cards associated with a number of well-known brands in retail and financial services, among others.

In this case, employees had to juggle their identities representing very different brands.

Was being a representative for a particular clothing company's credit card opposed to - or compatible with - the work they had to do for particular bank's [credit card](#)?

The researchers had a very good way to answer that question. Part of each [employee](#)'s job was to sell additional products and services to customers on calls. So the question was: Would identity conflict hurt their sales - and would compatibility help?

Employees were asked in a survey to name the two brands they worked with most. They then rated how much they agreed with a variety of statements. These statements measured if their identification with the two brands was in conflict ("Life would be easier if I represented only one of these brands and not another") or if working with both brands enhanced each other ("I am a better representative of one [brand](#) because

I am also a representative for the other brand").

Results showed that employees whose responses implied identity conflict between their two brands had lower-than-average sales for the four months after they took the survey, while those who indicated their brands enhanced each other had better-than-average sales.

"There are real-world effects for not being able to successfully juggle your identities," Wilk said. "Your performance can suffer, as we found in this call center."

The researchers conducted two experimental studies that replicated many of the same results, and gave additional insight into how identity conflict or enhancement might work to affect performance.

The studies showed that participants who thought their identities enhanced each other showed more intrinsic motivation. In the first study, for example, they were more likely to agree with statements like "I work at this job because I think it is interesting." And [intrinsic motivation](#), in turn, improved sales.

The researchers also looked at how [identity](#) enhancement and conflict related to perspective-taking by participants, which was the extent to which they took on a customer's point of view.

Perspective-taking had an effect that surprised the researchers, at least at first - it actually reduced sales in the first study. After additional studies, the researchers think they better understand why.

"We believe if you put yourself into your customers' shoes too much, you may start to wonder if they really want or need what you're selling," Wilk said. "That can hurt performance."

The bottom line is that companies need to help their employees find common elements between their different identities, Wilk said.

"There needs to be connections between the identities that make sense to your employees. If there is [conflict](#), your employees will ruminate, take up their mental energy, and struggle with their jobs. But if the connections are there, it can help."

Provided by The Ohio State University

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