

# “Locked at the job”: a qualitative study on the process of this phenomenon

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Many employees experience a “locked at the job” situation and are not satisfied with their current job and at the same time, perceive limited job opportunities. This study examines the process that individuals who experience locked at the job go through and the coping mechanisms individuals use.

**Design/methodology/approach** – A total of Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted. Of the participants, 12 were locked at the job at the time of the interview and 18 participants experienced locked at the job in the past.

**Findings** – The authors identified three phases. Regarding the first phase “becoming locked at the job,” various individual and work environmental causes could be identified. In the second phase “being locked at the job,” the authors identified three levels: low-, medium- and high-locked individuals. Emotion-regulated coping strategies were mainly reappraisal, positive distraction and behavioral avoidance. The third phase “ending locked at the job” revealed that a locked at the job situation often comes to an end either by taking control independently or by external force. Especially, the role of the direct supervisor was decisive during the entire locked at the job process.

**Practical implications** – In the practical implications, the authors suggest to discuss locked at the job throughout the entire workplace and create an open culture acknowledging that individuals may find themselves in such a situation.

**Originality/value** – To date, no qualitative study has been conducted before from this perspective. Therefore, it is extremely important to look at this relatively unknown phenomenon from this perspective.

**Keywords** Qualitative study, Locked at the job, Sustainable careers, Process, Job immobility, Emotion-focused coping

**Paper type** Research paper



## Introduction

Many employees experience a “locked at the job” situation at a certain point throughout their careers (Feenstra-Verschure, 2022). Locked at the job is a state in which the individual is dissatisfied about the current job and at the same time, experiences limited job opportunities to leave the current situation. To date, in addition to a conducted literature review on existing studies within the job immobility literature and a conceptualization of “locked at the job,” several quantitative studies have also been conducted on locked at the job (Feenstra-Verschure, 2022) and on related constructs such as locked-in (Stengård *et al.*, 2017), reluctant stayers (Hom *et al.*, 2012) and job-lock (Fisher *et al.*, 2016). These studies found, for example, a negative relation to health and well-being (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999; Muhonen, 2010; Stengård *et al.*, 2016) and to perceived support from supervisors and colleagues (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999). However, we still lack insight into how individuals become locked at the job, how they experience this and how this situation is ended. Therefore, this study examines the entire process from becoming locked at the job until ending a locked at the job situation. It is of great importance to know what causes lead to combined feelings of both job dissatisfaction and perceiving limited job opportunities to minimize the number of individuals who become locked at the job.

Based on the person–environment (PE) fit theory (Edwards, 2008), we suggest that the causes of becoming locked at the job lead to several misfits that collectively lead to the two dimensions job dissatisfaction and the perception of limited job opportunities. Currently, there is little understanding of what factors cause these misfits that ultimately lead to job dissatisfaction and the perception of limited job opportunities, which makes someone feel locked at the job. However, we do know that age (Kooij *et al.*, 2011), level of education (Furåker *et al.*, 2014), the role of the supervisor (Muhonen, 2010) and mental and physical job demands (Stengård, 2018) are factors that are associated with becoming locked at the job. In this study, we want to examine the feelings, thoughts and emotions that individuals experience when they feel locked at the job. For example, several studies have shown that emotional, mental and physical issues such as depressive symptoms, stress, exhaustion, headaches and sleep problems can arise (Allen *et al.*, 2016; Aronsson and Göransson, 1999; Muhonen, 2010; Stengård *et al.*, 2016). To overcome this negative state of experiencing locked at the job, it is important to understand how individuals cope with such negative events and perceptions and make this situation endurable (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000). Further, we want to gain more knowledge on the ways to end locked at the job, since this has not been studied yet. The goal of this study is to give first insights into the process when experiencing locked at the job.

## Theory

### *Process of locked at the job*

In existing job immobility literature, no previous study has examined the behavioral, cognitive and psychological process that individuals go through when they experience locked at the job. When the individual experiences a PE misfit (Edwards, 2008) and is not able to control ones thoughts and behaviors, effort from the individual is required to move from unconscious to consciousness in the process the individual is going through. However, Stengård *et al.* (2016) hypothesize a situation in which the individual can be at risk of becoming locked at the job, which presumes that one passes through different phases refers to different stages. In addition, the transtheoretical model of behavior change (Prochaska and Velicer, 1997) proposes that individuals experience different behaviors in certain stages of change. In the first stage, individuals will “precontemplate” and do not intend to take action, which is also a dimension for employees experiencing locked at the job. Once individuals reach the end of being locked at the job, they will enter the second stage “contemplation,” in which one has the intention to make a change. When the individual enters the third stage

called “preparation,” the individual has started to end the locked at the job situation. The individual is willing to actively alter the situation and will take small steps to initiate change. According to Prochaska and Velicer (1997), the individual will eventually make the change in the fourth stage “action” and get out of the locked at the job situation. In case of a locked at the job situation, the individual fails to reach this action stage. Despite these conceptual ideas, empirical research on the process of becoming locked at the job is lacking. Therefore, the following research question is investigated:

*RQ1.* Through which process do individuals progress when becoming locked at the job?

#### *Becoming locked at the job*

Crant (2000) supposes that proactive individuals can act based on their own choices, something that individuals who feel locked at the job are incapable of. In addition, research shows that employees failing to self-regulate are unable to control their thoughts, behaviors and emotions (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996). It might be that these employees fail to self-regulate their own behaviors as they do not get enough guidance from their direct supervisor, peers or even from their family and friends (Heatherton and Baumeister, 1996).

As described by Aronsson and Göransson (1999), there are several reasons why individuals stay in their jobs that they do not consider desirable. Because the concept of locked at the job consists of two dimensions, we distinguish two main causes that lead to experiencing locked at the job. One feels dissatisfied in the current job on the one hand and perceives limited opportunities to leave the job on the other hand (Feenstra-Verschure, 2022). Based on the PE fit theory (Edwards, 2008), we propose that a locked at the job situation is fostered by multiple factors that cause the individual to experience a misfit between the current and desired work situation. Furthermore, due to the lack of self-regulation (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996), the individual is unable to achieve this desired situation (Wheeler *et al.*, 2007).

*Job dissatisfaction.* Several sub-causes can lead to a feeling of dissatisfaction in the job. Previous literature has shown that the relationship with the direct supervisor is important (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999). When there is insufficient support from the immediate supervisor, this can lead to job dissatisfaction (Ali and Ahmed, 2009; Danish and Usman, 2010; Tessema *et al.*, 2013). In addition to a negative relationship with the direct supervisor, we also suggest that the work atmosphere within the team or the entire organization can lead to job dissatisfaction, this as research shows that when individuals are in a positive work environment, they tend to be more satisfied with their job (Agbozo *et al.*, 2017). Research by Stengård (2018) shows that high levels of physical and mental obligations in the job that transcend the individual’s capabilities can also lead to job dissatisfaction and ultimately experiencing locked at the job. In addition, it is proposed that when the abilities of the individual are not adequately utilized, there will also be a misfit resulting in dissatisfaction in the job, for example, because of a lack of challenges and responsibilities in the job (Feenstra-Verschure, 2022; Okeke and Mtyuda, 2017; Wheeler *et al.*, 2007).

*Limited job opportunities.* There are several causes that may limit the perception of job opportunities. We propose that high income and associated fringe benefits may be a major cause in experiencing locked at the job in the current job position, due to the lack of available job opportunities with similar or better income (Keith and McWilliams, 1995). Further, research shows that higher age or tenure and lower level of education can lead to a sense of experiencing locked at the job due to lack of opportunities. Kooij *et al.* (2011) show that personal motives and conditions change with age, which might result in a misfit if the organization or job does not match these changes. Benjamin *et al.* (2008), Fisher *et al.* (2016), Furåker *et al.* (2014), Huysse-Gaytandjieva *et al.* (2013) and Wilkie *et al.* (2011) propose that older individuals are more likely to become locked at the job. When the work environment

is unable to meet these changed conditions, there is a chance that one may suffer from a PE misfit. With respect to tenure, it appears that the higher the years of service, the more pessimistic one is about their chances in the labor market, in particular when one has more than 15 years of service (Furåker *et al.*, 2014). In addition, it is evident that the level of education promotes or reduces the available opportunities, since a more educated person will have access to a greater variety of jobs (Furåker *et al.*, 2014). These studies show a few possible causes why individuals can become locked at the job. However, little empirical research exists on a broad spectrum of all possible causes for becoming both dissatisfied with the job and perceiving limited job opportunities, which results in becoming locked at the job. A qualitative approach can help gain this broader understanding on reasons for becoming locked at the job. In addition to the limited number of studies, Feenstra-Verschure (2022) also show that a fragmented approach is used in the conceptualization and operationalization of job immobility constructs, which also shows the current lack of insight. Therefore, the following first sub-research question is addressed:

*SQ1.* What are the reasons to become locked at the job?

#### *Being locked at the job*

Several studies have been conducted that examined the feelings, thoughts and emotions that occur when someone is stuck in the job. They are less involved with their jobs (Blau, 2001), experience lower career satisfaction (Fisher *et al.*, 2016) and at the same time, perceive insecurity about keeping their current job (Furåker *et al.*, 2014; Gazier, 2007). They experience more work-related stress and poorer well-being (Edwards and Shipp, 2007; Fisher *et al.*, 2016; Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Muhonen, 2010). It is suggested that when being locked at the job, individuals experience frustration by which a depletion of energy may occur, as the individual is not able to reach their desired situation (Vander Elst *et al.*, 2012). Also, emotional exhaustion (Allen *et al.*, 2016) may occur. At its peak, one may even experience depressive symptoms (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999; Muhonen, 2010; Stengård *et al.*, 2016) or a burnout (Tong *et al.*, 2015) leading to long-term sick leave (Fahlén *et al.*, 2009) as individuals will lack personal resources after a while. As a result, physical effects of being locked at the job will occur, such as decreases of sleep quality/quantity (Allen *et al.*, 2016; Muhonen, 2010), fatigue and headaches (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999). However, the extent to which these effects will similarly develop across different individuals has not been examined to date. The following second sub-research question is studied:

*SQ2.* How do individuals experience being locked at the job?

#### *Coping mechanisms when being locked*

Research indicates that when experiencing negative events, such as a locked at the job state, coping mechanisms are very important to minimize the negative effects (Folkman and Moskowitz, 2000). Coping is defined by Folkman *et al.* (1986) as “the person’s cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage (reduce, minimize, master, or tolerate) the internal and external demands of the person-environment transaction that is appraised as taxing or exceeding the person’s resources” (p. 572). Subsequently, it can counter the individuals’ perceived stress (Beh and Loo, 2012). In the literature, mainly two types of coping mechanisms are outlined: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Folkman and Lazarus, 1985; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Later, Folkman (2008) introduced a third type, meaning-focused coping, in which the individual relies on their own beliefs, values and goals to handle the present situation. For this study, we focus on the first two types of coping mechanisms, which show a good fit with the phenomenon of locked at the job. Because individuals who are locked at the job situation are unable to control their thoughts

and behaviors, making reliance on one's own beliefs is impossible (Carver and Scheier, 1982). Problem-focused coping proposes that the individual will solve the problem or address the source of the stressor. This approach will be used when the individual believes that constructive improvements can be made, or they are able to take control over the situation, which often happens at the ending locked at the job phase. However, locked at the job, individuals are passive and not capable of altering their current situation. Therefore, we focus on emotion-focused coping in this study for individuals who are in a locked at the job state. Emotion-focused coping suggests that the individual will regulate the emotional distress, caused or linked to the situation. This strategy is used when the individual feels that the situation must be endured (Carver *et al.*, 1989). The longer the situation will continue, the more difficult it will be for the individual to cope with this prolonged intense situation (Mabiza *et al.*, 2017). Among emotion regulation strategies, there are four types that are more common when experiencing a locked at the job situation (Naragon-Gainey *et al.*, 2017): first, reappraisal where the individual adjusts their perspective and will look more for the positive aspects of the current situation (Izadpanah *et al.*, 2017; Naragon-Gainey *et al.*, 2017) and second, positive distraction, in which the individual shifts his/her attention. This could include shifting the focus from work to private related aspects in one's life (Loch *et al.*, 2011; Naragon-Gainey *et al.*, 2017). In addition, one can also apply avoidance strategies, for example, thirdly experiential avoidance is spoken of when one suppresses negative thoughts and emotions related to work (Izadpanah *et al.*, 2017; Naragon-Gainey *et al.*, 2017). Fourth, the individual may also exhibit behavioral avoidance; hereby, one avoids the unpleasant situation, individual or environment (Naragon-Gainey *et al.*, 2017). When individuals find themselves in an unfulfilling job for an extended period, it can lead to a depletion of energy as one needs to cope with this nonpreferred situation (Aronsson *et al.*, 2000; Stengård *et al.*, 2016). In addition, a reason for individuals to postpone their exit and not seek for job opportunities may have to do with reaching specific career goals in which their current job is required to obtain a desired job as mentioned by De Jong *et al.* (2009). In this case, the individual will also use reappraisal or positive distraction strategies and make a conscious decision not to leave temporarily and remain locked at the job (Stengård *et al.*, 2016). Given the limited understanding of how individuals cope with a locked at the job situation, further extensive research is needed on this topic. The following third sub-research question is addressed:

SQ3. How do individuals cope with being locked at the job?

#### *Ending locked at the job*

Among individuals who feel locked at the job and experience job dissatisfaction, however, there are two ways through which the process of locked at the job will come to an end by their own volition or by force. When the "being locked at the job" phase passes into the "ending locked at the job" phase, it is important that the individual has taken control of the work situation (Carver and Scheier, 1982) in order to leave the situation. This control can only be achieved when the individual actively behaves and is aware of the change that needs to be made (Verbruggen and De Vos, 2016). Job crafting theory shows that it is important to examine whether individuals shape their own work environment and to what extent they take matters into their own hands (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). Research shows that individuals prefer to search for job opportunities from within their current job. From this safe and comfortable environment, people often decide whether they should leave when their present value is decreased in their current job (Lévy-Garboua *et al.*, 2007). In addition, we propose that there is also a group that will not craft their careers independently but will exit the locked at the job situation due to external forces. The so-called "reluctant leavers" (Hom *et al.*, 2012) are laid off, fired or eventually retire. To date, it is unclear how some individuals

are able to change their situation and others are not. An important and fourth sub-research question, also suggested by [Huysse-Gaytandjieva et al. \(2013\)](#), is therefore as follows:

*SQ4.* How does being locked at the job end?

The locked at the job phenomenon

## Method

### *Research design and procedure*

In this study, using a qualitative research design, we sought to gain an in-depth insight into the process individuals go through when becoming locked at the job. To generate a heterogeneous sample, we targeted both public and private sector companies, varying from a municipality to a custodian bank (see [Table 1](#)). To attract respondents who were locked at the job now or in the past, a flyer was designed. The following description was used: *“Have you ever had that feeling that you are no longer satisfied with your job or work environment and felt that you could not take any steps to change this situation? For example, because of salary, fear of the unknown or because you are stuck in your job.”* Many people stated that they were familiar with the topic and confirmed that it was a common phenomenon within their company. However, people were not keen on participating. Notable reactions that we received after flyering came from an employee stating: *“I don’t really feel the need to bring up this period anymore. It’s taken me enough effort to get back on track and I’m glad that this has worked out anyway.”* Further, while the flyers were distributed, there were several potential participants

ID#	Type of organization	Gender	Age	Period	Duration (months)	Coping
1	Employment agency	Female	25	Currently locked	6	X
2	Municipality	Female	27	Past locked	6	X
3	Employment agency	Male	27	Currently locked	12	X
4	Employment agency	Female	26	Past locked	18	X
5	Financial institution	Female	51	Past locked	96	X
6	Custodian bank	Female	49	Past locked	24	X
7	Custodian bank	Female	41	Past locked	36	X
8	Custodian bank	Female	42	Currently locked	72	X
9	Custodian bank	Female	39	Currently locked	72	X
10	Custodian bank	Male	57	Currently locked	36	X
11	Custodian bank	Male	57	Currently locked	18	X
12	Custodian bank	Female	48	Past locked	36	X
13	Custodian bank	Female	27	Past locked	18	X
14	Municipality	Male	30	Past locked	12	X
15	Custodian bank	Male	45	Currently locked	96	X
16	Financial institution	Male	27	Past locked	6	X
17	Custodian bank	Male	60	Currently locked	30	
18	Law firm	Female	38	Past locked	24	
19	Production company	Male	41	Past locked	18	
20	Pension fund	Female	47	Past locked	24	
21	Custodian bank	Female	58	Currently locked	7	
22	Child day-care	Female	38	Currently locked	18	
23	Custodian bank	Male	42	Past locked	24	
24	Custodian bank	Male	47	Past locked	6	
25	Pension fund	Male	31	Past locked	24	
26	Custodian bank	Male	41	Currently locked	24	
27	Insurance broker	Male	44	Past locked	60	
28	Custodian bank	Male	59	Past locked	48	
29	Consultancy firm	Female	30	Past locked	30	
30	Custodian bank	Male	37	Currently locked	12	

**Table 1.**  
An overview of participants

who indicated that they did not want to disclose their participation in the interview because they did not want their colleagues to know. In addition to this form of shame in participating, there was also a lack of trust towards the organization. We received several e-mails in which potential participants expressed doubts about the influence of the organization and did not want any form of communication about the potential interview being recorded on the internal company network (no e-mail or agenda notifications). This demonstrates that there is a great taboo on this phenomenon. Nonetheless, we were able to find 32 respondents who voluntarily shared their experience.

#### *Data collection*

In a time period of two weeks (April–May 2018), we were able to conduct the 32 in-depth interviews. The interviews lasted approximately one hour. To avoid interviewer bias, the interviews were conducted by two independent master's students, who had no relationship to the participants. This allowed the participants to speak freely and did not restrict them in possibly not wanting to express their feelings and thoughts regarding their locked at the job situation (Salazar, 1990). In addition to having taken several courses on conducting qualitative interviews, the master's students were coached and carefully monitored at the end of each interview on how they asked follow-up questions and how they placed appropriate emphasis on specific questions. The majority of the interviews were held in person; however, four interviews (ID 1, 15, 20 and 33) were conducted via telephone, as some respondents were not able to meet in person. Because the interviewers had already conducted several interviews in person, the quality of the interviews could be ensured (Opdenakker, 2006). All interviews were conducted in Dutch. Of the 32 interviews, two interviews were found to be unusable as the respondents did not meet the two dimensions of experiencing locked at the job, resulting in a total number of 30 interviews, see Table 1.

The interviews started with a brief introduction that included some practical information about who conducted the interview, our request to be as detailed as possible when answering the questions and that all respondents gave their consent on audio recording the interview. In addition, they were assured that the interview was strictly confidential and that their input would be treated with the utmost care. To put the respondents at ease, they were first asked some general questions about their background, the importance of their work (compared to other factors in their lives) and (de)motivators at work. By asking these questions, we were able to get some general information, but more importantly, the respondents felt so at ease that almost all of them already began to share their locked at the job experience when asked about demotivating factors.

In accordance to the two main research questions and four sub-research questions, the interview protocol was focused on retrieving information on the three phases in the process of locked at the job, the coping mechanisms used while being locked and the actors that play a role with regards to a locked at the job situation. Therefore, for the [first research question](#), we focused on the process of locked at the job. For the first phase, the causes of becoming locked at the job, the questions would give more indepth insights into reasons and factors on becoming locked at the job, for example we asked "*Talking about this situation what do you think is/was the biggest cause of you feeling this way and why?*" Further, the second phase, being locked at the job, we intended to show insights on the feelings, thoughts and emotions while being locked at the job, we therefore asked questions like, "*Can you explain how you feel/felt during this time?*" Subsequently, regarding the second phase, we questioned which coping mechanisms individuals used. Regarding this sub-research question, we asked five additional questions in half of the interviews, due to the leeway the master's students were given for their own sub-topic (ID 1 to 16). These enriched interviews with more information on coping strategies provided a significant addition to the existing input from the basic

questionnaire. Nevertheless, the other participants, who did not receive the additional questions, also mentioned particular coping strategies. Thus, we asked the respondents “*Have you taken any steps to change the situation, if so which ones?*” Furthermore, for the third phase, ending locked at the job, questions were asked to gather information on how participants were able to end their locked at the job situation. For example, we asked the respondents “*How did this period come to an end and why?*” In addition, to studying the process that participants experienced while being locked at the job for the second main research question, we asked participants about the role other actors within the organization played. Among others things we asked “*Did the organization, colleagues and/or direct supervisor also have a role in how you feel/felt, if so why?*” (see [Appendix 1](#). Interview protocol).

### *Sample*

Of the total population, 12 participants were locked at the job during the interview and the other 18 participants had experienced a locked at the job situation in a previous job or time period. The sample entailed 15 women and 15 men, ranging from 25 to 60 years of age.

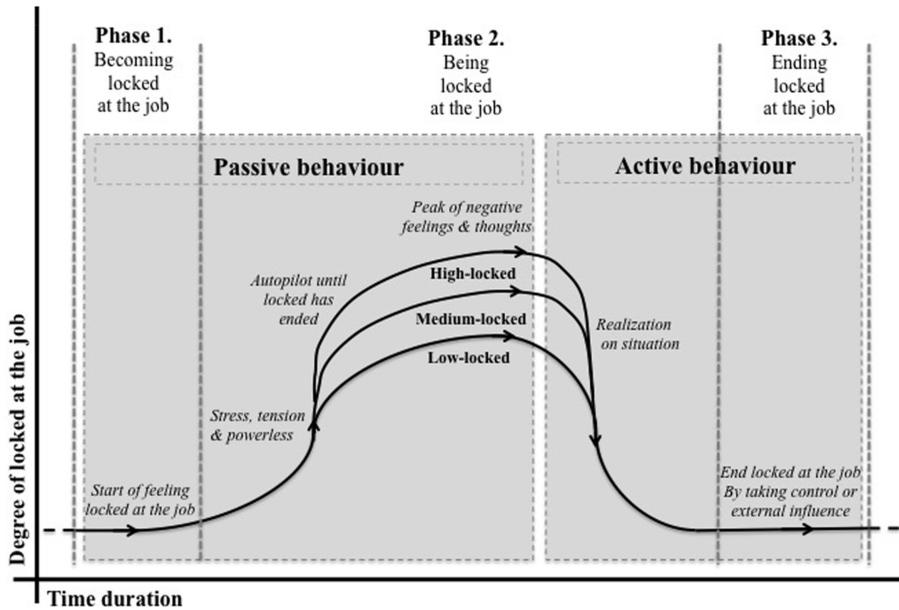
### *Data analysis*

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed by the two interviewers. After verbatim transcription, the interviews were handed over and thoroughly checked by the team by listening to all audio recordings while reading the manuscripts. For further analysis, the 30 interviews were then uploaded into Atlas.ti. Template analysis ([King, 2004](#)), a form of thematic analysis, was used in order to map the three phases: becoming, being and ending locked at the job in the process of locked at the job. We started coding five random interviews and performed both inductive and deductive coding based on theoretical contributions from previous studies on locked at the job and related constructs. *Open coding* ([Strauss and Corbin, 1990](#)) was used, by carefully reading the manuscript and at the same time listening to the audio recordings, to have a more comprehensive perspective on statements and expressions during the interviews. In addition to the questions posed in the interview protocol, codes that could potentially be linked to related theories such as the PE fit theory ([Edwards, 2008](#)), theory of control ([Carver and Scheier, 1982](#)) and self-regulation ([Baumeister et al., 2007](#)) were also considered. Through this process, we were able to design a codebook in Microsoft Excel that corresponded with our three phases and research questions. In addition to this, in order to merge and simplify our 127 general codes concerning the process of experiencing locked at the job into a more simplified code structure we performed *axial coding*. Hereafter, we created a codebook with 35 codes, see [Appendix 2](#). Subsequently, the remaining 25 interviews were coded, in which we only added three new codes to the previously drafted codes, namely “life changing event,” “consequence burnout” and “speaking out about locked at the job.” Concerning the data analyses, we then printed all quotations. By printing them, we were able to get a good overview and carefully read all quotations per code and make any remarks if needed. Subsequently, we were able to see associations and further elaborate on them in the results section of this paper. To give the data the necessary depth, an excel sheet was then prepared in which the outcomes per respondent were mapped. This enabled us to see a connection between the different respondents and the impact their locked at the job situation had on their daily lives.

## **Results**

### *Process of locked at the job*

The results of the three distinguished phases for all individuals who became locked at the job are discussed in more detail, see [Figure 1](#) on how the different phases are related.



**Figure 1.**  
Phases when  
experiencing locked at  
the job

*Phase 1. Becoming locked at the job.* Because every individual has his/her own story of becoming locked at the job, the extent to which someone experiences this situation can vary from person to person. Nevertheless, in all cases, entering the first phase of “becoming locked at the job” entailed the experience of at least one dimension of locked at the job. The individual either feels dissatisfied in the job or perceives limited opportunities. In earlier studies, this was also referred to as being at risk of becoming locked at the job (Stengård et al., 2016). When the individual must deal with both dimensions of the concept of locked at the job, he/she enters the following phase.

*Phase 2. Being locked at the job.* This second phase of “being locked at the job” starts when both the dimensions of job dissatisfaction and perceiving limited job opportunities are being met. People are hindered in their daily life and experience negative feelings and thoughts. For example, “When I was in the middle of it, I thought, if this is it, I don’t know how long I can keep this up.” (ID 14). At the same time, they experience less involvement with their work environment and switch to autopilot. This is followed by feelings getting worse, resulting in a peak of negative feelings and thoughts. The impact of these feelings and thoughts vary by individual, which will be further discussed in “levels of locked at the job”. All participants first undergo this locked at the job situation passively. During the first part of this second phase, the individual will also not be conscious of what is happening. For example, one respondent indicated, “For a very long time, I have not thought about it” (ID 20). Other thoughts that then arise are “I’ve been here too long,” “I need to do something else,” “what am I still doing here” and “I’m wasting my time.” The participant is alternating active thoughts “I have to go do something else” (ID 8), with passive behavior. As a result, people stay in this negative spiral quite long, which also leads to a feeling of guilt and failure because they have been in this situation for too long. However, at the time the individuals experienced this phase, they were not consciously aware of this. They found themselves in a tunnel vision, the world was getting smaller and as someone also points out “I just couldn’t get out of that” (ID 5). Ultimately, a sense of reflection is encouraged in which the participant realizes that the current situation is unsustainable and needs to be ended. This consciousness has been awakened, for example, due to new insights that were offered by colleagues, family or friends related to the individual. As one respondent

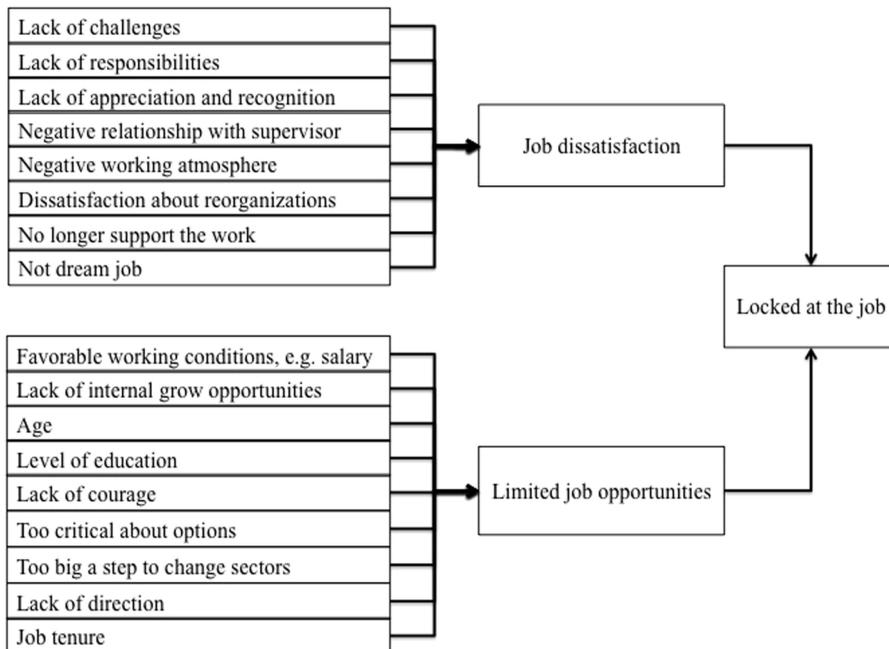
comments, “I don’t think until I was overworked, which really felt like driving into a wall, that before that I didn’t think at all about am I happy in this job. It was just work, work, work and do your best” (ID 20). At this point, their passive behavior changes to active behavior, to modify or end their undesirable situation: “I am in that phase now, making it specific and looking for a job to go with it and really taking the time for that” (ID 22). Participants that were locked at the job in the past reported in retrospect that they themselves have done too little to address the situation in the different phases and should have searched more actively and be more assertive. Some respondents even indicated that they did not know how they should have mobilized earlier or differently. “When I left, I thought, actually I should and would have taken this step two years earlier and just now I am doing it” (ID 18).

*Phase 3. Ending locked at the job.* Individuals then transition to the third phase, “ending locked at the job” when they take control of the situation or when the situation is terminated by external forces. For example, the individual can take control over the situation by leaving the organization or external forces, such as being recruited for a new external position, could end the situation. When ending the locked at the job period one feels again, “kind of in control” (ID 20). One is guided more by feelings and able to self-regulate more frequently about their current situation.

Regarding the duration, there is a wide variety in how long this process and the different phases of locked at the job lasted. On average, the 30 respondents felt locked at the job for about 30 months (2.5 years). The shortest period in which someone felt locked at the job was six months, and the longest period indicated was 96 months (8 years).

*Causes of becoming locked at the job*

Although very diverse, we found a number of regularly occurring reasons why respondents perceive they are stuck, see Figure 2. Respondents indicate that it often involves a combination of factors. Not all respondents gave a reason why they felt locked at the job



**Figure 2.**  
Causes of becoming locked at the job

based on the two dimensions; however, all of them indicated experiencing locked at the job. In nearly all interviews, respondents stated more than two aspects per dimension that made them feel locked at the job. Besides an aspect related to job dissatisfaction, people mentioned factors related to their lack of job mobility. The situation often occurred as they felt dissatisfied about their job, where one then experienced a perception of limited job opportunities. For both dimensions, there are one or more causes leading to the feeling of job dissatisfaction on the one hand and one or more causes to the perception of limited opportunities on the other.

*Dimension 1. Job dissatisfaction.* The biggest cause for experiencing job dissatisfaction is the lack of challenge in the current job; participants report that they find their jobs boring or less rewarding. Routine work is often a reason for experiencing this lack of challenge. What is also mentioned a few times is the underlying cause lack of responsibilities, which leads the participant to believe that the organization is not making sufficient use of their full potential. Another major cause for decreased job satisfaction is the lack of appreciation and recognition for the work done. A participant comments as follows: *“when you don’t get the recognition it also makes you feel empty”* (ID 7). What is subsequently indicated, as an important reason for not being satisfied in the job is the negative relationship with one’s direct supervisor. For example, because there is insufficient interest shown in the employee. Although the majority did not mention their relationship with their direct supervisor as a cause, the respondents who did mention this aspect consider this aspect most important. Several respondents mentioned the negative working atmosphere within the team or the organization. Other causes of job dissatisfaction mentioned include the workload, interaction with colleagues, the lack of respect and the negative working atmosphere after going through several reorganizations. Finally, two participants offered two unique yet distinctive causes. One respondent indicated, *“I no longer believed in the work I was doing”* (ID 14). The other respondent experienced limited job satisfaction because he realized that this is not his dream job. *“If I had to do it over again, my studies, I think I would have done a different study. That’s kind of the situation”* (ID 30).

*Dimension 2. Limited job opportunities.* Most participants state that their current favorable working conditions, in particular their salary, is a major cause for them to experience limited job opportunities. *“I had a good salary, also secondary, I had many vacation days, a nice car, everything was well organized which also made it difficult to make that switch”* (ID 29). Apart from that, their exit packages are also very favorable which makes it more attractive for them to stay. For individuals who are at the upper limit of their salary in their job category, taking a position at a lower level would seem unacceptable. *“That is below my dignity. It also feels a bit like a loss and the best thing to do is just go to another company and make a fresh start and that’s what I finally decided to do”* (ID 24). Next, many participants indicate that they experience little or no internal growth opportunities. Their direct supervisor or the organization does not support them in this. A respondent commented as follows: *“the organization does not encourage you to grow, the organization does not encourage you to take on other roles”* (ID 17).

Further, there are two personal factors that are regularly mentioned as causes. The first is age, where many older individuals state that they perceive their age as an obstacle in finding a new job. This mindset prevented them from making any search attempts. The second personal factor is the level of education which makes it impossible for certain participants to find their desired job because, in their view, they lack the right qualifications. Similarly, executing a traineeship keeps individuals from leaving due to their educational obligations. According to respondent 2, *“That was really one of those situations which was not pleasant but I couldn’t get out of it because I had to finish my internship to get my degree”* (ID 2).

Next, there is a smaller group of respondents who feared the unknown. Their lack of courage keeps them from taking steps. One respondent denotes, *“my own courage, of course*

*it's all up to me, I'm just very honest about that*" (ID 17). They literally experienced a barrier to take steps in their career, due to the fear of the unknown as they had been working for the same company for a considerable period. *"This is the only thing I know that makes me think: what is it like somewhere else, will you be able to find your place again, and will I be able to work three days a week and will I have the flexibility that I have built up here?"* (ID 8). Ultimately, these risk averse individuals remained because they felt this would be the safest option as losing their job would feel like a loss.

Furthermore, there are a few respondents who indicate they were unable to find a position that would be a vertical step in their career either internal or external, or in some cases, they did not know what their next career step should be. *"I haven't really seen anything that meets all the needs"* (ID 9), in particular within the group of respondents who felt locked at the job at the time the interview took place. One respondent even mentioned not knowing what career moves would be suitable, they experienced a lack of direction.

Many of these causes emerge due to a lack of self-regulation and a lack of control at the time the individual feels locked at the job. One participant says, *"so in that sense I was more stuck in my mind, realistically I knew I could easily go, but I didn't because of all these other reasons so hence I was stuck in my own way"* (ID 29). In many cases, one takes a passive stance and waits until one would *"get it somewhat more under control"* (ID 11), which makes it difficult to work towards a solution.

#### *Experiencing locked at the job*

Respondents used a great variety of terms to indicate how they experience being locked at the job. Terms that were mentioned the most were *"rusting in place," "stuck"* and *"imprisoned"* often because they feel they have no direction to go anymore and they basically feel they *"belong to the furniture of the company."* Metaphorically speaking, several respondents used the term *"chained"* and sometimes even more specifically used the term *"golden chain"* referring to the relatively high salary that they earned. This comfortable and well known routinized work environment makes it a greater obstacle to the unknown. Eventually, the participant *"resigns"* in this *"impasse"* and they settle for the moment; this becomes *"just life"*. An important note is that these individuals feel trapped in their own thoughts; they do not see a way out. These individuals experience a lack of self-regulation and most importantly feel that they are *"anything but in control"* (ID 25). A few respondents did not feel comfortable with using terms like *"job lock"* or *"imprisoned,"* they claimed that these terms were overstating their locked at the job experience and indicated more that because of their passive behavior, they were *"a little stuck in the routine"*.

#### *Levels of locked at the job*

The analysis revealed that the degree to which an individual feels locked at the job can vary per person. We were able to distinguish three levels: low- (12 respondents), medium- (8 respondents) and high-locked individuals (10 respondents). The intensity to which the individual experiences being locked at the job varies in strength and impact by each level. The low-locked level is determined as the basic level that every respondent goes through when experiencing a locked at the job situation. Through the use of legenda, it became clear that low-locked individuals had few disruptions in their daily lives, medium-locked individuals experienced a significant disruption in their daily lives and high-locked individuals were experiencing heavy daily disturbance. The differences per level are based on a variety of feelings and emotions mentioned which suggested differences in the intensity of the experience.

Low-locked individuals. For this group of individuals, the experience has low impact. The individuals experience moderately negative feelings, and their daily lives however were not fully affected by it. This group was characterized by feelings such as *"insecurity," "shame"* and *"anger."* They experienced a lack of control to deal with their current situation.

At the same time, individuals are frustrated by their own lack of initiative and the constant negative thoughts. They operate mainly based on logic as the work is performed in a routine way. Additionally, they waste time and energy by worrying about the situation. Further, they indicate that this situation does not affect their lives on a daily basis. Respondents indicate, for example, that they have to bide their time, that they have ended up in a bad movie, of which the script is already fixed, and that they switched to autopilot, when the individual is acting without thinking what he/she is doing. One respondent phrased this as follows: *"I wasn't unhappy. [ . . . ], it's a passive situation you're in, because of that you're just a bit stuck or so in the routine and yes nice and comfortable in the known, and then maybe the threshold for the unknown also gets bigger and bigger"* (ID 18).

Medium-locked individuals. This second group with medium impact experiences additional symptoms on a frequent basis and indicates that it is affecting their lives. This group struggled to get ready for a new workday in the morning and went to work reluctantly. *"I really felt like I couldn't get through the day"* (ID 6). They indicate that they reluctantly get up and go to work and some even wonder as they get up, why they got up. Furthermore, they experience a hard time to even make it through the day, and they serve their time. *"It was just an awful place, an awful place"* (ID 2). Key characteristics of these medium-locked individuals are that they experience *"lack of energy," "headaches," "stress" and "sadness."* This uncomfortable work situation also manifested itself in negative feelings and emotions after working hours. The participant expressed feelings with family and friends and in some cases also vented their emotions. For many, home is used as an outlet. One takes negative feelings home and reacts this way to family and friends, sometimes even resulting in feelings of guilt toward their loved ones. *"You don't go to work comfortably, and you don't come home comfortably either [ . . . ] those days were not very pleasant. My wife noticed that too. [ . . . ] I was very short-tempered, blamed her for things she wasn't to blame for. I needed an outlet, and I was not feeling well"* (ID 11).

High-locked individuals. The group of high-locked individuals experienced even more negative symptoms on top of that. Their mindset can lead to feelings of *"desperation"* and causes the feeling of being locked at the job to grow stronger and stronger, resulting in a downward spiral. In many cases, people were at or near experiencing symptoms of a burn out. We therefore characterize this group in particular by the fact that they indicated to experience depressive feelings, to be *"overworked"* or to have a *"burnout."* In addition to mental complaints, some also experienced physical symptoms, like sleep deprivation or a disturbed sleep rhythm, headache and abdominal pain as one respondent indicated: *"my body really locked up"* (ID 12). Some even reported staying longer in their undesired situation due to the lack of stability when leaving the job. This situation provided them with a sense of purposeless and powerlessness. One respondent summarizes these feelings as follows: *"I started to doubt myself a lot and I was very insecure. I felt I couldn't do anything, it made me depressed, exhausted and stressed. I came home with a headache. So I just didn't like life anymore because I had to be here every day. That was a really horrible period"* (ID 13).

An additional notable outcome that emerges in several interviews is that individuals hold back from sharing their locked at the job experiences. *"People from my networks, acquaintances, circle of friends are often related to my work in a way and then it doesn't feel safe to tell them I would like to leave, because you never know how and where it will end up"* (ID 27). Thus, on the one hand, one is not able or confident to share these locked at the job experiences, and on the other hand, the work environment in many cases does not react positively to sharing these locked at the job experiences. *"This is a topic you don't easily throw on the table"* (ID 10), also because people prefer to share successes and positive stories. In addition, some respondents indicated that they would like to have the opportunity for an open conversation with their superiors or to be able to take them into confidence about their desire to leave. Once people speak out about their locked at the job feelings, they often received confirmation from peers who were going through the same situation. As opposed to

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peers, some supervisors decided to terminate the employment contract, by arrangement, after bringing the news.

### *Coping mechanisms*

When the respondents were asked what their coping strategies are, they gave a variety of coping mechanisms, which kept them from changing their current undesired situation. These coping mechanisms caused the interviewees to endure the situation longer, but also kept them in this situation. First, coping concerned aspects related to the work environment that helped in coping with their current situation and prevented them from leaving. A large group was able to cope with the situation because they were attached to their colleagues, one respondent mentioned the following *“I really had a bond with those people, so I found it very difficult to say goodbye. That kept me from leaving”* (ID 18). In addition, the team spirit and the atmosphere within the company were important aspects of making the situation more bearable. *“Because I can endure somewhere for a very long time even if the work is not fun, that is what I say as long as the work atmosphere is good then I can endure somewhere for a very long time”* (ID 19). Some participants indicated that they experienced the routine in their job as pleasant, which was their way of coping with the situation. By working on an auto pilot, this routine gave them a sense of control. Other participants remained in their locked at the job situation with the goal of investing into future career opportunities. This was their way of coping with the situation, with this clear goal that they have in mind.

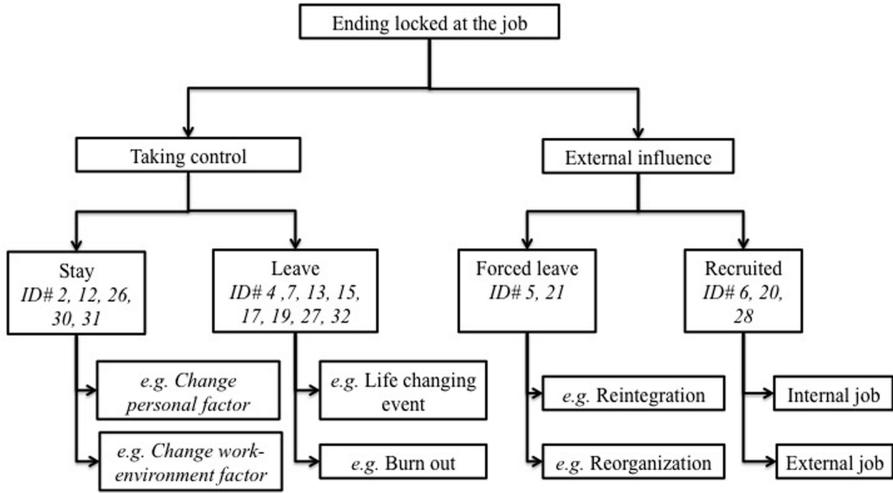
Second, participants gave various reasons all related to their personal situations that prevented them from leaving the locked at the job situation. In some cases, for example, individuals experienced an unstable home base, where their work situation acted as a way of coping their current situation. Thus, there were individuals who went through divorce, or they had a partner with relatively lower income, their way of coping with their situation meant that, for the time being, they remained in the locked at the job situation. *“From private perspective things are not going so good [ . . . ] a lot of things are going to change for me, so if so much changes then I’m not going to change my job. I have that as a piece of security that I still have”* (ID 30). Further, there were also several individuals who indicated they had different priorities in their lives. They had a different balance in their work and personal life, which made them feel less of a need to leave and able to cope with the situation. For example, one stated to be only working for three days, leaving four days to focus on other, more positive, aspects of their lives.

### *Ways for ending locked at the job*

The experience of locked at the job can end in a number of ways. Thoughts about solving their current locked at the job situation often remain passive. These passive thoughts also manifested themselves in passive behavior. Respondents indicated that, in their own words, they did not actively participate in altering their situation. An end will come to the locked at the job situation when the individual will either take control and have influence on the change or the change will be initiated externally. See [Figure 3](#) for possible ways to end a locked at the job situation.

Own volition. For those individuals who take control of their own situation, there are two possible scenarios. One can either stay in the current work environment or leave. Either way one of the two dimensions on experiencing locked at the job will have to be resolved in order to end the phase being locked at the job.

When the individual remains within their current job the dimension job dissatisfaction needs to be altered. One can either change a personal factor or a work environmental factor in order to regain satisfaction. Just a few respondents were able to give a more positive spin to their job dissatisfaction with the aim of getting out of the locked at the job experience, for example by altering the number of working hours or by attending training and courses.



**Figure 3.**  
Possible ways of  
ending a locked at the  
job situation

Others engaged in conversation with their manager in order to overcome a conflict that had developed. By doing so, they were able to regain their job satisfaction and remain in their current job. There were a few respondents who took a step back in function to get more satisfaction in return, something that is not very common and for which these respondents had to gather a lot of courage to come to this decision.

For those who are capable to leave their current work environment both the job satisfaction was greater when they left their work environment, and their perception limited job opportunities also decreased as they found an alternative job. There are different factors triggering individuals to leave, for example, by sharing such sentiments with colleagues or others closely related to the individual. *“It was really because other colleagues said to me that I should do something else. Then I started thinking about it myself, that I could give it a try. Then I applied for a job”* (ID 13). A significant number of respondents ultimately actively searched for new opportunities and possibilities to leave their locked at the job situation on their own. *“At some point, I decided for myself that this would not make me happy”* (ID 24). Some of them benefitted from the help of a career counselor. However, approaching a career counselor independently did not seem to be an obvious step for respondents to take. In addition, several respondents indicated that through a life changing event, for example due to the death of a loved one or the birth of a child, they saw the situation from a different perspective and gained new insights about their current situation, which enabled them to end their locked at the job situation. Despite the fact that a life-changing event often occurs outside of one’s own influence, it is often the individual who takes action after experiencing such a situation. These life-changing events give them a moment to reflect on their current situation and possibly adjust. One is thrown back to the basics and then asks oneself, what are the core elements in life? The same is applicable when one gets burnt out. In this case, the individual reflects and goes on to pursue a career with new insights.

External force. In addition to being able to regain control of the locked at the job situation by own strength, the locked at the job situation can also be terminated by external forces. People can either be recruited (internally or externally), or organizational changes can lead to a change in experiencing locked at the job in their current employment situation. Those who were recruited were asked for another job when they themselves were not actively looking for one, for example, because they were approached on a business networking platform.

When the end of the locked at the job situation is imposed, it is often beyond the actual control of the individual. Similarly, in the case of a burnout, a person can be placed in a different department during a reintegration process to advance further recovery. For some respondents, their locked at the job situation came to an end as they were forced to leave their current job. Thus, one was moved to another department due to a disagreement with one's supervisor or as a result of reorganization. *"Eventually in the reorganization I got out and then I started looking more, even more actively I guess and quite by chance this then came my way"* (ID 5). In addition, several respondents also indicated that they had no intention to leave unless the organization or their direct supervisor forced them.

Another way individuals ended their job while experiencing locked at the job is with a fixed-term contract. Even though most respondents were on permanent contracts, there were a few who were on fixed-term contracts. This fixed-term contract gave respondents the opportunity to have a planned end to the period they felt locked at the job. However, these individuals continue to feel locked at the job until their contract comes to an end.

#### *Actors that play a role in the process of locked at the job*

Respondents indicate that they do realize that the responsibility for resolving the situation lies with them. The data also reveal that all surrounding parties play an important role in supporting and guiding the individual while being locked at the job. We categorize four work related parties that play a role, colleagues (1), the direct supervisor (2), human resource (HR) management and other professional support such as coaches, psychologist and physicians (3) and senior management (4).

Colleagues. Colleagues do not play a crucial role but in many cases provide valuable advice and support to the participant experiencing locked at the job, by showing that they *"listen"* to what the individual is going through. Respondents often share these experiences with a limited group of confidants within the organization. *"With colleagues it is pleasant because they understand the situation well, are familiar with it, they sometimes don't experience it that way, but you can then discuss it with each other and you get a lot of good things out of it, that helped me more than my friends and family, to be perfectly honest"* (ID 28). In the vast majority, direct colleagues did not play a negative role while experiencing a locked at the job situation. Only a few did not fit well in the team, which caused them to suffer from their colleagues instead and creating a locked experience.

Direct supervisor. The relationship the individual has with a direct supervisor appears to be crucial in this regard. As one respondent points out, *"you need someone to help you to move forward"* (ID 16), referring to the phase of ending the locked at the job situation. It is essential here that the direct supervisor shows empathy, ensures an open culture and the individual is able to *"discuss"* their feelings and thoughts. However, participants did mention that the direct supervisor should pay more attention to the employees by being concerned with their state of mind and in helping them achieving their desired alternative job. One would like, for example, to talk to their direct supervisor on a frequent basis about their current status and prospects, but also about expectations from the direct supervisor. As stated by a respondent, *"at the end of the day, it's about being a people person as a manager and picking up on signals faster. If you notice that your employee is not feeling well or motivated that you sit down and look at where it's coming from. Why you are not motivated and whether that has to do with a personal or work situation"* (ID 16). In just a few cases, the direct supervisor was not aware of the situation or did not listen to the respondent. In addition, it is notable that respondents indicate that in some cases, direct supervisors have a different perspective and want to keep their employees for the work they provide. This results into less effort put in getting these individuals out of the locked at the job situation and allows the direct supervisor to either maintain the situation, help by coaching or be the problem solver of the locked at the job situation.

HR and professional support. In addition, there is a role for various actors who are called in to look after the employee's welfare and are there to "counsel" the individual. For example, respondents approached the HR department, internal or external coaches, psychologists and the company physician to discuss their situation with. Regarding the HR department, the respondents expect concrete plans from their HR advisor to provide the necessary support to people who feel locked. However, this was often not the case, as one of the respondents pointed out: "I have a very bad experience with HR in this. . . . I had an HR employee at the time that I confronted her about this. She said, "I am there for the company, not for the employees"" (ID 11). Nevertheless, respondents do indicate that they receive sufficient support from psychologists and HR when they eventually get completely locked at the job or even end up in a burn out. Regarding the other actors, it can be observed that the majority of respondents experience support from, for example, a coach or psychologist. Despite not being able to leave the locked situation, they manage to arrange professional help, either by their own initiative or with the help of others.

Senior management. In many cases, respondents indicated that senior management played a negative role in how they felt, due to a lack of appreciation. They often felt unsupported and unheard by senior management and in addition they felt senior management showed little interest in their personal situation. Furthermore, participants indicated that senior management should have better facilitated while being in these circumstances. Also, there is insufficient incentive in providing job mobility such as providing possibilities to leave with the use of the right terms and conditions, for example, with an appealing exit package. One respondent mentioned, "a colleague mentioned to me 'you'll never get a social plan like that, you have to sabotage the business'. I said, 'I've only done half my best and they already think it's great'" (ID 10). Here respondents prefer being locked at the job as they would miss out favorable benefits when leaving voluntary. Accordingly, many respondents also indicated a need for internal career opportunities or job rotation initiated and supported by senior management in order to get out of the locked at the job situation. In addition, several participants mentioned they would like this situation to be talked about more and have more attention from senior management on this topic. It is important that the organization initiates a move in order to "provide" for a change in culture.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to give an insight into the process individuals go through when experiencing a locked at the job situation. Based on 30 interviews, we investigated the research questions: *Through which process do individuals go when becoming locked at the job?* The results show that all individuals who experience a locked at the job situation undergo a similar process with three phases; becoming locked at the job, being locked at the job and ending locked at the job. Prior to the first phase of becoming locked at the job, the individual passes through a at risk of becoming locked state (Feenstra-Verschure, 2022). In most cases, it is the dissatisfaction that arises or comes to light first that will subsequently cause one to experience the perception of limited job opportunities. The findings show that becoming locked at the job as well as the first part of the being locked at the job phase is unconsciously experienced (Baumeister and Bargh, 2014). Once the participants are locked at the job and are in the phase of being locked at the job, they go through several stages of behavioral change (Prochaska and Velicer, 1997), from "precontemplation" to "action". Individuals often experience a peak when going through the phase of "being locked at the job" These stages of behavioral change show that individuals experiencing a locked at the job situation also go through a change in their behavior. However, this model assumes that the individual takes action, which is not the case for someone who is locked at the job. Some take action only when they experience a life-changing event, but there are also individuals where the misfit is accepted temporarily and sometimes for an extended period of time, defined as the resignation approach (Follmer et al., 2018). Those who exit their situation

independently often come to insights, a consciousness and active “preparation” stage, which is followed by the “action” stage that occurs in order to exit the situation and enter the “ending locked at the job” phase (Baumeister and Bargh, 2014; Crant, 2000; Prochaska and Velicer, 1997). Although we focused on locked at the “job” where the individual particularly experiences limited job opportunities, one can also be locked at the organization or workplace. It is important for future research to also look at this situation where the individual experiences stuckness in the organization, the profession or the workplace (Stengård, 2018).

With regard to the reasons to become locked at the job, participants experience job dissatisfaction, caused by a lack of challenges, responsibilities, appreciation and recognition in the job (Ali and Ahmed, 2009; Danish and Usman, 2010; Stengård, 2018; Tessema *et al.*, 2013). Aronsson and Göransson (1999) found that a negative relationship with the direct supervisor can influence the locked at the job situation, which is also found in this study. Further, the working atmosphere also played an important role, as the positive work environment provided more satisfaction to the individuals (Agbozo *et al.*, 2017). A person experiencing locked at the job will also perceive limited job opportunities, caused by factors such as their current favorable working conditions (Keith and McWilliams, 1995), lack of (internal) growth opportunities (Bernhard-Oettel *et al.*, 2020; Feenstra-Verschure, 2022) and also lack of courage. In many cases, people wait until these favorable conditions are met in case of a new job, or they hope for a beneficial termination arrangement to exit the job. In some cases, the individual may have reached their career plateau, a situation in which the individual has reached the highest level to be obtained within the current workplace (Yang *et al.*, 2019). In addition, individual factors such as level of education and job tenure prevent them from seeing opportunities to leave, consistent with the results of Feenstra-Verschure (2022).

Participants differed in the level of experiencing the locked at the job situation. These differences could be made by the feelings and thoughts individuals indicated as they went through this process, but we could not find a pattern related to (the causes of) the two dimensions of locked at the job. The “*low-locked individuals*” experienced, compared to the other two groups, limited negative effects due to their locked at the job situation. For example, there was frustration and anger over their situation, and they were functioning on autopilot. However, their situation did not negatively influence their daily lives. The second group, defined as the “*medium-locked individuals*,” experienced significantly more negative effects for example, because the situation did affect their daily lives, they experienced stress (Meyer *et al.*, 2002; Muhonen, 2010), symptoms such as headaches (Aronsson and Göransson, 1999) and had a depletion of energy, as also described by Vander Elst *et al.* (2012). Finally, the “*high-locked individuals*,” who experienced such negative effects both physically and mentally from their locked at the job situation that at some point they developed depressive feelings, had a disrupted sleep rhythm (Allen *et al.*, 2016), became overworked or even suffered a burnout, similar to the studies by Aronsson and Göransson (1999), Muhonen (2010) and Stengård *et al.* (2016). Often the participants end up in a vicious circle, staying too long in a locked at the job situation and may end up with a burnout, comparable with outcomes of Tong *et al.* (2015). However, due to the lack of stability and control, the participant has difficulty to leave the current situation (Carver and Scheier, 1982). They are not prepared to anticipate on the personal sacrifice it takes to honestly tell the organization what makes them feel this way and distance themselves from the job (Mitchell *et al.*, 2001). Especially with favorable working conditions and unfavorable exit packages, this sacrifice can make it seem impossible to the individual to alter the situation (Keith and McWilliams, 1995).

With respect to coping mechanisms, the results showed that the participants used various emotion regulation strategies, since the individual does not seek short-term adjustments in the process and regulation of the situation primarily takes place to keep the situation durable and bearable (Carver *et al.*, 1989). Related to the work environment mainly, the pleasant working atmosphere played an important role. These individuals used a reappraisal strategy

and focussed more on other positive aspects in their work environment (Naragon-Gainey *et al.*, 2017). These individuals, in some cases, were very loyal to the organization or extremely embedded in the job. As such, the comfortable work environment makes it too difficult to leave (Allen *et al.*, 2016). These individuals felt embedded in the organization and derived energy from their environment (Hom *et al.*, 2012). The social ties of these individuals in the workplace kept them from leaving. Another emotion regulated strategy used was the positive distraction in which participants mentioned to focus on the content of their work, which was often routine in nature (Loch *et al.*, 2011). Because these individuals were in a passive state and unable to self-regulate, this routine gave them something to hold on to and something that they did have control over (Baumeister and Heatherton, 1996; Carver and Scheier, 1982; Crant, 2000). In addition, some respondents also indicated that they used their current position as a career step for a better future position and consciously choose for this temporarily locked at the job situation (De Jong *et al.*, 2009; Stengård *et al.*, 2016), in which they too used reappraisal and positive distraction strategies (Naragon-Gainey *et al.*, 2017). In addition, on a personal level, coping took place in particular through private circumstances, which in some cases was even worse compared to their work related locked at the job experience. Hereby the individual was able to cope with their current locked at the job situation, which enabled them to handle their private situation. These participants showed behavioral avoidance towards particular situations, the environment or sometimes even individuals (Naragon-Gainey *et al.*, 2017). Continuing, there were also participants, although experiencing locked at the job, who found security and stability in their job and wanted to be able to provide for their family members; hence, their norms prevented them from exiting the situation (Hom *et al.*, 2012). In doing so, the participant was encountering a positive distraction, focussing on the stability their income offered them (Loch *et al.*, 2011).

Regarding the ways in which individuals ended their locked at the job situation, we distinguished respondents who took control of their locked at the job situation and others who let it depend on external forces. Based on the current interviews, we could not discern a different pattern as to why certain participants left the locked at the job situation by taking control or rather with external force. Regarding the individuals who took matters into their own hands, they either chose to stay in their current position by changing their job dissatisfaction or they left their undesired situation. Often the response individuals gave to their misfitting situation consisted of a resolution approach (Follmer *et al.*, 2018), in which the individual addresses the source of the misfit they experienced. This group ultimately was able to craft their own careers and shape their future (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). When the locked at the job period ended through external force, there could be either a forced leave or the individuals could be recruited. In both cases, this would change their current situation. However, they were not actively behaving to improve their situation and did therefore not accomplish this liberation of their locked at the job situation on their own (Verbruggen and De Vos, 2016).

The results revealed that different actors play a role in the process of locked at the job. The colleagues played an important role and should “*listen*” to the locked at the job individual. Also the direct supervisor appeared to play an important role and should create space to “*discuss*”; in many cases, the participants also expected their direct supervisor to play a supporting role in the whole process. Aronsson and Göransson (1999) also found that individuals lack encouragement and support when experiencing locked at the job from their direct supervisor. As for HR who should “*counsel*” more in order to give more professional support. Further, there is an important role for senior management. In particular, they should “*provide*” a more open culture where the individual can speak his/her mind and be listened to. The results show that participants are reluctant to speak out about their locked situation because of possible job loss. In this study, it emerges that what is most important to participants is that the organization provides a safe environment to talk about this topic and that they are encouraged in their job. Further, the literature shows that the organization also plays an

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important role when feeling locked at the job in the health and well-being of the individual (Meyer and Maltin, 2010; Stengård *et al.*, 2016; Van Zyl *et al.*, 2010). However, the participants in this study consider well-being and health to be a greater responsibility for the direct supervisor.

With this study, we contribute to the existing literature on locked at the job and all related constructs within the job immobility and turnover literature. This first empirical qualitative study on the concept of locked at the job has brought several new insights about this concept. This study demonstrated that the construct of locked at the job is indeed experienced by employees through the statements that participants made about how they described and defined their situation. All locked at the job participants experienced, in varying degrees, different phases in which they experienced negative feelings, thoughts and behaviors. To date, no study has previously found multiple levels at which individuals experience such levels of job immobility. Also, until now it was not clear which coping strategies were used when individuals experience a locked at the job situation. The current study has provided insights that, in particular reappraisal, positive distraction and behavioral avoidance emotion regulated coping strategies are used (Naragon-Gainey *et al.*, 2017). These current insights allowed us to make a significant contribution to the scientific literature and expand our current knowledge in the field of job immobility, in particular that of the construct of locked at the job.

### Limitations and future research agenda

The first limitation concerns recollection bias. Recollection bias could have occurred here because for a few respondents this locked at the job experience had taken place several years ago (Bleijenbergh, 2005). However, there was no difference in experiences between participants who felt stuck in their job currently or in the past. In addition, the literature shows that unique events are easier to recall than everyday events (Pillemer, 2009).

Second, despite gaining very valuable insights on locked at the job, we only found a limited number of individuals willing to participate in this study. Given the sensitivity of this study and the great taboo surrounding the subject, fewer individuals were willing to participate. In some cases, individuals admitted to having such an experience, but were not open to an in-depth interview where sensitive topics might be raised. Nevertheless, we have received valuable input from the participants to develop additional studies, both quantitatively and qualitatively. In terms of future research, finding individuals who are willing to admit that they have felt or are currently experiencing locked at the job will be difficult. It is therefore important to create a greater understanding on the importance of research on this topic and to break the taboo on speaking out about this topic on the job.

Third, as shown in the results, we were able to distinguish three levels in which a person can feel locked at the job (low-, medium- and high-locked individuals). Future research would have to reveal the further differences between these levels and, above all, what makes people find themselves in these levels, for example, by looking at how differences in these levels can further be explained and if specific causes led to these levels. It is conceivable that, for example, personality traits may affect the experience when being in a locked at the job situation. In addition, it is also possible that specific individual or work environmental factors influence the intensity with which the individual experiences the level of locked at the job. However, more research is needed to address these limitations in future research.

Fourth, an important finding in our study was the possible outcome locked at the job can have on getting burned out. Even though we did not focus on the relationship between locked at the job and burn out in our study, the results strongly suggested that there were several respondents who became burned out during the peak of their locked at the job experience. Future research should therefore test this relationship and see what factors additionally predict the number of individuals who become burned out after experiencing a locked at the job situation.

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A final limitation is concerned with the depth of the different phases. Because the research area of this study was quite broad, the entire process of experiencing locked at the job was studied. Future research should further explore the different phases in depth in particular Phase 2 "being locked at the job". For example by using a diary study, participants could record on a more frequent base how they feel and what they think at a certain point in time. Further, this depth could also give more clarity on the on the trajectory from being at risk or becoming locked to actually becoming locked at the job. With the current study, it cannot be said with certainty whether in most cases job dissatisfaction occurs first after which the perception of limited job opportunities then occurs. Future research could provide more insights into this, by looking at the transition from at risk of becoming locked to actually the emergence of a locked at the job situation.

### *Practical implications*

This study suggests several implications for practice. First, as demonstrated in this study, all surrounding actors within the organization play a role to a greater or lesser extent to support these locked at the job individuals. In particular, the direct supervisor has an important role when it comes to making the situation open for discussion, and he/she should also ensure sufficient understanding for the feelings of the individual. In addition, it also appears that direct colleagues can serve as a valuable asset in order to provide a social safety net for the individual who feels stuck in their job. By being able to talk about it with colleagues, the individual may be helped more quickly in finding another suitable job by receiving advice and support and they may experience fewer peaks in the degree of locked at the job. The impact this issue has on the individual and the entire organization can only be minimized when attention to this issue is created. A joint effort from all involved actors is therefore needed to address this phenomenon.

Second, the taboo participants experience in speaking out about experiencing locked at the job should be addressed. Experiencing locked at the job or just feeling dissatisfied in the job should be widely accepted in the business and talking about it should be the norm. In this way, individuals will become aware of the situation more quickly and can sooner take control. It goes without saying that it is important that the immediate supervisor is open to such conversations. Only then can it be made easier for individuals who feel this way to express their feelings, and they will also dare to take steps more quickly to promote job mobility. In addition, this can prevent unnecessary career stagnation.

Third, in addition to all involved actors, from colleagues to senior management playing a role in the process of someone experiencing locked at the job, there needs to be attention throughout the whole process. In order to prevent individuals from becoming locked at the job, if they do become locked at the job into minimizing their peaks and to end the locked at the job situation sooner, because it can be discussed within the organization. In addition, it is also important to pay attention in the form of aftercare for people who have gone through such a locked at the job situation.

Fourth, a major reason for individuals not leaving their undesired situation is the favorable working conditions and more importantly the exit packages, which they would receive in case of redundancy or dismissal. Because of the accumulated redundancy pay that individuals would receive if the organization would dismiss them, employees often stay longer in their undesired situation. Therefore, it should be made easier for employees who feel locked at the job and would like to leave the organization. For example, favorable exit packages can be considered for employees who feel locked at the job, as the current employment conditions cause individuals to be dissatisfied in their job and thus nonproductive for the organization.

## Conclusion

By conducting a qualitative study, we were able to provide insights about why and how individuals experience locked at the job. Various reasons caused misfits that led to both job dissatisfaction and limited job opportunities, which made them temporarily not leave their situation. With this study, we were able to provide insight into the fact that employees go through a process of locked at the job and how employees experience this process. We also found that there are different levels in which a person can feel locked at the job. These employees used different coping strategies, such as reappraisal, positive distraction and behavioral avoidance. In addition, their locked at the job situation often came to an end either by taking control or by external forces. Further, we found that in addition to the urgency for the individual to recognize this situation, there is an important role for all involved actors within an organization, in particular for the direct supervisor and senior management in supporting individuals who experience a locked at the job situation. Breaking this taboo in the workplace is therefore the most important implication of this study.

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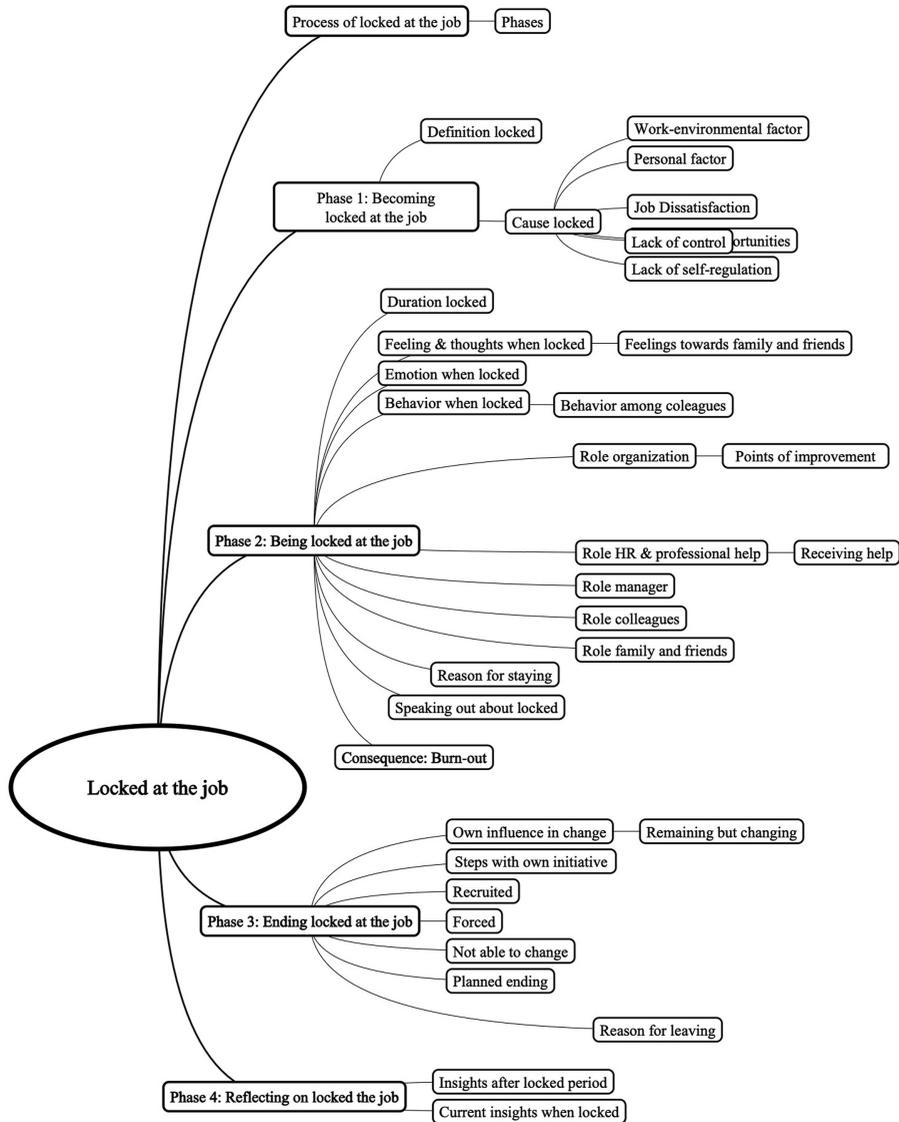


Figure A1. Code tree locked at the job

**Appendix 2**

**Interview protocol**

*"Welcome <NAME>, my name is <NAME>, together with <NAME> I am conducting a research and as part of this research I would like to ask you some questions. I would like to ask you to answer as detailed as possible and, where possible, provide an explanation with examples. I would like to record this interview using an audio recorder. This is for the simple reason that I can never write as fast as we talk. To also keep my attention on the conversation I would therefore like to suggest recording it. The audio recording will be treated as confidential as the interview itself. Do you agree to this recording?"*

>>> **AGREE** <<<<

- (1) I am very curious who the person is I am talking to, can you tell me briefly about yourself?
  - Age?
  - Which company?
  - What position and in what department?
  - How many years working for your current employer?
- (2) How important is your work to you and why?
  - How important is work relatively to other elements in your life?
- (3) What motivates you or energizes you at work and why?
  - What does not motivate you at all?

Referring to the flyer: *"Ever had that feeling of not being satisfied in your work environment, but at the same time having the feeling of not being able to take steps to change this situation? For example because of salary, fear of the unknown or because you are stuck in your job."*

- (4) Can you indicate what situation you were reminded of when you read or heard this and why?
  - Experienced it now or in the past?
  - Locked into position or locked into organization?
  - Type of employer and position (if in past)?
  - How long employed (if in the past)?
- (5) If you had to put into words how you feel now or felt at the time, how would you define this situation and why?
- (6) Talking about this situation what do you think is/was the biggest cause of you feeling this way and why?
  - Were there any other causes that made you feel this way?
- (7) Did the organization, colleagues and/or direct supervisor also have a role in how you feel/felt, if so why?
- (8) If you were to attach a time to this situation, how long is this period lasting or has this period lasted and why?
- (9) Can you explain how you feel/felt during this time?
  - What thoughts were going through you?
  - How do you see the future?
- (10) How did this period come to an end and why?
  - If still experiencing: What could you do to change this situation?

(11) What is/was the cause that you did not end this situation?

- Why does someone not take this step?
- What is more important?

### Option A: Coping

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A.12. You just explained that you felt “locked at the job,” but how does/did that express itself and why this emotion?

- Toward whom was this expressed?
- Active/Passive behavior

A.13. Have you taken any steps to change the situation, if so which ones?

- In the case of “nothing”: What kept you from changing the situation?

A.14. In what ways have you experienced help from people in your daily life (inside or outside of work) to deal with this situation?

A.15. What has/had the organization (think colleagues/direct supervisor) done to help you?

- What else could they do in your opinion?

A.16. What do you think the organization, colleagues and/or immediate supervisor could do to prevent such a situation from occurring in the future?

### Option B: Work–family conflict

B.12. Now that I know more about your work environment and the situation that you are/were no longer satisfied in, perhaps you could tell me a little about your family situation?

- What is the marital status, children?
- Is the interviewee the money maker?

B.13. Can you describe how you and your family experienced this situation?

- What impact did the situation have on your family and why?

B.14. Can you explain how you feel/felt towards your family during this situation?

B.15. Can you indicate how your family handled this situation, what was the atmosphere like?

- What was their point of view?
- Support or discussion?
- What had this for an effect on yourself?

B.16. Could you talk to certain people about this situation if so, with whom and how did this manifest itself?

*Insights if now “locked at the job”*

17. Did this interview give you any new insights on how you might go about changing/ending this situation, if so how?

*“We have now gone through all the questions, thank you for your time! I would like to emphasize again that your contribution will help us tremendously. All your answers will of course remain anonymous.”*

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18. How did you experience this interview?

*“Would you like to be informed about the results?”*

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