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Job design

Explore the purpose and evolution job design, the role of effective job design in creating good work, and assessing job quality

Introduction

Job design is the process of establishing employees' roles and responsibilities and the systems and procedures that they should use or follow. The main purpose of job design, or redesign, is to coordinate and optimise work processes to create value and maximise performance. However, it's also a central element in creating good quality jobs or 'good work' which benefit workers themselves as well as their employers.

This factsheet examines job design and its links to work motivation, empowerment and job quality. It looks at the principles of job design, the role of job analysis and how assessing job quality can help.

What is job design?

Job design, or redesign, is a process of determining job roles and what a job involves, as well as how it relates to other relevant jobs and the organisation's structure. It includes deciding on the duties and responsibilities of the job holder, the way the job is done, as well as what support and resources the job holder needs. It can be done stringently or flexibly, depending on the nature and scope of the work that needs to be done.

The main purpose of job design is to optimise work processes, ensure the right value is created and improve productivity. It does this by clarifying roles, systems and procedures; reducing repetitive elements within and between jobs; and optimising the workers' responsibility.

However, these aspects of managing people are not only about the face-value effectiveness of allocating resources. They're also closely linked to core employee attitudes and work behaviours, including motivation, commitment, discretionary effort and job satisfaction. These are enhanced through techniques such as job enlargement,

job enrichment and job rotation.

Job design is an important element of people strategy as it influences:

- How well organised work is.
- How fulfilling and motivating employees find their work.
- What opportunities employees have to develop skills and progress.
- Whether workloads are sustainable and healthy.

Job design is thus a central component of job quality or 'good work' that benefits those doing the job as well as the organisation's long-term growth and sustainability.

Principles of effective job design

The objectives of job design will vary according to business demands and the organisation's approach. However, the following will feature to some extent in deciding both the approach and desired outcomes.

- **Business purpose.** Jobs should support the organisation's purpose and what it needs to do to succeed. This could be to sell a particular product, to provide a generic service, to constantly deliver innovative new designs, and so on.
- **Health and safety.** Jobs must not risk the wellbeing or safety of the job holder, their colleagues, customers or other individuals.
- **People capability.** Consider existing capabilities both internally and in the wider labour market.
- **Quality.** Jobs should minimise the risk of errors and to impose a degree of self-checking by employees to ensure highest possible quality standards.
- **Speed.** Jobs should ensure that time to complete tasks is appropriate to the job. For example, in the case of an emergency, the speed and appropriateness of the response is probably the most important feature of the job.
- **Productivity.** Jobs must ensure the primary focus of the job holder is on things that matter and add value to the business.
- **Sustainability.** Jobs should take account of sustainability, ensuring that organisations can respond flexibly in the face of changing economic, social and political landscapes. Also ensure there is room to develop the job over time to take account of the evolving individual and organisational capabilities.

- **Quality of working life.** Jobs should incorporate sufficient flexibility, breadth and challenge to ensure individuals are engaged and motivated, and not under excessive or prolonged stress, and have opportunities to develop.

As we discuss in the next section, the emphasis in job design has seen important developments in the history of management, evolving to be much more person-centred.

The evolution of job design

Taylorism

The idea of job design started in the industrial revolution. In the early 1900s, Taylor's 'scientific management' principles were used to measure and sequence human inputs alongside machinery to achieve higher efficiencies. Two important concepts emerged:

- **Method study** examines the efficiency of how and why jobs are done or sequenced, and it is still used today, for example, in designing 'lean' manufacturing processes.
- **Work measurement** aims to establish the time needed to complete tasks which is important for resource planning and cost control, and is now used less widely as the measures of effectiveness have shifted to considering the outputs of work.

In principle, Taylorism could involve varying tasks through job rotation to improve work experience. But above all, it was a mechanistic approach to job design that primarily served short-term productivity and efficiency, limiting worker autonomy as far as possible and making little effort to enhance people's working lives. Nonetheless, it's an important stage in the history of job analysis and design that can still be influential today.

Self-determination and job characteristics

With the rise of theories of motivation, behavioural considerations were integrated more firmly into job design, taking into account employee need for job satisfaction and flourishing. As we discuss in our evidence review which looks at work motivation, one of the most influential is self-determination theory, developed by Deci and Ryan in the 1970s and 1980s. This describes three areas of fundamental human needs that should be fulfilled in our work:

- **Autonomy:** the latitude workers have to make decisions about their work. Autonomy and related terms, such as task discretion and empowerment, involves a loosening of managerial control so that employees have more influence over what tasks they perform, how and when.

- **Competence:** people have a need to build their competence and develop mastery over tasks and activities important to them. As a result, the range and level of skills needed to do a job is an important aspect of job design.
- **Relatedness:** people need to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness with others. Thus, they need interaction and shared meaningful experiences with colleagues.

Hackman and Oldham's job characteristics theory has also been extremely influential. It covers much of the same ground but also adds other factors, now well established to drive work motivation, which can also be considered in job design. These include:

- **Task significance:** whether someone sees their job as important or otherwise meaningful.
- **Feedback on performance:** gives employees knowledge of the outcomes of their work, motivating them to achieve goals and helping them to improve.

A more recent addition is the theory of job crafting, developed by Wrzesniewski and Dutton. This builds on the above theories to argue that workers themselves can take the initiative to tailor or redesign their jobs to suit their preferences. Irrespective of how management sets up a job, employees can take some ownership of shaping the tasks they do, their work relationships and how they think about and find meaning in their work.

High-performance work practices

Job design is central to theories of high-performance work practices (HPWP), or clusters of these into high-performance work systems (HPWS). These broadly align with self-determination theory, presenting a mutual gains view of people management based on the 'AMO' model:

- **Ability:** employees' knowledge, skills and abilities are increased.
- **Motivation:** employees are motivated to put these to use.
- **Opportunity:** employees are empowered to put them to use.

Our research report *Over-skilled and underused: investigating the untapped potential of UK skills*, points to substantial untapped talent. In our survey, more than one third of UK employees had the skills to cope with more demanding duties than their current job needed.

The views of workers themselves suggest that being **under**-skilled for one's job is also a

problem. Thus, the HPWS model proposes that effective recruitment and selection practices, and ongoing training and development are also important in supporting high performance.

Flexible working

Another aspect of job design concerns when and how much people work. These decisions can be driven by employers, for example through the use of temporary and zero-hours contracts, or by employees themselves, through flexible working arrangements that allow them to shape their working hours and achieve greater work-life balance.

The role of job analysis

Job design should rely on careful job analysis – gathering information about the required outputs, the work needed to achieve them job, and the skills, resources and autonomy that will enable it. Job analysis should be informed by external and organisational factors as well as human, motivational and growth factors.

External factors include:

- Demand from customers, for example, the expectation for 24/7 services (as in customer service roles).
- The labour market, in particular how likely it is that people will have all the capabilities needed for the role; if not, it may be necessary to create more than one job.
- Technological developments which enable tasks to be performed in different ways, for example, automation, offshore collaboration and digitisation.

Organisational factors include:

- Workflow, or the sequence and relationship between tasks to achieve the desired outcomes and how the job will slot in with other jobs in the organisation.
- The nature and range of tasks to be performed in the job, which need to be considered alongside whether employees have the necessary capabilities and resources.

Human factors include:

- Ergonomics. Shaping the job to best fit the physical capabilities of humans. This may also cover any reasonable adjustments required to ensure the job can be carried out by someone with a disability – see more in our disability and employment

factsheet.

- Appropriate workloads. Overwork is a common feature of contemporary work, and a major source of stress.
- Work-life balance, including flexible working.

Motivation and growth factors include:

- Creating and maintaining jobs that are inherently satisfying and motivating, providing meaningful, interesting and stretching work with autonomy.
- Creating and maintaining jobs that are enriching, presenting good opportunities for professional growth and progression.

The job analysis should form the basis of a job description and person specification or job profile.

Assessing job quality

It's important to measure job quality so employers can understand the strengths and weaknesses of the jobs in their organisations and how they can improve them. Employee surveys are a common way to gather such data.

Our Good Work Index captures data on what we define as the seven dimensions of good work. One of these dimensions is job design and the nature of work. Within this, the index covers skills, workload, empowerment and meaning. The survey includes questions on:

- The intensity of people's jobs and whether they have adequate resources.
- How complex their work is and how well it matches their skills and qualifications.
- How much autonomy they have.
- How meaningful they find their work.
- What development opportunities they have.

Employers can use the questions from our Good Work Index survey and benchmark their results against our data from the UK.

Further reading

Books and reports

GRANT, A.M., FRIED, Y, and JUILLERAT, T. (2011). Work matters: job design in classic and contemporary perspectives. In ZEDECK, E. *APA handbook of industrial and organizational*

psychology: Vol 1: Building and developing the organization. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

SPREITZER, G. (2008) 'Taking stock: a review of more than twenty years of research on empowerment at work' in BARLING, J. and COOPER, C. (eds). *The SAGE handbook of organizational behaviour: Volume one: micro approaches.* London: Sage Publications.

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Journal articles

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HACKMAN, J. R. (1980) Work redesign and motivation. *Professional Psychology.* Vol 11, No 3, pp445-455.

KNIGHT, C. and PARKER, S.K. (2019) How work redesign interventions affect performance: an evidence-based model from a systematic review. *Human Relations* (online), 1 October. Reviewed in *In a Nutshell*, issue 91.

SIMONS, R. (2005) Designing high-performance jobs. *Harvard Business Review.* Vol 83, No 7, July/August. pp55-62.

TIMS, M., BAKKER, A.B. and DERKS, D. (2015) Job crafting and job performance: a longitudinal study. *European Journal of Work & Organizational Psychology.* December, Vol 24, No 6. pp914-928.

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This factsheet was last updated by Jonny Gifford.