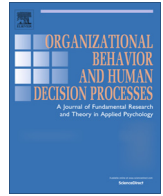




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Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdpJob design research and theory: Past, present and future [☆]Greg R. Oldham ^{a,*}, Yitzhak Fried ^b^a A.B. Freeman School of Business, Tulane University, 7 McAlister Dr., New Orleans, LA 70118, United States^b Rawls College of Business, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409, United States

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the research and theory that have focused on the design of jobs in organizations. We begin by summarizing some of the earliest work on this topic and then move to a discussion of several approaches to job design that attempted to address the shortcomings of this work. Next, we discuss several streams of contemporary research that have expanded the scope or deepened our understanding of job design. We conclude with a discussion of some future directions for research with an emphasis on job crafting, the effects of new work arrangements on the design of jobs, generational differences and reactions to job design, cultural differences and job design, and the impact of job design on organizational structures and employees' personal characteristics.

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1. Introduction

Over the past fifty years, few topics in the organizational sciences have attracted as much attention as job design (Clegg & Spencer, 2007; Fried, Levi, & Laurence, 2008; Hofmans, Gelens, & Theuns, 2014). The purpose of this article is to review the ideas, research and theory that have addressed this topic and to lay out several new directions for future research. We begin by defining job design and discussing the early work that was instrumental in shaping the direction of research on the topic. We then move to a discussion of the state of current research and theory on job design. Finally, we conclude with some ideas for future research.

2. Early work on job design

At its most basic level, job design refers to the actual structure of jobs that employees perform. Thus, job design focuses squarely on the work itself—on the tasks or activities that employees complete for their organizations on a daily basis. The earliest work on the topic of job design can be traced to the writings of Babbage (1835) and Smith (1850) who argued that if jobs were specialized and simplified to the greatest extent practicable, employees would be able to hone their job-related skills and devote their full

attention to very few tasks. These enhanced skills and focused attention were then expected to contribute to improved employee efficiency at work.

Job simplification and standardization were also critical parts of the scientific management philosophy developed by Taylor (1911). Taylor's basic idea was to design entire work systems with standardized operations and highly simplified jobs so that employees had little personal discretion at work and any unnecessary motions could be eliminated (Lawrence, 2010). Also, in scientific management there was little opportunity for employee involvement in the design process itself—management designed jobs and imposed these designs on employees in a top-down fashion.

Scientific management had a substantial impact on the job design practices of many firms. For example, in a study of manufacturing firms in the 1950s, researchers showed that most jobs were designed consistent with scientific management principles (Davis, Canter, & Hoffman, 1955). During that same period, research also began to show that many employees did not care much for the simplified jobs they were required to perform in scientific management—so much so that they often behaved in ways that negated the efficiencies that had been built into the work. Such counter-productive behaviors included tardiness and productivity restriction (Walker & Guest, 1952).

In an effort to deal with these counter-productive behaviors, a number of scholars developed approaches to job design that would allow employees to achieve high levels of performance without incurring the costs associated with simplified work (see Davis & Taylor, 1972). Many of these approaches were based on Herzberg's (1966) Motivation-Hygiene Theory which posited that

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^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: goldham@tulane.edu (G.R. Oldham), yitzhak.fried@ttu.edu (Y. Fried).

in order to enhance employee performance and job satisfaction, jobs should be *enriched* rather than simplified. That is, work should be designed to include “motivators” that would foster employee responsibility, achievement, growth in competence, recognition, and advancement.

Herzberg’s ideas were considered revolutionary at the time and spawned a great deal of research and a large number of successful job enrichment projects (see Herzberg, 1976; Paul, Robertson, & Herzberg, 1969). And as Herzberg expected, many of these projects demonstrated that boosting a job’s standing on the motivators generally led to beneficial outcomes such as increases in employee work effectiveness and job satisfaction.

Unfortunately, despite its merits, there were several difficulties with Herzberg’s approach. For example, his approach provided little guidance about the specific properties that might be introduced during job enrichment and did not offer a technology for measuring the presence of these job properties. Also, like scientific management, job changes were imposed by management in a top-down fashion without giving employees opportunities to suggest changes in the work itself (Paul et al., 1969). Finally, Herzberg did not allow for the possibility that there may be differences in how responsive employees were to job enrichment despite the results of early studies showing that some people may respond more positively than others to enriched work (see Davis & Taylor, 1972).

Research in the late 1960s and 1970s attempted to address these issues. One major study during this period was conducted by Turner and Lawrence (1965). These authors examined six “Requisite Task Attributes” (i.e., variety, autonomy, required interaction, optional interaction, knowledge and skill required, and responsibility) they expected to shape employee reactions and then created a summary measure (i.e., the RTA index) by formulating a linear combination of the six attributes. Results showed that the index was positively associated with the satisfaction and attendance of employees who worked in factories located in small towns. For employees in urban areas, however, the RTA index was negatively related to satisfaction and unrelated to attendance. Turner and Lawrence concluded that employees with different subcultural backgrounds reacted differently to high RTA jobs, and later research by Blood and Hulin (1967) supported these arguments.

Hackman and Lawler (1971) extended the Turner-Lawrence work by focusing on the effects of four job characteristics (i.e., autonomy, variety, task identity, and feedback) they expected to be strongly related to an employee’s internal work motivation (i.e., the extent to which the employee feels good when performing well, and feels bad when performing poorly). In addition, these authors suggested that the previously found differences in how members of subcultural groups responded to their jobs might most simply be explained in terms of employees’ needs for growth and development at work. Specifically, they argued that the stronger an employee’s need for growth, the more likely he or she would be to respond positively to jobs high on the four characteristics.

Results of the Hackman-Lawler research provided support for most of their predictions—employees who worked on jobs high on the four characteristics were more internally motivated, satisfied with their jobs, and productive. Further, employees with high growth need strength (GNS) showed more positive responses to the four characteristics than those with lower GNS.

The Hackman and Lawler (1971) study stimulated a good deal of research and also provided the foundation for Job Characteristics Theory (JCT; Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980) which became the most widely-researched and debated approach to job design from the late 1970s until the present day (Ghosh, Rai, Chauhan, Gupta, & Singh, 2015; Grant, Fried, & Juillerat, 2010). JCT extended the Hackman-Lawler work in several ways. First, it focused on five

(versus four) core job characteristics that were expected to contribute to an employee’s internal work motivation and other outcomes. These were: skill variety (i.e., the degree to which the job requires a variety of different activities involving the use of different skills), task identity (i.e., the degree to which the job requires doing a whole and identifiable piece of work), task significance (i.e., the degree to which the job has an impact on the lives of others), autonomy (i.e., the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom to the employee), and job-based feedback (i.e., the degree to which carrying out the work provides the employee with performance information). Second, JCT provided a testable theoretical framework that explained the effects of these job characteristics on employee outcomes (e.g., internal motivation, job satisfaction, performance). Each of the job characteristics was expected to contribute to the outcomes via its effects on one of three employee psychological states. Skill variety, task significance, and task identity were expected to contribute to the *experienced meaningfulness* of the work. Autonomy was expected to contribute to the *experienced responsibility* for work outcomes and feedback was expected to provide direct *knowledge of the results* of the work. Third, JCT posited that three conditions would moderate the effects of job characteristics. In addition to GNS, employees were predicted to respond most positively to the five characteristics when (a) they had job-relevant knowledge and skill and (b) were satisfied with the work context (i.e., with security, pay, supervision, coworkers). Employees satisfied with the context were expected to respond positively to jobs high on the characteristics because they were able to focus their attentions directly on the work itself, consistent with Herzberg’s (1966) position about the role of the context and hygiene factors in job enrichment. Finally, the Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS) was created to assess jobholder descriptions of the job characteristics along with other constructs central to the theory.

Hundreds of studies tested JCT using cross-sectional and longitudinal designs, and the results provided some support for the theory’s major propositions (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007). For example, there was strong support for the expected positive relations between the core characteristics and employee attitudinal outcomes (e.g., internal motivation, job satisfaction), however, the relations between the job characteristics and behavioral outcomes (e.g., attendance, performance) were relatively modest in magnitude (Humphrey et al., 2007; Kopelman, 1985). Also, results provided strong support for experienced meaningfulness as a mediator, but only weak support for experienced responsibility, and little support for knowledge of results (Humphrey et al., 2007). Results involving the proposed moderators provided only mixed support for GNS (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Lohr, Noe, Moeller, & Fitzgerald, 1985; Spector, 1985) and for context satisfactions (DeVaro, Li, & Brookshire, 2007; Fried et al., 2008; Ghosh et al., 2015), with some studies showing the expected positive relations between the job characteristics and outcomes for those high on GNS and context satisfactions, and others showing weak, statistically nonsignificant relations. No studies directly tested the moderating effect of knowledge and skill or the expected joint moderating effect of that variable, GNS and context satisfactions.

In summary, early work on the topic of job design focused on the effects of simplified, standardized jobs and demonstrated that employees often exhibited counter-productive behaviors in response to such jobs. Herzberg (1966) and other scholars addressed these issues and argued that employees would actually be more productive and satisfied if their jobs were enriched versus simplified. Later research extended and refined Herzberg’s ideas and focused on several specific job properties (e.g., autonomy, feedback) expected to boost employees’ motivation, satisfaction and work effectiveness, and the possibility that there were

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