

## Impact and the art of motivation maintenance: The effects of contact with beneficiaries on persistence behavior <sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

We tested the hypothesis that employees are willing to maintain their motivation when their work is relationally designed to provide opportunities for respectful contact with the beneficiaries of their efforts. In Experiment 1, a longitudinal field experiment in a fundraising organization, callers in an intervention group briefly interacted with a beneficiary; callers in two control groups read a letter from the beneficiary and discussed it amongst themselves or had no exposure to him. One month later, the intervention group displayed significantly greater persistence and job performance than the control groups. The intervention group increased significantly in persistence (142% more phone time) and job performance (171% more money raised); the control groups did not. Experiments 2 and 3 used a laboratory editing task to examine mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions. In Experiment 2, respectful contact with beneficiaries increased persistence, mediated by perceived impact. In Experiment 3, mere contact with beneficiaries and task significance interacted to increase persistence, mediated by affective commitment to beneficiaries. Implications for job design and work motivation are discussed.

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Scholars and practitioners care about cultivating, increasing, and maintaining work motivation. In the past three decades, extensive research has focused on motivating employees by redesigning and enriching the work itself (e.g., Griffin, 1983, 1987; Hackman & Oldham, 1976, 1980). However, these efforts can be costly and

time-consuming, and the extent to which assigned tasks can be redesigned is often limited by the requirements and expectations of customers, clients, and suppliers. Accordingly, these interventions have often had mixed effects and unintended consequences (Morgeson & Campion, 2002, 2003; Parker & Wall, 1998).

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Early models of work design devoted considerable attention to the social and relational characteristics of jobs and tasks that structure opportunities to interact with other people (Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Trist & Bamforth, 1951; Turner & Lawrence, 1965). Redesigning the social and relational characteristics of work may be a promising solution to the limitations of traditional work redesign interventions, as jobs can be structured to provide opportunities for interpersonal interaction without changing the nature of the assigned tasks that employees perform. However, as work design research has developed, the social and relational characteristics of work have been neglected (Grant, *in press*; Morgeson & Humphrey, *in press*; Latham & Pinder, 2005). The job characteristics model (JCM; Hackman & Oldham, 1975, 1976), the dominant model of work design in organizational research, includes only one job characteristic that focuses directly on relationships with other people: task significance, the degree to which an employee's work affects the health and well-being of other people. Meta-analyses suggest that task significance enhances motivation by enabling employees to experience their work as more meaningful (Fried & Ferris, 1987; Morgeson & Humphrey, *in press*).

In providing guidelines for redesigning work to increase task significance, Hackman, Oldham, and colleagues recommended establishing contact between employees and the beneficiaries of their work—clients, customers, patients, and other recipients and constituents who are positively affected by the jobs that employees perform (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Hackman, Oldham, Janson, & Purdy, 1975). Contact with beneficiaries is assumed to enhance perceived task significance, and thereby employee motivation, by enabling employees to directly see the consequences of their work for other people. However, rather than theoretically developing and empirically testing these principles of work redesign, organizational researchers have largely abandoned them. Dodd and Ganster (1996, 331) dismissed the importance of task significance in employee motivation, emphasizing that it is one of two job characteristics that have “seldom emerged as strong predictors of outcomes.” Of the two instruments commonly used to measure motivational job design, one does not include task significance (Sims, Szilagyi, & Keller, 1976); when using the other instrument, researchers treat task significance as one of five dimensions of job complexity, rather than as a noteworthy job characteristic in its own right (Ferris & Gilmore, 1985; Gerhart, 1988; Hogan & Martell, 1987).

In light of recent evidence that many employees define the purpose of their work in terms of having a positive impact on the beneficiaries of their efforts (Colby, Sippola, & Phelps, 2001; Ruiz-Quintanilla & England, 1996), and that service jobs providing opportunities to have a positive impact on beneficiaries are

becoming increasingly prevalent in national and international workforces (Cascio, 1995, 2003; Parker, Wall, & Cordery, 2001), the time is ripe for organizational scholars to develop and test the hypothesis that structuring jobs and tasks to provide contact with beneficiaries can enhance work motivation. In this article, we take a step toward filling this gap in organizational research. We propose that employees can be motivated to invest additional time and energy in their work when jobs and tasks are relationally structured to provide opportunities for respectful contact with the beneficiaries of their efforts. We present the results of three randomized, controlled experiments—a field experiment with fundraising callers and two laboratory experiments—that test this hypothesis and examine mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions. Together, our results suggest that even minimal, brief contact with beneficiaries can enable employees to maintain their motivation.

### Contact with beneficiaries and motivation maintenance

Motivation is an umbrella concept encapsulating the psychological processes that direct, energize, and sustain human behavior (e.g., Mitchell & Daniels, 2003). Our focus is on a particular aspect of motivation, *motivation maintenance*, the degree to which individuals continue to invest time and energy in their work. Consistent with prior research (Blau, 1993; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2000; Sandelands, Brockner, & Glynn, 1988), we use the term persistence—the amount of time an individual spends on a task—to capture motivation maintenance.

In line with the assumptions of prior job design research (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Hackman et al., 1975), we expect that contact with beneficiaries can enhance the persistence behavior of employees. Contact with beneficiaries is the degree to which jobs and tasks are relationally structured to provide employees with opportunities for exposure to and interactions with the people affected by their work (Grant, *in press*). In many occupational and organizational contexts, employees lack opportunities for contact with beneficiaries. For example, automotive engineers rarely meet the people who drive their cars, and textbook editors rarely meet the people who read their books. When these jobs are relationally designed to provide opportunities for contact with beneficiaries, employees may become aware of the significance of their tasks and thereby maintain their motivation in order to have a positive impact on beneficiaries.

Job design researchers have assumed these motivational benefits of contact with beneficiaries (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Hackman et al., 1975), but little research has examined them directly. Instead, researchers have focused on the detrimental effects of contact with beneficiaries. For example, research on emotional labor,

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