

6.2: Motivating Employees Through Job Design

Learning Objectives

1. Learn about the history of job design approaches.
2. Consider alternatives to job specialization.
3. Identify job characteristics that increase motivating potential.
4. Learn how to empower employees.

Importance of Job Design

Many of us assume the most important motivator at work is pay. Yet, studies point to a different factor as the major influence over worker motivation—job design. How a job is designed has a major impact on employee motivation, job satisfaction, commitment to an organization, absenteeism, and turnover.

The question of how to properly design jobs so that employees are more productive and more satisfied has received attention from managers and researchers since the beginning of the 20th century. We will review major approaches to job design starting from its early history.

Scientific Management and Job Specialization

Perhaps the earliest attempt to design jobs came during the era of scientific management. Scientific management is a philosophy based on the ideas of Frederick Taylor as presented in his 1911 book, *Principles of Scientific Management*. Taylor's book is among the most influential books of the 20th century; the ideas presented had a major influence over how work was organized in the following years. Taylor was a mechanical engineer in the manufacturing industry. He saw work being done haphazardly, with only workers in charge. He saw the inefficiencies inherent in employees' production methods and argued that a manager's job was to carefully plan the work to be performed by employees. He also believed that scientific methods could be used to increase productivity. As an example, Taylor found that instead of allowing workers to use their own shovels, as was the custom at the time, providing specially designed shovels increased productivity. Further, by providing training and specific instructions, he was able to dramatically reduce the number of laborers required to handle each job (Taylor, 1911; Wilson, 1999).

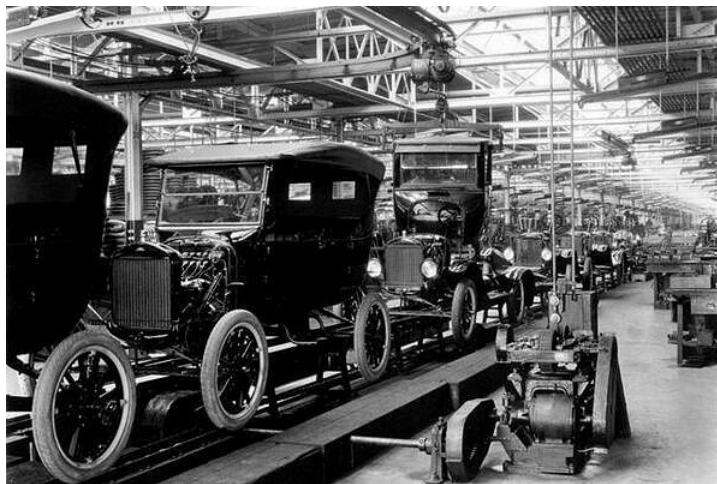


Figure 6.2.2: This Ford panel assembly line in Berlin, Germany, is an example of specialization. Each person on the line has a different job. Kyle Harris – [This old #Model T assembly line is awesome!](#) – CC BY 2.0.

Scientific management proposed a number of ideas that have been influential in job design in the following years. An important idea was to minimize waste by identifying the most efficient method to perform the job. Using time–motion studies, management could determine how much time each task would require and plan the tasks so that the job could be performed as efficiently as possible. Therefore, standardized job performance methods were an important element of scientific management techniques. Each job would be carefully planned in advance, and employees would be paid to perform the tasks in the way specified by management.

Furthermore, job specialization was one of the major advances of this approach. **Job specialization** entails breaking down jobs into their simplest components and assigning them to employees so that each person would perform a select number of tasks in a

repetitive manner. There are a number of advantages to job specialization. Breaking tasks into simple components and making them repetitive reduces the skill requirements of the jobs and decreases the effort and cost of staffing. Training times for simple, repetitive jobs tend to be shorter as well. On the other hand, from a motivational perspective, these jobs are boring and repetitive and therefore associated with negative outcomes such as absenteeism (Campion & Thayer, 1987). Also, job specialization is ineffective in rapidly changing environments where employees may need to modify their approach according to the demands of the situation (Wilson, 1999).

Today, Taylorism has a bad reputation, and it is often referred to as the “dark ages” of management when employees’ social motives were ignored. Yet, it is important to recognize the fundamental change in management mentality brought about by Taylor’s ideas. For the first time, managers realized their role in influencing the output levels of employees. The concept of scientific management has had a lasting impact on how work is organized. Taylor’s work paved the way to automation and standardization that is virtually universal in today’s workplace. Assembly lines where each worker performs simple tasks in a repetitive manner are a direct result of job specialization efforts. Job specialization eventually found its way to the service industry as well. One of the biggest innovations of the famous McDonald brothers’ first fast-food restaurant was the application of scientific management principles to their operations. They divided up the tasks so that one person took the orders while someone else made the burgers, another person applied the condiments, and yet another wrapped them. With this level of efficiency, customers generally received their order within 1 minute (Spake, 2001; Business heroes, 2005).

Rotation, Job Enlargement, and Enrichment

One of the early alternatives to job specialization was job rotation. **Job rotation** involves moving employees from job to job at regular intervals. When employees periodically move to different jobs, the monotonous aspects of job specialization can be relieved. For example, Maids International Inc., a company that provides cleaning services to households and businesses, utilizes job rotation so that maids cleaning the kitchen in one house would clean the bedroom in a different one (Denton, 1994). Using this technique, among others, the company is able to reduce its turnover level. In a supermarket study, cashiers were rotated to work in different departments. As a result of the rotation, employees’ stress levels were reduced, as measured by their blood pressure. Moreover, they experienced less pain in their neck and shoulders (Rissen et al., 2002).

Job rotation has a number of advantages for organizations. It is an effective way for employees to acquire new skills and in turn for organizations to increase the overall skill level of their employees (Campion, Cheraskin, & Stevens, 1994). When workers move to different positions, they are cross-trained to perform different tasks, thereby increasing the flexibility of managers to assign employees to different parts of the organization when needed. In addition, job rotation is a way to transfer knowledge between departments (Kane, Argote, & Levine, 2005). Rotation may also have the benefit of reducing employee boredom, depending on the nature of the jobs the employee is performing at a given time. From the employee standpoint, rotation is a benefit, because they acquire new skills that keep them marketable in the long run.

Is rotation used only at lower levels of an organization? Anecdotal evidence suggests that companies successfully rotate high-level employees to train managers and increase innovation in the company. For example, Nokia uses rotation at all levels, such as assigning lawyers to act as country managers or moving network engineers to handset design. This approach is thought to bring a fresh perspective to old problems (Wylie, 2003). Wipro Ltd., India’s information technology giant that employs about 80,000 workers, uses a 3-year plan to groom future leaders of the company by rotating them through different jobs (Ramamurti, 2001).

Job enlargement refers to expanding the tasks performed by employees to add more variety. By giving employees several different tasks to be performed, as opposed to limiting their activities to a small number of tasks, organizations hope to reduce boredom and monotony as well as utilize human resources more effectively. Job enlargement may have similar benefits to job rotation, because it may also involve teaching employees multiple tasks. Research indicates that when jobs are enlarged, employees view themselves as being capable of performing a broader set of tasks (Parker, 1998). There is some evidence that job enlargement is beneficial, because it is positively related to employee satisfaction and higher quality customer services, and it increases the chances of catching mistakes (Campion & McClelland, 1991). At the same time, the effects of job enlargement may depend on the *type* of enlargement. For example, job enlargement consisting of adding tasks that are very simple in nature had negative consequences on employee satisfaction with the job and resulted in fewer errors being caught. Alternatively, giving employees more tasks that require them to be knowledgeable in different areas seemed to have more positive effects (Campion & McClelland, 1993).

Job enrichment is a job redesign technique that allows workers more control over how they perform their own tasks. This approach allows employees to take on more responsibility. As an alternative to job specialization, companies using job enrichment may experience positive outcomes, such as reduced turnover, increased productivity, and reduced absences (McEvoy & Cascio, 1985;

Locke, Sirota, & Wolfson, 1976). This may be because employees who have the authority and responsibility over their work can be more efficient, eliminate unnecessary tasks, take shortcuts, and increase their overall performance. At the same time, there is evidence that job enrichment may sometimes cause dissatisfaction among certain employees (Locke, Sirota, & Wolfson, 1976). The reason may be that employees who are given additional autonomy and responsibility may expect greater levels of pay or other types of compensation, and if this expectation is not met they may feel frustrated. One more thing to remember is that job enrichment is not suitable for everyone (Cherrington & Lynn, 1980; Hulin & Blood, 1968). Not all employees desire to have control over how they work, and if they do not have this desire, they may become frustrated with an enriched job.

Job Characteristics Model

The [job characteristics model](#) is one of the most influential attempts to design jobs with increased motivational properties (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Proposed by Hackman and Oldham, the model describes five core job dimensions leading to three critical psychological states, resulting in work-related outcomes.

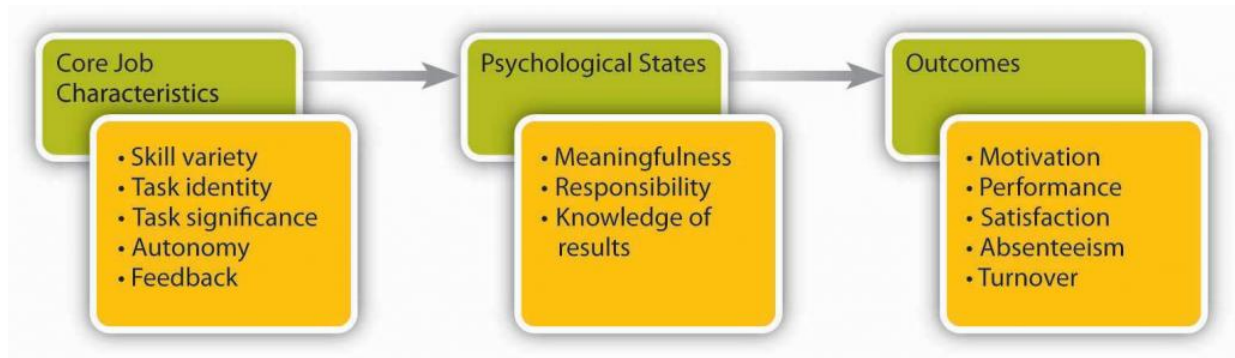


Figure 6.2.3: The Job Characteristics Model has five core job dimensions. Source: Adapted from Hackman, J. R., & Oldham, G. R. (1975). Development of the job diagnostic survey. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 60, 159–170.

Skill variety refers to the extent to which the job requires a person to utilize multiple high-level skills. A car wash employee whose job consists of directing customers into the automated car wash demonstrates low levels of skill variety, whereas a car wash employee who acts as a cashier, maintains carwash equipment, and manages the inventory of chemicals demonstrates high skill variety.

Task identity refers to the degree to which a person is in charge of completing an identifiable piece of work from start to finish. A Web designer who designs parts of a Web site will have low task identity, because the work blends in with other Web designers' work; in the end it will be hard for any one person to claim responsibility for the final output. The Web master who designs an entire Web site will have high task identity.

Task significance refers to whether a person's job substantially affects other people's work, health, or well-being. A janitor who cleans the floors at an office building may find the job low in significance, thinking it is not a very important job. However, janitors cleaning the floors at a hospital may see their role as essential in helping patients get better. When they feel that their tasks are significant, employees tend to feel that they are making an impact on their environment, and their feelings of self-worth are boosted (Grant, 2008).

Autonomy is the degree to which a person has the freedom to decide how to perform his or her tasks. As an example, an instructor who is required to follow a predetermined textbook, covering a given list of topics using a specified list of classroom activities, has low autonomy. On the other hand, an instructor who is free to choose the textbook, design the course content, and use any relevant materials when delivering lectures has higher levels of autonomy. Autonomy increases motivation at work, but it also has other benefits. Giving employees autonomy at work is a key to individual as well as company success, because autonomous employees are free to choose how to do their jobs and therefore can be more effective. They are also less likely to adopt a "this is not my job" approach to their work environment and instead be proactive (do what needs to be done without waiting to be told what to do) and creative (Morgeson, Delaney-Klinger, & Hemingway, 2005; Parker, Wall, & Jackson, 1997; Parker, Williams, & Turner, 2006; Zhou, 1998). The consequence of this resourcefulness can be higher company performance. For example, a Cornell University study shows that small businesses that gave employees autonomy grew four times more than those that did not (Davermann, 2006). Giving employees autonomy is also a great way to train them on the job. For example, Gucci's CEO Robert Polet points to the level of autonomy he was given while working at Unilever PLC as a key to his development of leadership talents (Gumbel, 2008).

Autonomy can arise from workplace features, such as telecommuting, company structure, organizational climate, and leadership style (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Garnier, 1982; Lyon & Ivancevich, 1974; Parker, 2003).

Feedback refers to the degree to which people learn how effective they are being at work. Feedback at work may come from other people, such as supervisors, peers, subordinates, and customers, or it may come from the job itself. A salesperson who gives presentations to potential clients but is not informed of the clients' decisions, has low feedback at work. If this person receives notification that a sale was made based on the presentation, feedback will be high.

The relationship between feedback and job performance is more controversial. In other words, the mere presence of feedback is not sufficient for employees to feel motivated to perform better. In fact, a review of this literature shows that in about one-third of the cases, feedback was detrimental to performance (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). In addition to whether feedback is present, the sign of feedback (positive or negative), whether the person is ready to receive the feedback, and the manner in which feedback was given will all determine whether employees feel motivated or demotivated as a result of feedback.

According to the job characteristics model, the presence of these five core job dimensions leads employees to experience three psychological states: They view their work as *meaningful*, they feel *responsible* for the outcomes, and they acquire *knowledge of results*. These three psychological states in turn are related to positive outcomes such as overall job satisfaction, internal motivation, higher performance, and lower absenteeism and turnover (Brass, 1985; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007; Johns, Xie, & Fang, 1992; Renn & Vandenberg, 1995). Research shows that out of these three psychological states, experienced meaningfulness is the most important for employee attitudes and behaviors, and it is the key mechanism through which the five core job dimensions operate.

Are all five job characteristics equally valuable for employees? Hackman and Oldham's model proposes that the five characteristics will not have uniform effects. Instead, they proposed the following formula to calculate the motivating potential of a given job (Hackman & Oldham, 1975):

Equation 6.1

$$\text{MPS} = ((\text{Skill Variety} + \text{Task Identity} + \text{Task Significance}) \div 3) \times \text{Autonomy} \times \text{Feedback}$$

According to this formula, autonomy and feedback are the more important elements in deciding motivating potential compared to skill variety, task identity, or task significance. Moreover, note how the job characteristics interact with each other in this model. If someone's job is completely lacking in autonomy (or feedback), regardless of levels of variety, identity, and significance, the motivating potential score will be very low.

Note that the five job characteristics are not objective features of a job. Two employees working in the same job may have very different perceptions regarding how much skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, or feedback the job affords. In other words, motivating potential is in the eye of the beholder. This is both good and bad news. The bad news is that even though a manager may design a job that is supposed to motivate employees, some employees may not find the job to be motivational. The good news is that sometimes it is possible to increase employee motivation by helping employees change their perspective about the job. For example, employees laying bricks at a construction site may feel their jobs are low in significance, but by pointing out that they are building a home for others, their perceptions about their job may be changed.

Do all employees expect to have a job that has a high motivating potential? Research has shown that the desire for the five core job characteristics is not universal. One factor that affects how much of these characteristics people want or need is **growth need strength**. Growth need strength describes the degree to which a person has higher order needs, such as self-esteem and self-actualization. When an employee's expectation from his job includes such higher order needs, employees will have high-growth need strength, whereas those who expect their job to pay the bills and satisfy more basic needs will have low-growth need strength. Not surprisingly, research shows that those with high-growth need strength respond more favorably to jobs with a high motivating potential (Arnold & House, 1980; Hackman & Lawler, 1971; Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Oldham, Hackman, & Pearce, 1976). It also seems that an employee's career stage influences how important the five dimensions are. For example, when employees are new to an organization, task significance is a positive influence over job satisfaction, but autonomy may be a negative influence (Katz, 1978).

OB Toolbox: Increase the Feedback You Receive: Seek It!

- *If you are not receiving enough feedback on the job, it is better to seek it instead of trying to guess how you are doing.* Consider seeking regular feedback from your boss. This also has the added benefit of signaling to the manager that you care about your performance and want to be successful.
- *Be genuine in your desire to learn.* When seeking feedback, your aim should be improving yourself as opposed to creating the impression that you are a motivated employee. If your manager thinks that you are managing impressions rather than genuinely trying to improve your performance, seeking feedback may hurt you.
- *Develop a good relationship with your manager.* This has the benefit of giving you more feedback in the first place. It also has the upside of making it easier to ask direct questions about your own performance.
- *Consider finding trustworthy peers who can share information with you regarding your performance.* Your manager is not the only helpful source of feedback.
- *Be gracious when you receive feedback.* If you automatically go on the defensive the first time you receive negative feedback, there may not be a next time. Remember, even if receiving feedback, positive or negative, feels uncomfortable, it is a gift. You can improve your performance using feedback, and people giving negative feedback probably feel they are risking your good will by being honest. Be thankful and appreciative when you receive any feedback and do not try to convince the person that it is inaccurate (unless there are factual mistakes).

Sources: Adapted from ideas in Jackman, J. M., & Strober, M. H. (2003, April). Fear of feedback. *Harvard Business Review*, 81(4), 101–107; Wing, L., Xu, H., Snape, E. (2007). Feedback-seeking behavior and leader-member exchange: Do supervisor-attributed motives matter? *Academy of Management Journal*, 50, 348–363; Lee, H. E., Park, H. S., Lee, T. S., & Lee, D. W. (2007). Relationships between LMX and subordinates' feedback-seeking behaviors. *Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal*, 35, 659–674.

Empowerment

One of the contemporary approaches to motivating employees through job design is empowerment. The concept of empowerment extends the idea of autonomy. **Empowerment** may be defined as the removal of conditions that make a person powerless (Conger & Kanugo, 1988). The idea behind empowerment is that employees have the ability to make decisions and perform their jobs effectively if management removes certain barriers. Thus, instead of dictating roles, companies should create an environment where employees thrive, feel motivated, and have discretion to make decisions about the content and context of their jobs. Employees who feel empowered believe that their work is meaningful. They tend to feel that they are capable of performing their jobs effectively, have the ability to influence how the company operates, and can perform their jobs in any way they see fit, without close supervision and other interference. These liberties enable employees to feel powerful (Spreitzer, 1995; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). In cases of very high levels of empowerment, employees decide what tasks to perform and how to perform them, in a sense managing themselves.

Research has distinguished between *structural* elements of empowerment and *felt* empowerment. **Structural empowerment** refers to the aspects of the work environment that give employees discretion, autonomy, and the ability to do their jobs effectively. The idea is that the presence of certain structural factors helps empower people, but in the end empowerment is a perception. The following figure demonstrates the relationship between structural and felt empowerment. For example, at Harley-Davidson Motor Company, employees have the authority to stop the production line if they see a blemish on the product (Lustgarten, 2004). Leadership style is another influence over experienced empowerment (Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003). If the manager is controlling, micromanaging, and bossy, chances are that empowerment will not be possible. A company's structure has a role in determining empowerment as well. Factories organized around teams, such as the Saturn plant of General Motors Corporation, can still empower employees, despite the presence of a traditional hierarchy (Ford & Fottler, 1995). Access to information is often mentioned as a key factor in empowering employees. If employees are not given information to make an informed decision, empowerment attempts will fail. Therefore, the relationship between access to information and empowerment is well established. Finally, empowering individual employees cannot occur in a bubble, but instead depends on creating a climate of empowerment throughout the entire organization (Seibert, Silver, & Randolph, 2004).

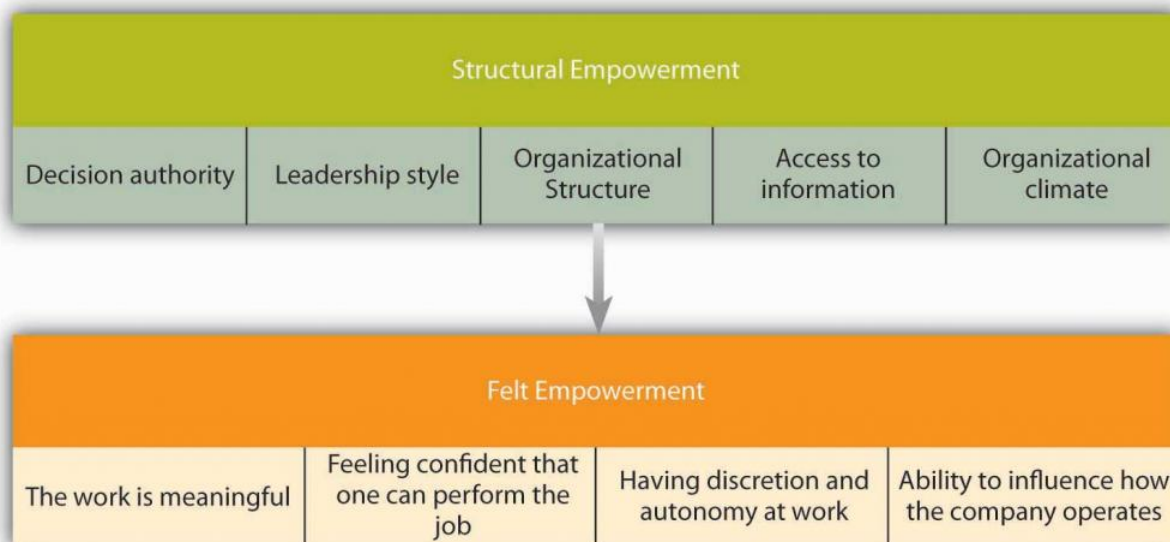


Figure 6.2.4: The empowerment process starts with structure that leads to felt empowerment. Source: Based on the ideas in Seibert, S. E., Silver, S. R., & Randolph, W. A. (2004). Taking empowerment to the next level: A multiple-level model of empowerment, performance, and satisfaction. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47, 332–349; Spreitzer, G. M. (1995). Psychological empowerment in the workplace: Dimensions, measurement, and validation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 38, 1442–1465; Spreitzer, G. M. (1996). Social structural characteristics of psychological empowerment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39, 483–504.

Empowerment of employees tends to be beneficial for organizations, because it is related to outcomes such as employee innovativeness, managerial effectiveness, employee commitment to the organization, customer satisfaction, job performance, and behaviors that benefit the company and other employees (Ahearne, Mathieu, & Rapp, 2005; Alge et al., 2006; Chen et al., 2007; Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000; Spreitzer, 1995). At the same time, empowerment may not necessarily be suitable for all employees. Those individuals with low growth strength or low achievement need may not benefit as strongly from empowerment. Moreover, the idea of empowerment is not always easy to implement, because some managers may feel threatened when subordinates are empowered. If employees do not feel ready for empowerment, they may also worry about the increased responsibility and accountability. Therefore, preparing employees for empowerment by carefully selecting and training them is important to the success of empowerment interventions.

OB Toolbox: Tips for Empowering Employees

- *Change the company structure so that employees have more power on their jobs.* If jobs are strongly controlled by organizational procedures or if every little decision needs to be approved by a superior, employees are unlikely to feel empowered. Give them discretion at work.
- *Provide employees with access to information about things that affect their work.* When employees have the information they need to do their jobs well and understand company goals, priorities, and strategy, they are in a better position to feel empowered.
- *Make sure that employees know how to perform their jobs.* This involves selecting the right people as well as investing in continued training and development.
- *Do not take away employee power.* If someone makes a decision, let it stand unless it threatens the entire company. If management undoes decisions made by employees on a regular basis, employees will not believe in the sincerity of the empowerment initiative.
- *Instill a climate of empowerment in which managers do not routinely step in and take over.* Instead, believe in the power of employees to make the most accurate decisions, as long as they are equipped with the relevant facts and resources.

Sources: Adapted from ideas in Forrester, R. (2000). Empowerment: Rejuvenating a potent idea. *Academy of Management Executive*, 14, 67–79; Spreitzer, G. M. (1996). Social structural characteristics of psychological empowerment. *Academy of Management Journal*, 39, 483–504.

Key Takeaways

Job specialization is the earliest approach to job design, originally described by the work of Frederick Taylor. Job specialization is efficient but leads to boredom and monotony. Early alternatives to job specialization include job rotation, job enlargement, and job enrichment. Research shows that there are five job components that increase the motivating potential of a job: Skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. Finally, empowerment is a contemporary way of motivating employees through job design. These approaches increase worker motivation and have the potential to increase performance.

Exercises

1. Is job rotation primarily suitable to lower level employees, or is it possible to use it at higher levels in the organization?
2. What is the difference between job enlargement and job enrichment? Which of these approaches is more useful in dealing with the boredom and monotony of job specialization?
3. Consider a job you held in the past. Analyze the job using the framework of the job characteristics model.
4. Does a job with a high motivating potential motivate all employees? Under which conditions is the model less successful in motivating employees?
5. How would you increase the empowerment levels of employees?

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