

23.17: Job Design and Job Characteristics Theory

Learning Objectives

- Explain how job characteristics theory can be used to enhance employee motivation



Job design is an important prerequisite to workplace motivation, as a well-designed job can encourage positive behaviors and create a strong infrastructure for employee success. Job design involves specifying the contents, responsibilities, objectives, and relationships required to satisfy the expectations of the role. Below are some established approaches managers can take to doing it thoughtfully and well.

Proposed by Greg R. Oldham and J. Richard Hackman in 1976, job characteristics theory identifies five core characteristics that managers should keep in mind when they are designing jobs. The theory is that these dimensions relate to, and help satisfy, important psychological states of the employee filling the role, with the results of greater job satisfaction and motivation and less absenteeism and turnover.

Core Job Characteristics

Below are the core job characteristics:

- **Skill variety:** Doing the same thing day in, day out gets tedious. The solution to design jobs with enough variety to stimulate ongoing interest, growth, and satisfaction.
- **Task identity:** Being part of a team is motivating, but so, too, is having some ownership of a set of tasks or part of the process. Having a clear understanding of what one is responsible for, with some degree of control over it, is an important motivator.
- **Task significance:** Feeling relevant to organizational success provides important motivation for getting a task or job done. Knowing that one's contributions are important contribute's to sense of satisfaction and accomplishment.
- **Autonomy:** No one likes to be micromanaged, and having some freedom to be the expert is critical to job satisfaction. Companies usually hire people for their specialized knowledge. Giving specialists autonomy to make the right decisions is a win-win.
- **Feedback:** Finally, everyone needs objective feedback on how they are doing and how they can do better. Providing well-constructed feedback with tangible outcomes is a key component of job design.

In the following Ted Talk, career analyst Dan Pink examines the puzzle of motivation, starting with a fact that social scientists know but most managers don't: Traditional external rewards aren't always as effective as we think, and those that speak to a person's internal motivation are often more potent and lasting:



You can view the [transcript for “The Puzzle of Motivation | Dan Pink” \(opens in new window\)](#) or the [text alternative for “The Puzzle of Motivation | Dan Pink” \(opens in new window\)](#).

Psychological States

Below are the psychological states that help employees feel motivated and satisfied with their work:

- **Experienced meaningfulness:** This is a positive psychological state that will be achieved if the first three job dimensions—skill variety, task identity, and task significance—are in place. All three dimensions help employees feel that what they do is meaningful.
- **Experienced responsibility:** Dimension four, autonomy, contributes to a sense of accountability, which, for most, people is intrinsically motivating.
- **Knowledge of results:** Dimension five, feedback, provides a sense of progress, growth, and personal assessment. Understanding one’s accomplishments is a healthy state of mind for motivation and satisfaction.

Work Outcomes

The combination of core job characteristics with psychological states influences work outcomes such as the following:

- **Job satisfaction:** When employees feel that their jobs are meaningful, that positive psychological state contributes to a sense of satisfaction.
- **Motivation:** Employees who experience responsibility in their job, a sense of ownership over their work, and knowledge of the results tend to be more highly motivated.
- **Absenteeism:** When employees are motivated and satisfied, absenteeism and job turnover decrease.

Overall, the manager’s goal is to design the job in such a way that the core characteristics complement the psychological states of the worker and lead to positive outcomes.

Job Design Techniques

As a motivational force in the organization, managers must consider how they can design jobs that lead to empowered, motivated, and satisfied employees. Below are a few established methods to accomplish this objective:

- **Job rotation:** As noted in the above model, it’s not particularly motivating to do the exact same thing every day. As a result, rotating jobs and expanding employees’ skill sets accomplish two objectives: increased employee satisfaction and broader employee skills.
- **Job enlargement (horizontal):** Giving employees the autonomy to step back and assess the quality of their work, improve the efficiency of their processes, and address mistakes contributes to satisfaction in the workplace.
- **Intrinsic and extrinsic rewards:** Giving employees autonomy helps generate intrinsic rewards (self-satisfaction) and motivation. Extrinsic rewards (such as time off, a bonus, or commission) are also motivating.
- **Job enrichment (vertical):** It’s important for managers to delegate some of their planning to seasoned employees as they grow into their roles. By turning over control of work-task planning to employees themselves, they feel a strong sense of engagement, progress in their career, and ownership of their work outcomes.

? Practice Question

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