Whenever you go to work, you have a number of tasks, activities and responsibilities that you need to carry out, usually in collaboration with others. Work design is basically how these tasks, activities, responsibilities and interactions with other people are organised and structured. Good work design is crucial, as it affects both individual employees and organisational outcomes. For employees, work design can affect their motivation, their well-being and their development. Increased employee motivation, well-being and accelerated development can in turn improve organisational outcomes such as safety, performance, and innovation.

7 Motivational Aspects of WORK DESIGN

There are seven core elements to think about when creating a motivating job.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JOB AUTONOMY</th>
<th>JOB DEMANDS</th>
<th>SOCIAL SUPPORT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How much discretion does your job provide over daily work decisions such as when and how to perform your work?</td>
<td>How much sustained or high levels of physical, mental or emotional effort does your work require?</td>
<td>Are you provided with emotional and social support from your peers and/or your supervisor?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ROLE CLARITY

Do you have a clear understanding of your role, responsibilities and accountabilities?

JOB VARIETY

Are you required to do lots of repetitive tasks, or do you have lots of variety in your work?

JOB FEEDBACK

How much clear feedback do you receive about your effectiveness in performing your work?

SKILL UTILISATION

Does your workplace provide appropriate opportunity and support for you to use your skills effectively?

The seven elements of work design can be combined in different ways to create work that is ideal not only for productivity, but also employee well-being. Keep in mind though that there is no 'one fits all' formula of work design. Good work design is often tailored to fit the organisation, individuals and situation.

WHAT DOES GOOD OR BAD WORK DESIGN LOOK LIKE?

GOOD WORK DESIGN

“I love my job...I’ve learned so much... I can talk the talk with biochemists, software engineers, all these interesting people... And I love being independent, relying on myself... It’s exciting”

(Corporate headhunter, Bowe et al, 2009. P12)

BAD WORK DESIGN

“We see about a hundred injuries a year and I’m amazed there aren’t more. The main causes are inexperience and repetition... People work the same job all the time and they stop thinking. Workers in a plant like this need to be moved around...”

(Slaughterhouse human resources director, Bowe et al, 2009. P52)
How and Where can Work Design be Used?

As mentioned before, the way work is designed can affect employee stress, engagement, satisfaction and safe working. Two methods of redesigning work to improve well-being include:

1. Changing the nature, number or organisation of tasks and responsibilities to reduce stress and/or provide more resources, such as making modifications to working hours, introducing working from home policies, reducing the level of demands, or providing more support.
2. Empowering and motivating employees to proactively implement their own strategies to reduce sources of stress, and/or increase their resources (e.g. allowing employees the freedom to structure their own work day).

Illustrative research evidence:

- A relatively small increase in the autonomy of call centre workers in a UK bank (e.g. allowing them a greater say in the planning of their work) led to a significant increase in motivation, and a decrease in absenteeism and mental distress (Bond & Bunce, 2003).
- Job autonomy is associated with greater organisational commitment, which in turn, is linked to safer working (Parker, Axtell and Turner, 2001).
- Despite an increased work load, the survivors of downsizing did not become more stressed and in fact job satisfaction increased. Further investigation showed that this was explained by the survivors being given greater job autonomy (Parker et al., 1997).

Today's working environment is increasingly complex, requiring organisations to juggle between control and flexibility. Control is required for consistency and cost efficiency, but at the same time, flexibility is required for creativity and innovation. A balance between control and flexibility can both be achieved when clearly designated leaders engage in what is called 'dynamic delegation'. Dynamic delegation involves passing the leadership role to junior leaders to help them learn the ropes, but also reclaiming the leadership role during unfamiliar or urgent situations. This means work essentially changes according to the situation.

Illustrative research evidence:

Research has found that despite the great urgency, uncertainty and consequences that extreme medical action teams such as trauma resuscitation units face, a high degree of reliability can be maintained, even with frequent changes in team make-up (Klein et al., 2006). Integral to these teams' performance is a decentralised system of shared leadership and dynamic delegation. This type of dynamic delegation helps junior leaders to learn by doing, and at the same time makes it clear who team members should turn to in moments of uncertainty.
Some organisations are restructuring work to move away from narrow and inflexible jobs, and towards more empowered work roles. But many jobs remain poorly designed.

UWA Expertise: Professor Sharon Parker

Professor Sharon Parker is an award winning applied researcher and world leading expert in the field of work design. Her research focuses on understanding how to design work that is ‘good for people’ (mental and physical health) and ‘good for business’ (productivity and innovation). Professor Parker has contributed to the development of UK work-stress policy, and has also been an expert advisor to the US National Institute of OH&S. She is currently the key consultant on the joint Comcare/Safe Work Australia “Good Work Through Effective Design” project which involves developing principles to help employers comply with the Work Health and Safety Act. Professor Parker is currently based in the Business School of The University of Western Australia (UWA), and is the Co-Director of the Accelerated Learning Lab at UWA. Download Professor Parker’s Comcare summary report for principles of good work design here.

Examples of Work Design Projects under Professor Parker’s Lead

**Building Safer & More Productive Operating Theatres**

There is increasing evidence that surgical errors are not due to a lack of technical skills (e.g., training or knowledge), but are due to non-technical skills such as communication and team failures, e.g. unclear team goals. Using work design theories, this study examines how changes to surgical team briefings and debriefings can improve surgical outcomes.

[Project page link](#)

**Sleep Deprivation and Fatigue in Surgical Practice**

The nature of health care frequently entails shift-work, prolonged work hours, and overnight emergency calls. These environments can be particularly detrimental for sleep quality and lead to episodes of serious physical and mental fatigue. Using work design theories, this study provide strategies to address fatigue issues and improve performance in surgical settings.

[Project page link](#)

**Designing Meaningful, Healthy, and High Performing Work in Cybersecurity**

Considering the potentially high costs of error in cybersecurity roles, there is a need to reduce the immense attentional and physical demands for analysts’ health. Work design principles are being applied to investigate how analysts’ motivation and performance, health and safety, and learning and development can be improved.

[Project page link](#)

**Looking toward the Future: Extreme working conditions**

Work design is of increasing relevance, and it is essential to keep the understanding of how to best design work for well-being and performance, up to date. Globalisation, competition and new technology will push industries towards unchartered territory and necessarily give rise to radical changes in the ways organisations operate and people work. Some work conditions are becoming more extreme, for example, the activity of deep sea mining. The Centre for Safety is placing itself at the forefront of these changes, in order to generate new knowledge on how extreme working conditions can be designed so they have a positive effect on well-being and performance.

Organisations that are making radical changes in the way work is carried out (e.g. remote control centres), and who are interested in understanding the effects of these changes, are encouraged to contact the UWA Centre for Safety.

Other potential collaborations of interest to the Centre for Safety include:

- Evaluating the effects of work redesigns (or other changes with effects on work design).
- Leadership development interventions to train leaders in work design and mental health.
- Company-wide audits of work design, mental health, and engagement.
About the UWA Centre for Safety:

The UWA Centre for Safety is a hub for cutting edge research, innovative ideas, and practical solutions across the field of work safety.

Formed out of a partnership between Rio Tinto and The University of Western Australia, the Centre is dedicated to solving important safety challenges, and creating sustainable organisational change.

The Centre for Safety brings together world renowned experts across disciplines including Psychology, Engineering, Medicine, Business, Law and Health Science. This unique multidisciplinary approach towards safety provides critical insights into current industry concerns.

By encouraging collaborations between research, industry and government, the Centre for Safety is leading the way for safety innovation.

References:


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