Job Design

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is job design?

Every job has an inherent design—the collection of duties, responsibilities, required competencies, environment, relationships, and resources involved in the job. This design may be intentional or unintentional. The concept of job design, however, is a more purposeful process of shaping a job's characteristics with the goal to increase employee motivation, performance, and job satisfaction as well as lower turnover and absenteeism in the workplace (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). According to Job Characteristics Theory, this is done through enhancing the five core job dimensions of skill variety, task identity, task significance, job autonomy, and feedback from the job. In enhancing these dimensions, employees should have greater knowledge of results, feelings of responsibility, and perceptions of meaningfulness in the workplace, which will lead to more positive individual outcomes. The five dimensions of job design are described below.

- Skill variety is defined as "the degree to which a job requires a variety of different activities in carrying out the work, which involve the use of a number of different skills and talents of the person" (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 257).

- Task identity is defined as "the degree to which the job requires completion of a "whole" and identifiable piece of work; that is, doing a job from beginning to end with a visible outcome" (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 257).

- Task significance is defined as "the degree to which the job has a substantial impact on the lives or work of other people, whether in the immediate organization or in the external environment" (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 257).

- Job autonomy is defined as "the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the individual in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out" (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 258).

- Feedback from the job is defined as "the degree to which carrying out the work activities required by the job results in the individual obtaining direct and clear information about the effectiveness of his or her performance" (Hackman & Oldham, 1976, p. 258).

This original conceptualization of job design as five characteristics has since been expanded to four categories of 21 characteristics that capture a greater variety of aspects of a job. These dimensions are detailed further below.

- Task characteristics include work scheduling autonomy, decision-making autonomy, work methods autonomy, task variety, task significance, task identity, and feedback from the job.

- Knowledge characteristics include job complexity, information processing, problem solving, skill variety, and specialization.

- Social characteristics include social support opportunities, initiated interdependence, received interdependence, interaction outside of the organization, and feedback from others.

- Work context characteristics include ergonomics, physical demands, work conditions, and equipment use (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006).

The traditional method of assessing job design has been through the 15-item Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS; Hackman & Oldham, 1975). This survey contains three items pertaining to each of the five job characteristics of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback from the job. Respondents are asked to rate their perceptions of how accurate each statement is on a scale from 1 (*very inaccurate*) to 7 (*very accurate*). The 77-item Work Design Questionnaire (WDQ) is a newer and much more comprehensive approach to measuring job design that assesses the seven task characteristics, five knowledge characteristics, five social characteristics, and four work context characteristics (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006).

Why is job design valuable?

Job design is valuable because job characteristics are associated with positive employee attitudes and behaviors in the workplace. The bulk of the research thus far has been on the original five dimensions, so further research is needed to establish meta-analytic findings for many of the knowledge, social, and work context characteristics. In addition, there are no meta-analytic results for turnover at this time.

- Job satisfaction is the most frequently studied outcome for job characteristics. It is associated in some way with all of the job characteristics studied so far. It is higher when employees have greater autonomy; the job involves more complexity, information processing, skill variety, task significance, task identity, and task variety; employees receive feedback from the job itself and others; there is interdependence with others; employees have interactions with others outside the organization; and there are opportunities for social support and lower physical demands.

- Organizational commitment is also associated with all of the characteristics studied so far, though fewer have been examined. Organizational commitment is higher when employees have greater autonomy; the job involves skill variety, task significance, and

task identity; employees receive feedback from the job itself and others; and there is interdependence with others and opportunities for social support.

- For job performance, stress, burnout, and turnover intentions, the findings are more mixed or unknown.

How can existing jobs be improved?

In an optimal situation, jobs are initially designed with the factors above in mind. If not, a comprehensive redesign process can be used to arrive at a better balance of the desired characteristics. The QIC-WD's work with the [Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services](#) illustrates how a comprehensive job redesign process resulted in a teams approach to serving children and families.

Existing jobs can be also enhanced through job enrichment and [job crafting](#). Job enrichment is "an organizational intervention designed to restructure jobs with the intent of making them more challenging, motivating, and satisfying to the individual" (Loher et al., 1985, p. 280). In other words, job enrichment consists of augmenting a job to include more of the 21 job characteristics in order to increase employee motivation. For example, to increase skill variety, an organization might widen the scope of a job so that tasks require a greater diversity of skills, or to increase autonomy an organization may allow an employee to take the lead on a project. Job enrichment has many positive outcomes, like being moderately related to less turnover in the workplace (McEvoy & Cascio, 1985).

Similar to job enrichment, job crafting is also used as a means to restructure a job. Job crafting is defined as "the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task and relational boundaries of their work" (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 179). Whereas job design and job enrichment are organization-level interventions to change a job, job crafting is implemented by an individual employee in order to make their job better suited to their personal needs and motivations.

It is important to note, particularly in the context of child welfare, that more may not always equal better in terms of job design. In changing job characteristics, an organization should be mindful to not inadvertently create excessive job demands or workloads for employees, as these tend to be associated with greater burnout and less engagement (Rattrie et al., 2020). Relative to many other entry-level jobs, child welfare work is typically already very high on many of the desired task, knowledge, and social job characteristics—significance, complexity, variety, information processing, problem solving, interdependence, and interaction, among others. Thus, improvements in job design may require simplification or rightsizing rather than expansion or increases.

QIC-WD Takeaways

► Job design involves creating a job with certain characteristics in order to motivate employees and bring about positive outcomes.

► Job design was originally thought to involve five core job characteristics including skill variety, task identity, task significance, job autonomy, and feedback from the job.

► Now, job design encompasses not only task characteristics, but also knowledge (e.g., specialization), social (e.g., feedback from others), and work context characteristics (e.g., physical demands).

► Enhancing job characteristics generally leads to positive attitudinal outcomes like greater job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

► Organizations can use job enrichment as a means to make job characteristics more present in an existing job and employees can use job crafting in order to tailor a job to themselves.

► Researchers and practitioners seeking to measure the characteristics of a job should consider the Work Design Questionnaire (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006).

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