

Job enrichment

Job enrichment is a type of job ‘redesign’ (see ‘Job design’ in this volume) initially derived from Herzberg’s Motivation-Hygiene Theory. It refers to building into jobs ‘greater scope for personal achievement and its recognition, more challenging and responsible work, and more opportunity for individual advancement and growth’ (Paul et al., 1969, p. 835). Job enrichment involves the *vertical* expansion of jobs and especially includes greater job autonomy, whereas job enlargement involves the *horizontal* expansion of jobs in which the range of tasks is broadened.

The Job Characteristics Model is the main theory that underpins job enrichment. This theory suggests that, by increasing skill variety, task identity and task significance, feelings of meaningfulness are fostered; while augmented perceptions of responsibility are achieved by increasing employee autonomy, and an increase in job-related feedback promotes employees’ knowledge of the results of work, thus increasing the motivational potential of the job.

Research on job enrichment as a form of job redesign was highly prevalent in the 1970s. Although there is meta-analytic evidence that enriching (or motivating) work characteristics such as autonomy positively predict many outcomes, mostly through enhancing meaningfulness, research is more mixed when it comes to demonstrating positive change as a result of job enrichment interventions. The evidence is most consistent for attitudes like job satisfaction and commitment and beliefs like self-efficacy (Parker, 1998), but is inconsistent when it comes to performance (Kelly, 1992; Yan et al., 2011).

In part, inconsistent outcomes might reflect the challenges involved in implementing work redesign (Locke et al., 1976). Performance effects might also depend on contingencies such as job incumbent personality (e.g., their growth need strength), task and job type, and organizational and national culture. For example, in a Chinese high-tech organization, job enrichment increased job satisfaction and task performance for knowledge workers but this was not so for manual workers (Yan et al., 2011). The authors argued that manual workers might perceive enrichment as an obstacle or additional stressor.

Time lags might also play a role in explaining mixed performance effects. In a study of fundraising callers, the amount of pledges earned more than doubled following a task significance intervention (see Grant et al., 2011); whereas the positive performance effects of a more multifaceted job enrichment initiative involving bank tellers were only evident after several months (Griffin, 1991).

Job enrichment can apply at the group level in the form of self-managed teams or autonomous work groups. As with individual job enrichment, organizational/occupational context can mitigate the effects. For example, the introduction of self-managed teams had a positive effect on performance, attitudes and behaviours in government administrative staff; however, these results were not fully replicated and in some cases were negative in a military sample (Langfred, 2000).

There is evidence that an optimal level of job enrichment exists. For example, Xie and Johns (1995) demonstrated that jobs can be ‘too rich’, with associated role overload and strain, while Fried and colleagues (2013) demonstrated that jobs that are both ‘not rich enough’ or ‘too rich’ increased obesity rates, which the authors argue is due to employee experiences of stress. Job enrichment can also support professional and skill development.

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See also:

Empowerment; Job design; Job enlargement; Job rotation; Job satisfaction; Lean production; Quality circles; Scientific management; Teamwork.

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