

19 Jun 2019

Job design

Explore the evolution and objectives of job design, the factors affecting it, and the different approaches to designing jobs

Introduction

Job design is the process of establishing employees' roles and responsibilities and the systems and procedures that they should use or follow. The purpose of job design, or redesign, is to coordinate and optimise work processes to create value and improve productivity.

This factsheet examines job design, taking into account motivation theory, behaviour, employee empowerment, team working and flexible working. It looks at the key factors which influence job design and at the elements which contribute to its effectiveness. It considers job design as a feature of high performance working and the manager's role in driving engagement through job design. It concludes by looking at understanding and measuring job quality.

Explore [our stance on job quality](#) along with actions for Government and recommendations for employers.

What is job design?

Job design is a process of determining job roles and what a job comprises, and how it relates to other relevant jobs and the organisation's structure. It includes deciding on the duties and responsibilities of the job holder, the methods to be used in carrying out the job, as well as what support and resources they need. This can be done more or less stringently depending on the nature and scope of the work that needs to be done.

The main purpose of job design – or redesign – is to optimise work processes, ensure the right value is created and improve productivity. It does this in various ways, including clarifying roles, systems and procedures; reducing repetitive elements within and between jobs; and optimising the scope of workers' responsibility, which can be increased through techniques such as job enlargement, job enrichment and job rotation.

Job design is also a way to contribute to the long-term growth and sustainability of organisations. As an important element of people strategy, it contributes to how fulfilling and motivating employees find their work, the opportunities they have to develop skills and progress, and whether they have workloads that are sustainable and healthy.

The evolution of job design

Job design emerged during the industrial revolution. In the early 1900s, Taylor's 'scientific management' principles were used to measure and sequence human inputs alongside machinery to achieve higher efficiencies. Two important concepts emerged:

- **Method study** examines the efficiency of how and why jobs are done or sequenced, and it is still used today, for example, in designing 'lean' manufacturing processes.
- **Work measurement** aims to establish the time needed to complete tasks which is important for resource planning and cost control, and is now used less widely as the measures of effectiveness have shifted to considering the outputs of work.

This mechanistic approach to job design primarily served productivity and efficiency, and involved close supervision of workers and low autonomy, although varying the tasks through job rotation was used to improve work experience.

With the rise of theories of motivation, behavioural considerations were integrated more firmly into job design, taking into account employee needs for job satisfaction. In particular, Hackman and Oldham's job characteristics theory described five aspects of jobs that contributed to employee motivation, satisfaction and performance:

- **Skill variety:** the range of skills needed to do a job.
- **Skill identity:** whether a worker identifies with their job because it involves seeing through cohesive tasks from start to end.
- **Task significance:** whether a job affects the lives or jobs of others. Together with skill variety and identity, this contributes to how meaningful people find their work.
- **Autonomy:** the freedom workers have to schedule their work and choose how they do it. This makes employees feel responsible for their work.
- **Feedback on performance:** gives employees knowledge of the outcomes of their work.

With the rise of ideas on empowerment, the responsibility for job design shifted to some extent towards individual employees, giving them more autonomy over how to perform at least some aspects of their job. The same idea of devolved responsibility can be applied at the team level where team members can decide collectively who will perform certain tasks and how.

An additional aspect of job design concerns when and how much people work. These

decisions can be driven by employers, for example through the use of temporary and zero-hours contracts, or by employees themselves, through [flexible working arrangements](#) that allow them to shape their working hours and achieve greater work-life balance. Arrangements include flexi-time, compressed hours, reduced hours, job-sharing, term-time working, and working from home.

Factors that inform job design

Job design relies on careful job analysis – gathering information about the required outputs, the work needed to achieve them job, and the skills, resources and autonomy that will enable it. This analysis should form the basis of a job description and person specification or job profile.

Internal factors

- The nature, range and volume of tasks to be performed in the job and whether employees have the required capabilities and resources.
- Enriching, inherently rewarding and satisfying jobs, which provide meaningful, interesting and stretching work with autonomy where possible and good opportunities for professional growth and progression.
- Resources and appropriate workload. Overwork is a common feature of contemporary work, as shown in our survey [UK Working Lives](#), and it is a major source of stress. Read our guide on [helping teams thrive at work](#).
- Work-life balance and flexible working. Job design plays an important part in helping ensure health and well-being. See more in our factsheets on [well-being at work](#) and [flexible working](#).
- Ergonomics. Shaping the job to best fit the physical capabilities of humans. This may also cover any reasonable adjustments that might be required to ensure the job can be carried out by someone with a disability - see our [disability and employment](#) factsheet.
- Fair reward and recognition, as shown in establishing fair levels of reward for a job - see more in our [job evaluation and market pricing](#) factsheet.
- The workflow, or the sequence and relationship between tasks to achieve the desired outcomes and how the job will slot in with other jobs in the organisation.

External factors

- Demand from customers, for example, the expectation for 24/7 services (as in customer service roles).
- The labour market, in particular how likely it is that people will have all the capabilities needed for the role; if not, it may be necessary to create more than one job.
- Technological developments which enable tasks to be performed in different ways, for example, automation, offshore collaboration and digitisation.

Effective job design

The objectives of job design will vary according to business demands and the organisation's approach. However, the following will feature to a lesser or greater degree in deciding both the approach and desired outcomes.

- **Business purpose.** Job design should support the purpose of the organisation and what it needs to do to succeed. Its purpose, for example, could be to sell a particular product, to provide a generic service, to constantly deliver innovative new designs, and so on.
- **People capability.** Consider existing capabilities both internally and in the wider labour market.
- **Quality.** Design jobs to minimise the risk of errors and to impose a degree of self-checking by employees to ensure highest possible quality standards.
- **Speed.** Jobs should be designed to ensure that timeliness of task completion is appropriate to the job. For example, in the case of an emergency, the speed and appropriateness of the response is probably the most important feature of the job.
- **Health and safety.** Jobs must be designed to ensure they don't risk the well-being or safety of the job holder, their colleagues, customers or other individuals.
- **Productivity.** Jobs must be designed to ensure the primary focus of the job holder is on things that matter and add value to the business.
- **Sustainability.** Jobs should be designed with a view to sustainability, ensuring that organisations can respond flexibly in the face of changing economic, social and political landscapes. Also ensure there is room to develop the job over time to take account of the evolving individual and organisational capabilities.
- **Quality of working life.** Job design should incorporate sufficient flexibility, breadth and challenge to ensure individuals are motivated, excessive and prolonged stress is

minimised, and wherever possible job security is assured to sustain good quality work for employees.

Job design has long been a feature of high performance working initiatives. Specifically, the role of job design is in ensuring that skills and motivation are adequately applied. Engagement with the task is the most significant driver of organisational performance, according to our [Lens on engagement](#) research. This emphasises the need for a careful job design, alongside positive line management practices and organisational leadership supporting [employee engagement](#) levels. Further evidence is available on designing jobs for and managing young people, who may not have prior experience of work and hold misconceptions about working life in general. Find out more in our report [Developing the next generation](#).

Good work: an outcome of job design

Job quality or 'good work' is an important outcome of effective job design. We describe good work as work that:

- is fairly rewarded
- gives people the means to securely make a living
- gives opportunities to develop skills and a career and ideally gives a sense of fulfilment
- provides a supportive environment with constructive relationships
- allows for work-life balance
- is physically and mentally healthy
- gives employees the voice and choice they need to shape their working lives.
- should be accessible to all.

In line with this, our annual survey [UK Working Lives](#) measures seven core areas of job quality:

1. Pay and benefits
2. Employment contracts
3. Job design and the nature of work
4. Work-life balance
5. Relationships at work
6. Voice and representation
7. Health and well-being.

'Job design and the nature of work' features skills, workload, empowerment and meaning. It includes workload or work intensity, how empowered people are in their jobs, how well resourced they are to carry out their work, job complexity and how well this matches a person's skills and qualifications, how meaningful people find their work, and

development opportunities provided.

Measuring job quality through an employee survey or other means is an important way for employers to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the jobs that exist in their organisations and how they can provide better jobs for their workers. Employers may replicate the UK Working Lives survey and benchmark against this representative dataset.

Further reading

Books and reports

GRANT, A.M., FRIED, Y. and JUILLERAT, T. (2011). Work matters: job design in classic and contemporary perspectives. In ZEDECK, E. *APA handbook of industrial and organizational psychology: Vol 1: Building and developing the organization*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.

SPREITZER, G. (2008) 'Taking stock: a review of more than twenty years of research on empowerment at work' in BARLING, J. and COOPER, C. (eds). *The SAGE handbook of organizational behaviour: Volume one: micro approaches*. London: Sage Publications.

TAMKIN, P., COWLING, M and HUNT, W. (2008) *People and the bottom line*. IES report 448. Brighton: Institute for Employment Studies.

Journal articles

HACKMAN, J. R. (1980). Work redesign and motivation. *Professional Psychology*. Vol 11, No 3, pp445-455.

HERNAUS, T. and VOKIC, N.P. (2014) Work design for different generational cohorts: determining common and idiosyncratic job characteristics. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*. Vol No 4. pp615-641.

PIERCE, J. L., JUSSILA, I. and CUMMINGS, A. (2009) Psychological ownership within the job design context: revision of the job characteristics model. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. Vol 30, No 4, pp477-496.

SIMONS, R. (2005) Designing high-performance jobs. *Harvard Business Review*. Vol 83, No 7, July/August. pp55-62.

TIMS, M., BAKKER, A.B. and DERKS, D. (2015) Job crafting and job performance: a longitudinal study. *European Journal of Work & Organizational Psychology*. December, Vol 24, No 6. pp914-928.

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This factsheet was last updated by Jonny Gifford.