Management's Ecstasy and Disparity Over Job Enrichment

expectations in planning job change – a case study

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The last few years have witnessed increased discussion of *job enrichment* as an approach for energizing employee motivation and strengthening training effectiveness. The results of some studies reported to practicing managers in the field emphasize that "Job enrichment pays off."[1] Others, more skeptical of the technique, wind up insisting that it is overstated and has limited intrinsic motivational value.[2]

Job enrichment, as a procedure for "despecializing" repetitive tasks and building more variety, responsibility and opportunity into employee jobs — is both widely criticized and praised as a means for motivating employees in industrial organizations.

Obviously, something occurs in introducing job enrichment in successful organizations that does not occur in those which are less effective. While successful organizations are consistently capable of redesigning job content and generating higher employee motivations and performance, others are not similarly successful in obtaining the desired result. What accounts for the difference?

The reason usually given for successful performances is that job enrichment embodies psychological elements of achievement and challenge,[3] while the explanation for failure is usually stated as "employee resistance to change."[4] There may well be another reason. It is that job innovations do appreciably better in some organizations because managers expect more of them. It was a specification of managers' expectations and their relation to the efficacy of job enrichment which served as the focus for the study reported herein.

Expectations in Management

Successes or failures may flow not only from a program's true motivational value, but also from managements' response to reported outcomes from other organizations which have used job enrichment. Behavioral research findings by industrial organizations necessarily affect or "contaminate" the rest of the industry's thinking and expectations.[5] And, enrichment programs may be successful or unsuccessful, depending on what managers have heard and expect of them.

A number of case studies and behavioral science investigations on the "Pygmalion" principle or "self-fulfilling prophecy" now reveal: 1) What managers expect of subordinates and the psychological standards of achievement they set for them largely determines their skill development and job performance, 2) A communications' capability of good managers is their ability to convey high expectations for subordinates that employees fulfill, and 3) More often than not, employees appear to accomplish what managers expect of them.[6]

The principle applies in implementing job innovations, too. That is, if managers expect a great deal from job enrichment, employee motivations and performances are high. If expectations are low, employee motivations are likely to be low also.

Case Study

As an example, let us look at an experimental case study of managers' expectancy effects in a company's four-plant operation. The company, a large nonunionized manufacturer of clothing patterns, designed a new program of job enrichment to offset the adverse effects of overspecialization in its folding and packaging operations. The work of the firm's machine folders consisted solely of drilling two small holes in tissue patterns, placing patterns on bars under the machines and removing them when the processing was completed.

Faced with increased stockouts on all pattern sizes, the firm's top policymakers had hoped that by restructuring machine folder jobs to contain more tasks, technology and machine time could be more effectively utilized, work would be more challenging and productivity would be increased. The idea was attractive and the expression, "job enrichment," had become popular buzz words in the repertoire of corporate planners.

Two questions arose. What form of job enrichment, enlarging employee jobs to include more tasks (job enlargement) or rotating employees among the same job (job rotation), should the firm adopt in each of the four plants? Secondly, how would the firm know whether the effectiveness of the job change was greater than what "Hawthorne"[7] effects alone would yield?

To answer these questions, the firm's top management decided to: 1) Use job enlargement in plants one and two and job rotation in plants three and four and, 2) Instruct managers of plants one and three that the change should immediately overcome technical and psychological problems arising from overspecialization of jobs — productivity would be greatly increased; managers of plants two and four were told that the change was simply a "comparative control measure" and increased output was not expected to occur.

This scheme, perhaps somewhat confusing at first glance, is quite simple and easily summarized from Figure 1.

Job enlargement was effected for machine crews in plants one and two by additionally assigning both the setup of the machines and inspection of folded patterns to machine operators. Similar broadening of responsibility was not accomplished for plants three and four. With rotation, workers in plants three and four were trained in performing three tasks . . . loading, machine operation and takeoff . . . rather than one. Then, at scheduled intervals, they were rotated by switching positions with one another.

By emphasizing the beneficial effects of proposed organization changes on productivity, managers of plants one and three were led to believe (by instructions from the director of manufacturing) that job enrichment should result in higher levels of output. Similar instructions about the effects of job enrichment on productivity were not given to managers of plants two and four and no changes from previous levels of output were expected.

It thus seemed reasonable that for these different job innovations, any differences, then, in outputs between plants one and two and three and four would reflect differences in performance of the type of enrichment program. However, any differences in outputs between plants one and three and two and four would be entirely in the minds of the managers.

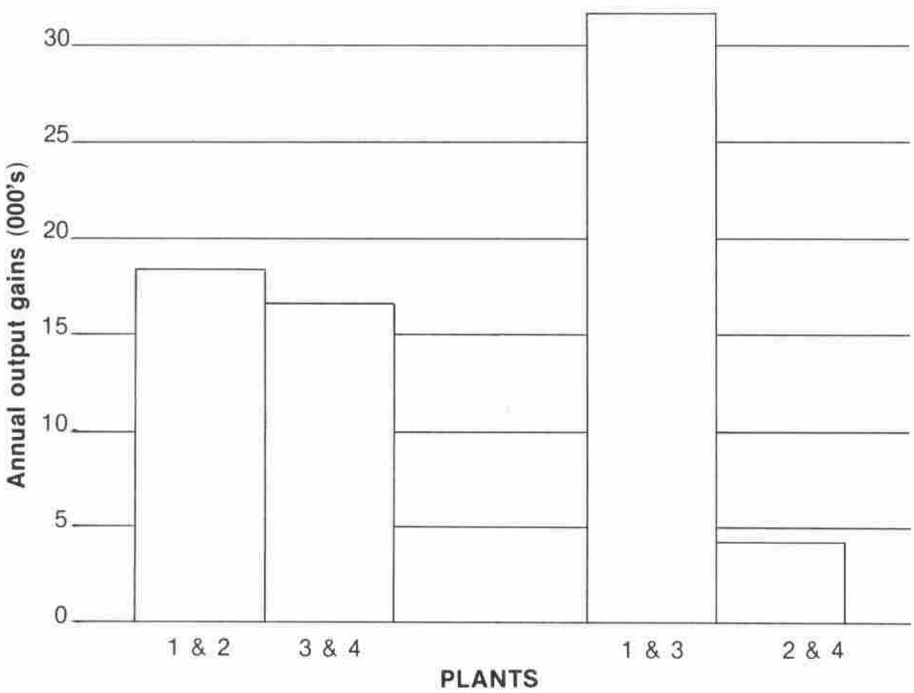
Productivity & Output Gains

The results shown in Figure 2 strongly indicate that job innovations from which managers expected greater gains showed such gains. After one year, increases in productivity for plants one and two employing job enlargement were slightly greater than those for plants three and four; however, gains in outputs for plants one and

FIGURE 1.

		Type of Enrichment Program	
		Job Enlargement	Job Rotation
Top policymakers instructions of what plant managers should expect	Increased Output	Plant One	Plant Three
	No change from previous output levels	Plant Two	Plant Four

FIGURE 2.



GAINS IN OUTPUT were shown in each plant during the first year in which job enrichment was conducted in the company's four-plant operation. Gains in output for plants one and two using job enlargement were larger than gains for plants three and four using job rotation (first set of bars). Further comparisons, on the basis of manager's expectations for changes in productivity indicate a more pronounced difference (second set of bars). Irrespective of the type of job enrichment, plants one and three from which managers expected greater gains, actually showed such gains.

three were dramatically greater than those for two and four by a substantial amount. In other words, improvements in productivity were more attributable to managers' expectations of the effects of job enrichment than to the type of enrichment program employed.[8]

In considering these results, the gains shown by plants two and four can be accounted for, of course, by the "Hawthorne" effect of something "new and important." It likely became known that the significant thing was not whether the enrichment program had any important influence on productivity but merely that managers and employees were given increased attention. Any changes that involved them, then, were likely to improve performance.

How was the director of manufacturing to account for the fact that managers told to expect increased output showed substantial increases in output? The answer seems to be in the plant managers' previous experiences in carrying out top managements' aims; that is, the pattern of expectations which they had learned to associate with organizational objectives of change and innovation.

Obviously, the aims of top corporate power figures importantly influenced subordinate managers' expectations about the innovation. Plant managers, in turn, transmitted their own strong feelings about the efficacy of the innovation to their employees, created mutually high expectations for performance, and greatly stimulated productivity. Since high expectations had not been communicated directly to the employees, they did not understand the reason for the new organization of jobs unless the managers pointed it out. Clearly, what the managers expected and the way they treated their employees, *not the way they organized them*, was the key to higher productivity in plants one and three.

In sum, Hawthorne effects and/or the intrinsic motivational value of job enrichment might account for the gains in productivity for plants two and four. But it would not account for the greater gains in productivity for plants one and three.

Management Programs

For several years, the efficacy of job enrichment has been the source of serious consternation and quarrels among motivation theorists and managerial practitioners. Most of the programs devised for using enrichment have focused on overcoming organizational barriers by actions aimed directly at job technology, work flow and employee resistance to change. The assumption seems to be that the problems are in the organization, the job and the employees.[9] The results here suggest that perhaps some of the problems might rest with the managers, and particularly in their attitudes toward implementing job change.

More emphasis and attention, then, should be placed on the manager, and especially on his or her confidence in him or herself and the employees. Effective managers have strong confidence in their own and their employees' ability to successfully implement organizational innovation and change. Consistent with what we know about the power of positive thinking, high expectations of effective managers are based realistically on how they evaluate themselves and their own aspirations for motivating and training subordinates. What the manager believes about him or herself subtly influences what he or she believes and expects of subordinates.[10]

And, if the manager has confidence in arousing their willingness and ability to seek and accept greater job responsibility and challenge, he or she will manage them with competence and expectations for high levels of performance will be met.

Identifying and Modifying Expectancy

Managers may be more accustomed to thinking about the consequences of not having their expectations fulfilled than to the effects of communicating expectancy. It is extraordinarily difficult to recognize the highly subtle and complex cues by which the magnitude and impact of managers' expectancy influence is communicated.

In order to determine the impact of managers' expectations, it is necessary to separate the effects of expectations based on observed past performance and those which are instrumental in influencing it. If one simply observes that those organizational changes resulting in substandard performance are expected by managers to show poor performance, it is not possible to answer the messy question of whether the managers' expectations were the self-fulfilling cause, or an accurate appraisal of actual performance. Such theoretically complex questions can seldom, if ever, be answered in ongoing organizations. But interesting problems concerning the modification of expectations in connection with job change arise which can be examined.

The problem of modifying managers' expectations in conjunction with organizational change arises because insufficient attention is normally paid to the reasoning processes involved in effecting the change. Managers accustomed to the established system of organizational norms and standards may be more concerned to derive standards and expectations from other standards and expectations as a result of past experience, rather than reasoning deductively.

An analogous example from personality testing may help to clarify this point. In personal interviewing, it is commonly recognized that an affirmative (or negative) response to one item implies an affirmative (or negative) response to another item although there is no evident logical connection between the two. Thus, if a respondent answered "yes" when asked "does the possibility that others may fail to recognize your accomplishments cause you to worry?" the interviewer would expect the respondent to answer "yes" to the question "Are your feelings easily hurt?"

Similarly, the classical "halo" or interpreter effect whereby the interviewer has a tendency to assume that a high (or low) rating on one factor justifies a correspondingly high (or low) rating on other factors exemplifies this form of reasoning. There is an empirical impliction between the items, but not a logical one.[11]

In terms of administering job enrichment programs, if managers perceive employees as being lazy, unmotivated and having deep-seated feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure, they would not likely expect employees to respond favorably to the increased opportunity for greater responsibility and achievement in enriched jobs. Hence, the innovation of job enrichment must be accompanied by the corresponding requirement for raising managers' expectations for employee performance. All this argues that systematic attention should be paid to the pre-existing attitudes of managers in introducing job change.

One approach that has been successfully used suggests that questions be aimed at probing managers' attitudes toward job enrichment, but indirectly in a manner which requires them to relate their evaluations of organizational climate, job and employee characteristics to organizationally influenced norms or expectancies. This method, illustrated by the following set of questions, shows the degree to which managers perceive their expectations as being met:[12]

1. When employees are assigned to more challenging tasks, they should feel a need for greater achievement in their work.

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Usually
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Seldom
- ☐ Never

2. When employees are assigned to more challenging tasks, they actually do feel a need for greater achievement in their work.

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Usually
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Seldom
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Don't know

3. I am satisfied that assigning employees to more challenging tasks results in their feeling a need for greater achievement in their work.

- ☐ Strongly Disagree
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Undecided
- ☐ Agree
- ☐ Strongly Agree

By examining the interrelationship among these components of attitude, insight into the reasons for managerial evaluations and information about what components (expectations and/or perceptions) need to be changed to establish a more supportive climate for job enrichment is provided, the need for implementing the results of such survey research should be obvious enough.

In critically analyzing what the "true" value of job enrichment has for motivating employees, "devil's advocates" carefully point to the fact that most of the successful enrichment programs have been concerned with the jobs of highly skilled professional and technical workers, not unskilled blue-collar employees. The extent to which this is experienced is summed up by one observer:[13]

> *"My experience in numerous plants has been that the lower the skills level, the lower the degree to which job enlargement can be established to be meaningful to the employees and management."*

When job innovations are introduced for professional and technical positions, it seems likely that managers whose authorization is required and highly skilled employees whose cooperation is necessary will expect the innovation to be effective. Job enrichment for highly skilled jobs can be readily facilitated by favorably high expectations for its performance.

Programs for unskilled workers have not been as eagerly authorized or accepted. Indeed, one of the more limiting things about the way results of enrichment programs have been reported has been the emphasized inapplicability and irrelevance of high standards and expectations for low-level, unskilled blue-collar jobs.[14] The notion that unskilled employees prefer the stability and security of highly specialized work and do not have any interest for learning new skills can become quickly connected with lowering expectations for their performance. This is an insidious and hazardous kind of association which may act as a prophecy that causes its own fulfillment. Inadvertently, it arises from supervisors' concealed premises about the unskilled employees' status and is reinforced by carelessly communicating top managements' expectations for job change.

If unskilled workers are to become adjusted to the higher standards of enriched jobs, more favorable expectations must be planned for them to do so. Lower-skilled employees cannot be assessed against higher job standards which they are not expected to fulfill. Haphazard, informal and perfunctory plans and expectations for their skill development are products of the past which should not be allowed to sweep job enrichment programs into the future.

Conclusions

Special attention should be paid to the attitudes of managers and to acquaint them with the possibility that their expectations of job and employee performance can be communicated as self-fulfilling predictions. Job innovations can achieve more than has been expected. Despite the speculative nature of knowledge and many doubts on how to approach problems of job innovation and change, managers need not allow these to be conveyed in lower expectations for performance. Searching for explanations of low motivations and human resistance to change in workers and employees has limited value. Observers might have been seeking in the worker what should have been sought in the manager.

Another substantive implication is in order for organizational researchers. Investigators cannot always be certain whether expectancy is an important variable influencing behavioral research results unless special efforts are taken to insure that the hypothesis itself is not confounded with observer performance. Since the Hawthorne findings, few management studies have been conducted without awareness of the concept. Yet few investigators seem to have explicitly taken it into account.

What this suggests is that motivational theorists and consultants familiarize clients and collaborators with the possibility that their expectations may serve as self-fulfilling predictions of organizational performance. Beyond this, where the additional information gained warrants the extra effort involved, and wherever it is feasible, it is desirable that systematic procedures for assessing the effects of expectations be taken into account. USEASTD

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