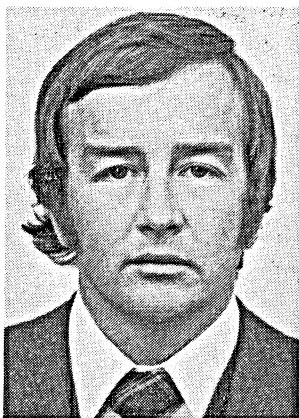


THE LIMITS OF JOB ENRICHMENT



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OPSOMMING

"Posverryking" is 'n belangrike onlangse ontwikkeling in die bedryfsielkunde wat daarop gerig is om werknemer-bevrediging en produktiwiteit te verhoog. Hierdie benadering geniet tans baie aandag en word deur sommige bestuurders as 'n wondermiddel gesien, en deur ander as 'n tegniek wat tot mislukking gedoem is. Die redes vir uiteenlopende ervaring met die benadering word ontleed, en die vereiste omstandighede vir die toepassing daarvan word bespreek. 'n Oorsig word ook gegee van die teoretiese agtergrond en van navorsing in die Verenigde State en in Suid-Afrika, om die invloed van posverryking op sowel werknemer-bevrediging as produktiwiteit te meet. Individuele, kulturele en omstandighedsverskille kan die doeltreffendheid van die tegniek sterk beïnvloed, en hierdie faktore moet veral in die Suid-Afrikaanse omstandighede deeglik in ag geneem word voordat duur posverryking-skemas aangepak word.

Recent research by psychologists concerned with human behaviour in work organizations (industrial psychologists) has resulted in the introduction of a number of new techniques and methods for improving employee satisfaction and raising productivity; one such approach is that of 'job enrichment'. In fact, judging from the number of conferences, seminars and papers which directly or indirectly deal with job enrichment, even in South Africa, one might be tempted to conclude that most of the jobs in industry and commerce either have been, or are about to be, enriched, i.e. changed in such a way as to make them inherently more challenging and interesting to the incumbents, usually by increasing the complexity and variety of the required duties and tasks. However, examination by the author of the state of personnel management in South Africa revealed a marked gap between words and action. While much was *said* about the virtues of job enrichment, little has in fact been done in practice.

There appear to be three main reasons for this state of affairs; for this gap between verbal interest and intellectual enthusiasm for enrichment on the one hand and the lack of implementation of its actual principles on the other. Firstly, the advocates of job enrichment have so far not yet produced general recommendations which do justice to the variability and complexity of contemporary jobs. Secondly, the introduction of job enrichment schemes usually produce uncertainty and anxiety among many employees, especially those who fear that some of their traditional power will be lost to those persons whose jobs are significantly enriched. Thirdly, the initial enthusiastic reception given to job enrichment has led to a disturbing number of failures. Probably because of a lack of concern with detail, quite a few of the earlier enrichment schemes have *not* led to significant improvements in employee productivity or even to greater job satisfaction.

It is the purpose of this short article to supply the background leading up to job enrichment and to indicate the evidence which has been produced in its favour. Thereafter, an attempt will be made to examine the main conditions in which job enrichment is likely to succeed or to fail. Underlying the present article is the belief that adequate attention has been paid to these limiting circumstances. Specifically, it is maintained that predictions have tended to regard job enrichment *either* as a panacea *or* as a technique that is inevitably doomed to failure without realizing sufficiently that job enrichment, like any other management procedure, is only applicable if certain conditions are fulfilled.

A concern with the ideas underlying job enrichment developed mainly as a reaction to the implications of increasing specialization of work that has been such a feature of industrial and commercial progress since the turn of the century. On the basis of their empirical studies, industrial psychologists over the past ten years have become increasingly aware that the kinds of narrow-range jobs that are produced by this trend towards increasing specialization and simplification have been responsible for much of the monotony, boredom and general dissatisfaction that is expressed by so many rank-and-file workers, especially in modern industrial societies. The essence of job enrichment is that it attempts quite specifically to reverse this trend towards smaller jobs, by giving employees more varied and more difficult duties and tasks and greater responsibility, in the belief that this will make job incumbents happier in their work and more productive as well.

In its most essential aspects job enrichment can perhaps be regarded as an instance of the more general notion of job enlargement, the term used to cover *all* systematic attempts to make jobs more inherently interesting and challenging to employees. In turn, job

enlargement can itself be usefully divided into horizontal job enlargement (similar to job extension) and vertical job enlargement (almost synonymous with job enrichment). Horizontal job enlargement involves extending a person's job outwards at the same level in the organization; the idea being *not* to make a job more difficult or simpler, but just bigger, and more varied, i.e. involving more duties or tasks of the same degree of variability and complexity as the original areas. The underlying assumption is that doing a bigger job will lead an employee to feel more satisfied with his work and perhaps even to perform more effectively in it. For instance, instead of a black worker performing only a single assembly task, he may be asked to complete a number of duties and tasks in the expectation that he will derive more satisfaction (and perhaps perform better) from doing an extended job, because of the greater variety and the knowledge he has produced a larger unit. In contrast, vertical job enlargement or job enrichment involves adding at least two extra dimensions to a person's job — a planning or controlling dimension and a difficulty dimension. To the extent that a person is required to display more initiative and responsibility and has to execute more difficult duties and tasks, to that degree his job is said to have been enriched; the idea is to raise the job's level in terms of initiative, responsibility and difficulty, not just to make it bigger. Protagonists of job enrichment argue that most individuals will respond to these changes with greater involvement and satisfaction, which in turn will lead to benefits such as greater efficiency, reduced absenteeism, and lower turnover. For instance, an examination of available findings indicates that it is very uncertain whether horizontal job enlargement, making jobs bigger, can really benefit either management or employees. This is because the slight increase in individual satisfaction and perhaps performance, are virtually more than outweighed by two major disadvantages. Firstly, bigger jobs of the kind produced by horizontal enlargement are usually technically less efficient than the more specialised arrangements produced by narrower jobs. Secondly, in practice, the scope for horizontal enlargement is usually very restricted. As a result, the adding of a few extra routine jobs — which is usually all that is possible — is unlikely to appreciably alter the employee's perception of his job, and hence this cannot be expected to lead to large improvements in productivity or much greater satisfaction.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

One of the major strengths of the job enrichment involvement is that it rests heavily on theoretical developments over the past twenty years that have been very well received by both industrial psychologists and practitioners in the field, notably those put forward by Maslow (1970) and Herzberg (1965). According to Maslow, human needs and motives are hierarchically organized, with lower needs for food and shelter and safety having to be adequately satisfied

before the higher order needs for esteem, independence and especially self-fulfilment come into operation. Herzberg's main contention is that in most industrial societies the lower-order needs tend to be adequately gratified; most people, he argues, get enough money to satisfy their existence needs and also feel fairly materially secure at work, with reasonable working conditions, pay, training, and freedom from unfair dismissal. It is argued by him, in consequence, that people at work these days are much more concerned with the gratification of their higher-order needs for self-expression, esteem from colleagues, opportunities for advancement and opportunities to feel that one is doing something worthwhile. According to Herzberg these needs can only be satisfied if individuals are given interesting and challenging work that they find inherently meaningful.

In the light of this conclusion, it is not surprising that Herzberg is one of the major advocates of the job enrichment approach. In his well-known two-factor theory of work motivation, Herzberg distinguishes between two major groups of work-related factors; 'hygienes' and 'motivators'. 'Hygiene' factors relate mainly to the context of work, and include such aspects of the work situation as physical work conditions, pay, and company policies. In contrast, 'motivators' are mainly concerned with the actual content of the job itself, and include such aspects of the job as achievement, recognition, and especially its capacity to offer opportunities for achievement, responsibility and self-expression. Herzberg argues that it is 'motivators' alone which have the capacity to produce feelings of job satisfaction and to motivate persons to perform really effectively. According to him 'hygienes' only serve to remove or reduce feelings of job dissatisfaction. As far as Maslow's need hierarchy is concerned, the main assertion of Herzberg is that management must first ensure that the 'hygiene' factors (lower-order needs) are attended to, but must not expect them to produce high levels of satisfaction or work motivation. Therefore, they must seek to provide 'motivators' (higher-order needs), the essential point being that only once the 'hygiene' factors are present to a sufficient extent, can the 'motivators' function properly, that is only if the lower-order needs of individuals are adequately gratified, will they respond to the presence of 'motivators' by feeling satisfied and working harder, direct consequences of their attempts to gratify their higher-order needs. How far have these arguments for job enrichment been supported by empirical evidence? It is to a consideration of this important question that we now turn.

At the outset it should be clear that it is insufficient simply to show that in some work organizations the introduction of job enrichment yielded substantial benefits, either to the managers or to employees, or to both. Before we can draw firm conclusions, it is necessary to examine well-designed research studies. Unfortunately such studies are few and far between. Moreover, their results are by no means conclusive.

The need for research studies, as opposed to case studies, is that the former employ a control group which make it possible to rule out explanations apart from the job enrichment one. The trouble with case studies is that even if positive changes are obtained it is impossible to unequivocally attribute these changes to the job enrichment itself, and not to other factors. In the absence of a control group, it is quite likely that the greater satisfaction or even better performance of the employees may be due to the fact that they feel they are the object of sympathetic attention, rather than to their different duties and tasks per se.

RESEARCH ON JOB ENRICHMENT

Two examples of well-controlled studies of job enrichment will be summarized, in order to indicate the kind of evidence that is relevant and to illustrate the fact that different results have been reported. Perhaps the best known of the earlier studies, as opposed to case reports, is that reported by Paul, Robertson and Herzberg (1969). In their study they looked at the non-graduate research staff at a multinational chemical firm, who were suffering from low morale. Because of the nature of their work it was difficult to solve their morale problem by traditional methods, such as altering work conditions or increasing pay; hence it was decided to enrich their jobs instead. Two groups were selected for simultaneous investigation; and experimental, or enriched, group and a control, or unenriched group. The enriched group's jobs were changed in such a way as to increase their sense of personal responsibility and autonomy. Specifically they were given more say in the selection, training and assessment of their assistants, were allowed to requisition most of the equipment they required and were able to sign reports, discipline subordinates, and make certain policy decisions — none of which they had been allowed to do prior to the study. The control group continued in the same jobs as previously, and received none of those enriching changes.

The investigators regularly measured all the major department variables from both the enriched and unenriched groups, namely labour turnover, absenteeism, productivity, and job satisfaction. The results were clear cut. Firstly, the members of the enriched group were significantly more satisfied with their jobs than were their counterparts in the unenriched group. Secondly, the job enriched employees performed much better than the unenriched employees. Thirdly, members of the unenriched group did not show any improvement, either in satisfaction or in work effectiveness. Finally after six months when the control group was itself split into two subgroups, one of which received the same changes as the experimental group had previously, the second enriched group improved over the remaining unenriched group in the same way as the original experimental group had done.

A more recent study (Orpen, 1978) performed on clerical employees in a local government office is also worth looking at. Unlike the study by Paul, Robertson and Herzberg (1969), it was based on a specific theory of job design, that developed by Hackman and Oldham (1976). Also, in contrast to the earlier study, it revealed significant effects for enrichment on satisfaction, but not on performance. In this study a group of female clerks were *randomly* assigned to either an enriched or an unenriched condition, thereby in accordance with the dictates of sound experimental design. In the enriched group, the extent to which their jobs possessed each of the following characteristics was markedly increased: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback. An idea of the kind of changes made can be gleaned from those made under the 'skill variety' heading: Employees in the enriched group could decide for themselves which kind of operation they wanted to perform instead of being assigned to specific tasks, like sorting incoming mail, or updating record cards, or searching for files. They were also specifically told they could choose whatever strategy they preferred for performing a certain task. In contrast, employees in the unenriched group were given explicit instructions regarding the appropriate strategy to adopt. After the six-month experimental period the effect of enrichment was examined. The results showed that (a) employees in the enriched group *did* perceive their jobs as possessing greater identity, significance, autonomy and feedback than before (b) enrichment *caused* significant increases in employee involvement, motivation and satisfaction with their jobs, but (c) enrichment had little impact on the job performance of the employees whether assessed by superiors' ratings or actual output. A few other controlled studies have also not found marked improvements in productivity following enrichment, with a few (e.g. Bishop & Hill, 1971; Umstot, Bell & Mitchell, 1976; Marks, 1964) even failed to find greater employee satisfaction after enrichment. Looking at the overall picture, we find that while vertical enlargement is supported by some studies, with a variety of employees ranging from shop floor machinists to sales representatives, there are a few instances where the supposed benefits of job enrichment have not been forthcoming. At the practical level, a number of companies have improved their overall effectiveness by introducing job enrichment schemes; however, quite a few companies have tried to apply the basic procedures recommended by Herzberg and others but have run into such problems that management have quickly given up the whole idea. What this suggests, as industrial psychologists have long suspected, is that job enrichment will only succeed if circumstances are favourable; conversely, that it will fail if they are unfavourable. The fact that job enrichment will only be successful if certain background factors are working in its favour is a very important point that has frequently been minimized, especially by practitioners. In an attempt to provide useful guidelines for the implementation of job enrich-

ment, the rest of the article will deal with the question: Why is it that some enrichment programmes succeed or others fail?

While there is a real need for more research to identify the precise conditions which must be satisfied if job enrichment is to live up to its promise, there is enough data to suggest a number of likely factors. These can usefully be grouped under three headings: people aspects, organizational aspects and situational aspects.

PEOPLE ASPECTS

There is little doubt that there are large individual differences among employees, which influence their reactions to jobs of different variety and complexity. Research studies have revealed that there are some employees who adopt an instrumental view of their work; they want to maximize extrinsic job aspects like pay and security and are not very concerned with the gratification of the higher-order needs in Maslow's hierarchy or with Herzberg's motivators. Because of this attitude, it is not surprising that this kind of employee does not respond favourably to job enrichment schemes. Studies with black workers in South Africa indicate that many of them fall into this category, and hence are unlikely to see much value in vertical job enlargement (Backer, 1975; Orpen, 1976). There are also some employees who may not want to take on the extra responsibilities that are an integral part of job enrichment schemes; they may either feel they have enough duties and tasks to perform in their present jobs or that the additional burdens are simply not worth the extra rewards they may bring. Finally, it should be noted that some workers may lack the ability and confidence necessary to perform the enriched jobs effectively, even though their performance in their present jobs is quite satisfactory. Although such workers may not be averse to 'bigger' jobs, managers should obviously think twice before substantially enriching their jobs.

One of the more dangerous assumptions underlying the philosophy of job enrichment is that specialized jobs necessarily produce boredom and monotony. Especially among relatively unsophisticated workers, like tribal-oriented blacks in South Africa, there is quite a large proportion who are *not* bored or frustrated doing specialized and repetitive work. Many of them may in fact actually prefer the 'safety' of not being asked to make decisions, while others may enjoy the 'rhythm' of doing short cycle time operations rather than the uncertainty of work which is complex and varied. Studies have shown that this is the case with many black workers, whose main concern seems to be to avoid doing anything which may lose them their job, rather than with taking challenges and exercising initiative (Bernath, 1978; Orpen, 1976).

The fact that there are employees who may not respond positively to job enrichment implies that job enrichment cannot be universally applied. However,

this does not necessarily mean that some of those employees may not benefit if job involvement were introduced. Although it seems likely that serious difficulties may be encountered by enriching the jobs of these employees, the actual *process* of enrichment may itself help to overcome their initial reluctance or apparent lack of ability; by doing more complex and specialized work, 'unpromising' employees may improve their attitudes and raise their ability, perhaps to the point where the enrichment scheme proves to be a success for the company concerned.

Other people factors which have been shown to affect attitudes to work are age, work values and geographical location. Specifically, research has shown that there are consistent differences between older and younger employees in their reaction to vertical job enlargement. Although there are exceptions, younger employees have generally responded more favourably to schemes aimed at making their jobs more complex and varied than have their older counterparts, probably because the latter are typically more set in their ways and also have more to lose if they should fail to carry out the extra demands effectively. While only a few studies have been carried out, it appears that employees who hold what have been called Protestant Ethic values towards their work are more favourably disposed to job enrichment than those who do not. Those values embody a positive attitude towards hard work, a belief that effort is rewarded and a desire to perform well as an end in itself. An important instance of different work values can be found in South Africa; specifically between traditional and western-oriented black workers. Studies (Grant, 1975; Orpen 1977) have shown that urban black workers, especially those who adopt western ideas about work that embody the Protestant Ethic, respond much more positively to more varied and complex jobs than do their rural counterparts whose approach to work is more traditional and tribal. Finally, some consistent differences have been found between employees living in villages and small farms and those living in large cities in their attitudes to vertical job enlargement, suggesting that companies with employees in different parts of the country may need to treat them differently, at least as far as making their jobs more varied and complex is concerned.

Besides individual differences in work attitudes, another important limiting factor is the amount of variation within the group whose jobs are to be enriched. If the particular employees differ considerably in such relevant aspects as age, work values, ability and confidence, then it is unlikely that they will respond in the same manner to the job enrichment scheme. If this is the case, then the introduction of such a scheme is likely to produce serious difficulties, with some employees perhaps responding positively but others possessing neither the attitudes nor the skills necessary to really benefit from the changes that are introduced. On the other hand, an all-inclusive kind of scheme is much more likely to succeed if

members of the target group are fairly similar in those personal aspects which have been found to affect work attitudes. This discussion highlights the need for managers, especially in South Africa, to find out *prior* to the introduction of job enrichment schemes, the extent to which employees in the target group possess the relevant personal characteristics.

ORGANIZATIONAL ASPECTS

Besides those personal factors which limit the likely effectiveness of job enrichment programmes, there are a number of important organizational factors which also have been found to be important; four of which will be mentioned. Among western industrial countries, probably the most significant organizational aspect is the attitude of the trade unions. Since black workers in South Africa are not unionized at present, this is not an important consideration concerning black workers at this stage; but if a South African employer is dealing with white employees who are members of a strong union then it is clearly an important consideration. Obviously if the trade union is formally opposed to the kinds of changes introduced by the enrichment scheme then it is much less likely to be successful than if the union's attitude is favourable. The main objection of unions to enrichment schemes seems to derive from the belief of union leaders that the introduction of such schemes leads to an erosion of their power and influence. Specifically, they argue that vertical job enlargement threatens the traditional union role in terms of which the union stands *against* management. This is because it tends to lead to a loss of unity, as some employees take on managerial kinds of responsibilities, and to the receiving of more pay and better work conditions, as a consequence of doing 'bigger' jobs rather than through trade union-management negotiations. Among black employees the principle source of objection to job enrichment in the present political climate is likely to issue from its possible disruptive effects on unity among black employees. Judging from developments in other 'divided societies', it is a prime concern of trade union leaders to maintain a high degree of cohesion among their members, as a necessary step not only for securing better pay and work conditions but also for helping to bring about political and social reforms. Paradoxically, the divisive effect of job enrichment on employees as a group, while it may lead to some resistance from employee leaders, would be a powerful reason *for* going ahead with such schemes on the part of employees attempting to entrench their positions of power and to reinforce the status quo.

Another difficulty of an organizational kind is that the introduction of enrichment schemes frequently leads to demands for higher pay or better conditions to match the greater responsibilities involved in the 'bigger' jobs. Clearly if the firm is not able to meet these demands then this represents a serious obstacle to widespread job enrichment. In the Paul, Robertson

and Herzberg (1969) study no such demands were experienced, while the other enrichment study, that of Orpen (1978), the employees were specifically told that only the content of their jobs would be changed, and not their pay or work conditions. However, in most of the case studies reported in the literature employees expected better pay and work conditions to accompany enrichment and were upset on the few occasions these were not forthcoming. There is thus a serious danger that the resulting frustration may more than offset any greater satisfaction or even efforts that are due to the actual job changes.

Another important hindrance to the success of any enrichment scheme derives from the resistance it often encounters from supervisors and managers. The bases of this resistance are many and varied, and are chiefly concerned with the threats these persons feel that the schemes pose to their positions within the firm. Since enrichment essentially involves moving initiative and responsibility downwards in the hierarchy — closer to the employees actually responsible for *doing* the work — there is always a strong possibility that the jobs of managers and supervisors will be correspondingly impoverished, or made slightly 'smaller' than before. It follows that job enrichment schemes are only likely to be successful if they are accepted by supervisors and managers, as well as employees. For this to occur, these persons will often have to accept positions of lesser formal authority, as well as new and different kinds of responsibilities, notably in the more active training programmes and the additional consultative discussion groups which the job changes are likely to call for. Finally, enrichment programmes can run into difficulties of a general kind if there are incompatibilities between the job enrichment philosophy and the climate of the firm. This kind of 'conflict' is most marked in traditional, bureaucratic kinds of organizations, where the democratic way of doing things that is implicit in job enrichment often runs counter to the autocratic style that prevails in the organization.

SITUATIONAL ASPECTS

Besides people and organizational aspects, there are certain job aspects which help to determine whether job enrichment is an applicable technique or not. Although it has sometimes been implied that jobs of all kinds are amenable to enrichment, research studies have clearly demonstrated that this is not the case. The evidence indicates clearly that there are wide variations in the susceptibility of different jobs to vertical enlargement. At the one end of the scale, there are some jobs which are so routine and repetitive that it is virtually impossible to introduce the planning and controlling elements that are such an essential feature of enrichment. At the other end, there are a whole host of clerical, technical and supervisory positions where there is inherently a large degree of scope for initiative and additional responsibility. The point is that those differences are a function

of the actual work processes involved in the jobs and have little to do with the people performing the jobs.

Another kind of difficulty for job enrichment schemes arises when the workers on the job to be changed are on some kind of piece-rate pay system. Because the controlling and planning functions introduced by the enrichment scheme are so difficult to measure, employees who are paid by results (piece-rate workers) often regard proposals to enrich their jobs as indirect attempts on the part of management to actually reduce their wage rates. It is therefore not surprising that in many instances manual workers who get high earning by continuous efforts on production, are suspicious of attempts to provide more 'challenging and interesting' jobs when such attempts appear to take away piece-rate advantages. In this respect, one of the most serious obstacles to be overcome is the resistance of highly paid piece-rate workers, who do not want to take on enriched jobs if it reduces the direct dependence of pay on their physical efforts.

Probably the most important point to emerge from this examination is that job enrichment can work *but* only under certain circumstances. If conditions are favourable then the results of job enrichment programmes are likely to be extremely encouraging; but if they are not, then the results are likely to be disappointing. This means that managers must *first* establish whether the mediating organizational people and work aspects are favourable, before venturing into expensive schemes. Managers are much more likely to take the trouble to check up on these background factors necessary for success, if they hold a realistic view of job enrichment, as a technique that is neither a panacea nor a waste of time, but one which can produce beneficial results for both employers and employees under certain circum-

stances. If the present article has helped to inculcate this attitude among practitioners it has been worthwhile.

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