

HERZBERG'S THEORY SHOULD BE GIVEN A DECENT BURIAL



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In hierdie artikel wys professor Orpen op 'n aantal ernstige leemtes waaraan die tweefaktorteorie van Herzberg mank gaan. Benewens die feit dat dit gebaseer is op studies met metodologiese gebreke is elkeen van dié teorie se hoofhipotesisse vervals deur navorsingstudies. In besonder voorspel dié teorie nie hoe stamverbonde swartmense in die werksituasie optree nie. Die skrywer kom tot die slotsom dat dit hoog tyd is dat Suid-Afrikaanse sakelui en -bestuurders hierdie teorie afskryf.

INTRODUCTION

Herzberg's so-called 'two factor' theory of work behaviour should be given a decent burial. It has long since outlived its usefulness. Because most of the empirical research has falsified each of its main hypotheses, industrial psychologists have abandoned the theory. It is about time the world of personnel management followed suit.

It is the purpose of this short article to show exactly where Herzberg's two factor theory is incorrect and in what respects it represents a dangerous oversimplification.

WHAT HERZBERG'S THEORY SAYS

1. Feelings of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are reactions to different aspects in the work situation.
2. Favourable feelings towards content or intrinsic factors like opportunities for achievement, task responsibility and the work itself constitute primarily to feelings of job satisfaction, but do *not* have much effect either way on job dissatisfaction.
3. Only these content factors, called motivators, have the capacity to induce workers to put forth extra effort and perform really effectively.
4. Favourable feelings towards context or extrinsic factors like work conditions, relations with fellow workers and company policy serve mainly to neutralize feelings of job dissatisfaction, but are *not* really capable of generating feelings of job satisfaction.
5. These context factors, termed hygienes, are incapable of improving work motivation, no matter how favourable they may be.

WHY THE THEORY IS WRONG

Let us look at these propositions from the point of view both of the industrial psychologist, with his

concern with the findings of empirical research, and from that of the personnel manager, who is mainly concerned with the implications of these propositions for improving job satisfaction and performance.

1. The perspective of the industrial psychologist

The industrial psychologist is concerned with whether the two-factor theory stands up to empirical research. An examination of validity studies indicates that it fails miserably in this respect. By far the majority of studies have produced results which do not confirm predictions made from the theory. This seems to be due to the following limitations of the theory.

In the first place, as made clear in my recent book the theory has been supported, with few exceptions, only by those studies which have used the same techniques as Herzberg in his original studies, namely semi-structured interviews in which the subjects are asked to list situations when they felt 'good' and 'bad' on the job. When industrial psychologists have used other techniques, like questionnaires, they have invariably failed to support the two factor theory, i.e., the theory is 'methodologically bound' (1,2). This is mainly because when things are going well, people tend to put themselves in the best light, but when they are asked to describe a situation when things are going badly they tend to protect their self-images by blaming failure onto their environment or on to others (3). Hence, the critical incident technique produces results that *have* to conform to the theory.

In the second place, most studies have only confirmed predictions of the theory if they have been conducted with relatively sophisticated subjects, like the accountants and engineers of Herzberg's original studies. When less sophisticated subjects are used whose lower-order needs have not been adequately gratified, the results have never supported the two

factor theory (4); i.e., the theory is also 'subject bound', and has only been found to apply to certain kinds of workers.

In the third place, in Herzberg's much-publicized studies the evaluations of the stories told by the subjects about the 'good' and 'bad' situations were done by raters who themselves were familiar with the theory and presumably had a vested interest in getting favourable results. This is likely to encourage biased interpretations, even though the raters may have tried to be as honest as possible, i.e., the original study on which the two factor was based is itself suspect in terms of its design.

In the fourth place, in most of the supportive studies, there was no attempt to separately measure both overall job satisfaction and the individual's level of performance. All that the studies have typically been concerned with is how much the subjects like or are satisfied with different aspects of their job. Since people often dislike some features of their job and like others and because there is often little relation between job satisfaction and performance (5), it is not possible to make sweeping statements about the relative effects of content and context factors on either satisfaction or motivation from these studies. But this is what Herzberg and his followers have done, without hesitation.

In the fifth place, research studies have consistently shown that there are many workers, especially in South Africa, who react more favourably to context factors in the work situation, contrary to what is expected in terms of the two factor theory. For example, in two recent studies (6,7), it was found that the job satisfaction of tribal-oriented blacks was more dependant on extrinsic factors like relations with ones peers, working conditions, and company policy than with intrinsic factors like kind of work and task responsibility. This seems to be due to the fact that, as shown in other studies (8), tribal workers are still so concerned with gratifying their lower-order needs in the work situation that they are unable to be very seriously concerned with factors like responsibility and the kind of work they do — which serve mainly to gratify one's higher-order needs.

In the sixth place, even in studies with sophisticated whites the theory has usually been proven wrong. The results of these studies have shown that content factors intrinsic to the individuals' actual job have a greater impact on the individual's feelings of satisfaction and dissatisfaction than do context or extrinsic factors (9), whereas the theory predicts that content factors should only have a greater effect than context ones on satisfaction, not on dissatisfaction.

Finally, recent research has shown conclusively that the two factor theory is a gross over-simplification of the complex mechanisms whereby feelings of job satisfaction and dissatisfaction arise (10). It completely

fails to account for the fact that under certain conditions satisfaction and dissatisfaction are derived mainly from content factors while under other conditions they arise mainly from context factors. As made clear in my book *Productivity and black workers*, what is needed is a more complex theory that can account for both possibilities.

2. The perspective of the personnel manager

The two factor theory says that workers will only be persuaded to put more effort into their work if the 'motivators' are increased; if the actual work they do is made challenging and they are given more responsibility and chances for self-fulfilment: i.e. it is only through job enlargement and enrichment schemes that they can be induced to work harder. Improving working conditions and relations with fellow workers and giving better pay will, at best, merely serve to reduce or overcome feelings of dissatisfaction; they will not produce greater motivation. However, personnel managers can only be expected to embark on this course if they can be certain (i) that controlled studies have actually proved that job enrichment or enlargement usually do produce the positive results Herzberg claims for them, and (ii) that it is usually feasible; from a business point of view — to actually introduce the changes required by such schemes.

Taking the first point, only a few scientific studies have been conducted into the effects of job enlargement. Most of the studies appearing in the personnel literature are just case histories. These cannot, by their very nature, prove that the improvements that occurred can unequivocally be attributed to the redesign of jobs per se, and not something else. On the negative side, as may be expected, studies have shown that different kinds of workers react differently to job enrichment. For instance in a recent study in South Africa (11) which compared the degree of job satisfaction of western and tribal black workers to three different kinds of jobs of different degrees of scope and complexity, it was found that, whereas the western-oriented workers were more satisfied with the more difficult jobs, it did not make any difference to the tribal-oriented workers. This is possibly because many of the latter see their job mainly as a means to non-work goals, not as an important end in itself.

An examination of the main studies of the effects of job enrichment indicates that these studies have not shown that job redesign itself produces significant improvements in motivation. In the few cases where improvements have occurred, it could have been due to a host of extraneous factors, like being subjects in an experiment, gaining extra attention and getting extra money.

In the many cases where no improvements occurred, it was probably because the workers were satisfied and contented with what they were doing and did not want the fuss and bother that went with enlarged jobs or because they actually disliked the extra respon-

sibility and more demanding work. In many cases, factors outside the job itself prevented job restructuring being a success. For instance, in some cases, the enlarged job brought the workers additional fatigue and tension and less chance to chat to their friends, which actually made them less not more satisfied with their jobs.

Taking the second point, it is only in exceptional circumstances that firms are in a position to embark on large-scale job restructuring, even if they want to. In the usual or more frequently-occurring situations, they simply cannot afford the time, expense and risks involved in massive job restructuring. Often the firm is in a competitive situation where it *has* to employ a particular technology because it is the most efficient, even if the resulting jobs created are relatively simple and narrow in scope. In this respect, it is beyond question that technology is the overriding factor in job design. It is for the most part machines, computers, arc welders, forklifts and engines that determine how jobs are divided up, not the theories of academics like Herzberg. And if firms want to stay in business and make a profit they usually have to obey this rule.

Furthermore, many first-line supervisors naturally feel threatened by schemes aimed at giving their immediate subordinates greater responsibility and more say in decision-making, especially if they perceive these changes as reducing their power. As made clear in my book *Productivity and Black Workers*, this is the typical reaction of white superiors to the enlargement of the jobs of their subordinates, particularly if the latter are ambitious blacks. In this situation, the supervisors may surreptitiously oppose these changes, producing role ambiguity and conflict for the black subordinates, whose performance is therefore likely to deteriorate. If they cannot oppose these changes even in subtle ways, the supervisors are likely to suffer a loss of esteem and pride, which is likely to result in poorer performance from than — in what are usually 'critical' jobs for overall efficiency.

In addition, the capital investment required to significantly alter methods of production as required by large-scale enrichment schemes, is awesome. Most jobs have over the years been designed around certain kinds of machines and equipment. To replace these for the sake of an experiment in job reform is a risk that few managers have been prepared to take on a large-scale. Hence, despite the fact that job enrichment has become almost a fad, over the past ten years there have been few genuine attempts at systematic job restructuring. Given the shaky evidence in favour of large-scale job enrichment, these managers who have *not* introduced massive job restructuring have acted wisely and sensibly — and are probably still in business. In this regard, it is often overlooked by proponents of job enrichment that at some point suggestions for enlarging jobs, lengthening job cycles, introducing greater complexity and more scope

come into serious conflict with the logic which dictated division of labour in the first place. They frequently overlook the fact that production methods have been developed not from the arbitrary decisions of engineers or even as a result of the inevitable progression of technology, but in the rational search for efficiency in competitive economics where efficiency is a prerequisite for survival.

Finally, in view of the existing and perhaps necessary conflict between white employers and their black employees, given the present South African political set-up and the fact that political views dominate the job attitudes of most sophisticated black workers, it is highly likely that more participation in decision making and a greater say in company affairs (which are essential parts of enrichment schemes) can lead to more conflict and greater confrontation rather than less. Since conflict leads to dissatisfaction often to poorer performance, enrichment schemes in South Africa can therefore backfire dangerously. It is naive to believe that when groups are basically competing for power, like whites and blacks in South Africa, that more so-called consultation and greater apparent participation in decision making, will lead to improved relations. On the contrary, what is highly probable is that the group on top initially is likely to feel more threatened and the group at the bottom to become more militant, as they see the others weaken, which will lead to more conflict than before.

IN CONCLUSION

On the whole the two factor theory has proved to be generally false and its main implications to hold only under restricted conditions, which do not generally obtain. Industrial psychologists have now advanced beyond this over-simplified theory and developed formulations which do more justice to the complexities of the real world.

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