

One size does not fit all: Person-Oriented Aspects of Job Design

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Abstract

Recognizing the clear deficiencies of theories of job design that consider only job characteristics themselves, two studies examine the importance of the personal evaluative salience of those characteristics. Investigating two forms of job satisfaction and of job engagement and also workers' intention to leave their organization, it is shown that certain feature-outcome associations are significantly affected by the discrepancy between a person's wanted and actual levels, but that this pattern is not universal. Theoretical and practical implications are illustrated.

Introduction

This paper brings together two - often unrelated - strands in the literature: job design and person-environment fit. Recognizing the clear deficiencies of theories of job design that consider only job characteristics themselves, it examines the importance of the personal evaluative salience of those characteristics.

Research into the affective correlates of job content has assumed that certain job features are desirable to all employees. That assumption is only moderately supported by the empirical evidence: associations between those characteristics and individuals' job satisfaction or similar variables are positive but not great.

Some studies have indicated that individuals have a continuing personal level of well-being (e.g., Headey & Wearing, 1992), and others have shown the importance of stable personality dispositions for job reactions (e.g., Judge, Heller, & Mount, 2002) or have explored judgmental processes that bear on affective reactions (e.g., Daniels, Harris & Briner, 2004). For example, affect is in part a function of people's processes of social and situational comparison, being more positive when a person assesses his or her situation against possibilities that are less attractive than one's own (e.g., Warr, 2007)

It is therefore important to complement the traditional "one-size-fits-all" perspective with a better understanding of the within-person preferences that influence the size of association between a job feature and other variables.

Related research has been framed in terms of person-environment fit demonstrating that an overall match between a person's actual and desired job content (combining together all job features) is correlated with, for example, job satisfaction (e.g. Verquer, Beehr & Wagner, 2003). Emphasis on total fit (e.g. profile correlations), however, does not permit differentiated theoretical accounts or practical recommendations about particular features, and the overall pattern needs to be broken down in respect of separate job characteristics. This paper firstly addresses the following question: Given a general association between job well-being and the total fit between a person's wants and job content, for which particular job features is degree of fit more important or less important?

Where fit is assessed on specific scales in the literature, it is often not clear why these particular scales were selected, whether they are linked to a larger framework and how generalisable findings are.

The paper's second question concerns generality across measures and samples. Possible between-variable differences will be investigated by including several affective outcomes: job satisfaction, satisfaction with the organization, engagement (being absorbed in one's work and feeling energised through work) and intent to stay with the organization. Generality will also be examined between samples, asking about the replicability across two sets of respondents of specific findings about particular job features for job satisfaction.

Person-environment fit is often studied in terms of people's values, asking how much they consider a feature desirable or want that feature, or the degree to which that feature is important or salient to them. The paper's third question asks about the presence of moderation by personal salience, examining separately different job features and types of affect.

Two studies will be described in which employees rated a range of job characteristics drawn from Warr's (2007) Vitamin model by indicating the extent to which they valued each characteristic, and the extent to which each one was present in their job. The Vitamin model is rooted in the well-being literature and captures key aspects of the work environment (e.g. opportunity for control, task variety) that are positively related to employee well-being and work satisfaction. Warr uses an analogy to illustrate his model: job features may be considered as vitamins that have an influence on physiological effectiveness. The intake of vitamins is important for physical health but only up to certain level. Beyond this level they either do not enhance health any further or they can even be harmful (e.g. vitamin A, D).

Associations with affective outcomes were analyzed for each job feature through three-step hierarchical regressions, inserting at step 1 a job feature (the extent to which people thought it was present), at step 2 the difference between how much of a job feature was present and wanted, and at step 3 the multiplicative interaction of those two.

Study 1

Participants

A British sample of 253 people responded to an online questionnaire which was distributed in two departments of a medium to large organization within the UK insurance industry and to a group of volunteers. 68% were women and ages ranged from 19 to 65 with a mean of 37.42 (SD = 11.15).

Measures

Respondents indicated how much of each of 24 characteristics (Warr, 2007) they would ideally want in a job (*Wanted Job Characteristics*). Seven response options ranged from "None at all" to "The most possible". Each feature was described through a two to five-item scale, and scale reliability was high (the average alpha coefficient was 0.81). Perceived *Actual Job Characteristics* were described on the same continuum through single items selected as central to the scales above by asking respondents how much of each characteristic was present in their current job.

Job-related well-being was recorded on a 16-point scale of overall job satisfaction, extending over intrinsic and extrinsic themes (Warr, Cook & Wall, 1979). Internal reliability was again high ($\alpha = .90$).

Study 2

Participants

1492 people completed an online questionnaire. 48.7% were women, and ages ranged from under 18 to 65 or older with 41.5% being between 25 and 34. Mean tenure was 4.34 years in a current job and 4.92 years in a current organization.

Measures

The same 24 Actual and Wanted Work Characteristics examined in study 1 were measured through 2 items each. A 9-point response scale was used, ranging from “None at all” to “The most possible”. The average reliability was 0.72 for Wanted Work Characteristics and 0.77 for Actual Work Characteristics. Respondents indicated on two single items how satisfied or dissatisfied overall they were with their job and with working in their organization, from “extremely dissatisfied” (1) to “extremely satisfied” (7). Based on previous conceptualizations, two aspects of work-role engagement were also measured. Absorption and energy were each tapped through 3-item scales which had alpha coefficients of 0.81 and 0.88 respectively. Respondents also indicated how long they would like to continue working in their current organization, with options ranging from “less than 3 months” (1) to “more than 5 years” (7).

Results and Discussion

As expected, the studied job characteristics were significantly associated with overall job satisfaction; the average correlation was +0.43 in Study 1 and +0.34 in Study 2. In Study 2 significant relationships were also found for the other dependent variables. Average correlations were: satisfaction with the organization, +0.30; absorption, +0.21; energy, +0.29; and intention to stay with the organization, +0.23.

Question 1: For how many, and which, job features is the personal fit between Wanted Job Characteristics and Actual Job Characteristics important?

Study 1

For 7 (29.2%) of the 24 job features, the addition of the discrepancy between Want and Actual at step 2 of the hierarchical analyses significantly increased the amount of variance accounted for beyond the contribution of the job feature alone. In these cases, an Actual Job Characteristic was always less than a Wanted Job Characteristic: individuals wanted more of these features than they currently had in their job. The significant step-2 effect of Want-Actual discrepancy thus indicated that, over and above the level of a job feature itself, perceived deficits relative to a person’s own wanted level further affected well-being. For those 7 job characteristics, a judgmental comparison standard of personal want/value affected satisfaction in addition to the level of a feature on its own.

Features for which values-fit was important beyond a feature’s Actual level included Being in Control of Your Own Work, Having a Helpful Manager and Being Well Paid. In those 7 cases, personal wants were important to the level of well-being over and above job content alone.

Study 2

For 9 (37.5%) of the 24 job features, step 2 in a multiple regression (adding the difference between Want and Actual) significantly accounted for incremental variance beyond the contribution of the job feature alone in predicting job satisfaction. As was the case in Study 1, the Actual Work Characteristic was always less than the Wanted Work Characteristic. These job features included Having a Supportive Manager and Non-Conflicting Goals. Step 2 was also significant for many job features in predicting other forms of job well-being: Satisfaction with the Organization: 12 features (50%); Absorption: 21 features (87.5%); Energy: 18 features (75%); and Intent to Stay with the Organization: 10 features (41.7%).

Question 2: How generalizable across measures and samples are findings about particular job features?

Although the discrepancy between a Wanted and Actual Job Characteristic incrementally accounted for the amount of variance in job satisfaction across the two samples (see above), the significant features were not identical across the two studies. Only Having a Control over work, Non-Conflicting Job Demands, Helpful Manager and Good Future Prospects were found to be significant in both steps 1 and 2 of the analyses in the two studies. Patterns also differed depending on the variable that was predicted: while most job features accounted for incremental variance in predicting the two engagement scales in step 2, fewer significances were observed for Satisfaction with the Organization and Intention to Stay.

Question 3: Do personal values/wants moderate the association between job features and job-related well-being?

Study 1

For 10 of the job characteristics (41.7%) the interaction term at step 3 of the hierarchical regression significantly increased the proportion of variance accounted for. In those cases, the level of specific values (Wanted Job Characteristics) significantly affected the association between an Actual feature and overall job satisfaction.

The pattern of this interaction was investigated by splitting the sample into low-, medium- and high-want sub-groups for each job feature; the correlation between an Actual Job Characteristic and overall job satisfaction was then examined for each sub-group. For the 10 attributes for which a significant interaction was present, mean attribute-satisfaction correlations were 0.25, 0.38 and 0.60 respectively; job features were substantially more associated with well-being when they were more evaluatively salient to a person.

Study 2

For 11 job characteristics (45.8%) step 3 of the regression analyses (introducing the interaction term) significantly predicted additional variance in overall job satisfaction. In those (the majority of) cases, the magnitude of the relationship between a job feature and well-being differed depending on the extent to which an individual valued the respective job feature.

To investigate the pattern of the interaction the sample was divided into low-, medium- and high-want sub-groups for each job feature and correlations between an Actual Work Characteristic and overall job satisfaction were then examined for each sub-group. For the 11 job attributes for which a significant interaction was found, mean correlations with job satisfaction were 0.11, 0.29 and 0.39. As in Study 1, job features were more highly associated

with well-being when they were more desired by a person. Significant interactions were also found for the other outcome variables: satisfaction with the organization (9 features), absorption (7), energy (13) and intention to stay with the organization (13). Average feature-outcome correlations were again consistently higher for job characteristics which had higher levels of Want.

Conclusions

These two studies have shown that, in addition to the mere presence of certain features, the discrepancy between Wanted and Actual Job Characteristic in many cases also significantly affects job-related well-being, engagement and the intention to stay with an organization (step 2, above). Moreover, the degree to which a job feature is related to well-being depends on the extent to which a person values it (step 3). The conference presentation will explore differential patterns more closely, to determine which job features are generally related to particular criteria independently of evaluative salience and for which features personal values particularly matter.

These findings are important both theoretically and practically. Theories of job design need to be extended to include differences in the personal salience of particular job characteristics and to more closely specify the circumstances under which these individual differences are or are not important. In practical terms, organizations can benefit from more careful attention to the job-related values of applicants for a position and the values of current staff, and by auditing both job content and worker values to reduce those discrepancies which are harmful.

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