

Ideal job design with the use of teams

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2003

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1. Introduction

The use of teams in all areas of business has become common practice. Undoubtedly, teams will increase in popularity in the future due to the possibilities afforded by virtuality and the ability to access a wide range of geographically and temporally dispersed labour skills. Aside from this labour benefit, teams provide managers and organisations with flexible and self-managing work units. It is no wonder then that the argument has been put forward that teams provide managers with an ideal job design approach. This essay examines this idea by first looking at the supporting evidence in the literature in section 2. Issues that are investigated here include the ability of teams to aid in managerial delegation, the benefits of virtual and cross functional team approaches to task design and finally, how the collaborative nature of teams can give rise to improved task performance. Whilst the benefits of teams for managers are numerous, there are a number of pitfalls that must be considered when deciding if a team approach is the way to go. Section 3 focuses on concerns such as job suitability for teams, team conflict, indirection and personnel selection headaches. All of these issues can make utilising teams far from an ideal approach to job design. Section 4 caps off this essay by examining the evidence for and against teams in job design and finishes with some conclusions.

2. Teams as an ideal job design approach: Supporting evidence

By combining the skills of many individuals it is possible to create a work unit that is at least the sum of its parts, and at its best, the creation of a something much more potent. When a manager seeks to design a work task, he or she has in mind the outcomes required, the input resources needed and the process by which the task is done. An individual or group of individuals can then be assigned to carry out that task. This style of task design is usually associated with authoritarian guidance by the manager and low worker interdependence and autonomy. Farr-Wharton (2003) has found that productivity in work groups actually increases above and beyond a simple summation of individual competency and capacity when interdependence amongst workers is increased. Therefore, team task design (using a team to design or accomplish a task) can be seen as a better way for managers to get tasks done, assuming that interdependence amongst team members exist.

Team interdependence is not however the only key to the successful use of teams. A team needs a certain level of self-management and self-direction to accomplish its goals. Self-managed work teams have been championed as providing a participatory decision-making process that removes the need for upper management to be concerned with the smallest details of the task or the relationships of individuals involved in the task (Hersey, Blanchard and Hambleton, 1980, cited in Sinclair, 1992; Musselwhite, 1988). For a manager it is important to appropriately delegate duties; enough so that time is made available for the manager to concentrate on higher level concerns, but not so much that complete control is lost. Therefore, teams can be a good way to complete a task because the manager does not need to be concerned with the minute details of how the task will be performed. Yandrick (2001) suggests that when an organisation sheds its authoritarian model of leadership and makes use of self-managed work teams, performance increases, waste reduces and product-development cycles accelerate. Some research also suggests that employees working in a team will be more satisfied than they would be in traditional work arrangements. Needs for individual motivation (Mayo, 1945; Lewin 1947, both cited in Sinclair, 1992), responsibility and autonomy (Hertzberg et al., 1959, MacGregor, 1960, both cited in Sinclair, 1992) and participative and democratic leadership (Likert, 1976, cited in Sinclair, 1992) are said to be satisfied in a team environment and are more likely to contribute positively to team and organisation performance (Gulowsen, 1972, cited in Sinclair, 1992). Sustaining a high level of satisfaction should result in the manager needing to intervene less in the daily workings of the team. Anti-task behaviour, work misdirection and low productivity can potentially be minimised by increased worker satisfaction.

By linking self-managed work teams with a cross-functional flavour, the manager can realise significant benefits in the actual task design. Cross-functionality in a work team can provide specialists from a variety of functional areas that would not normally come together in a traditionally based, functionally designed work arrangement (Bishop, 1999). Bishop states that this type of team works well where input is required over a number of functional departments in the decision-making process for the design and manufacturing component of product development. Henke, Krachenberg and Lyons (1993, cited in Bishop, 1999) suggest that cross-functional teams reduce the likelihood of rework, unacceptable behaviour, information transfer delays and process redundancy. Other

benefits include product development cycle time acceleration, reduced interdepartmental conflict and an increase in product development process coordination (Sinclair, 1992). Farr-Wharton (2003) has found that by populating a team with cross-functional or outsourced personnel, team creativity and performance increases. If a manager is required to design and oversee a task involving a complex array of diverse inputs, such as that in a typical product development initiative, cross-functional teams can make the job easier. The manager will most likely have a reduced need to act as a go-between amongst the functional departments, as members in the team will already have strong links back to them. More specialised task knowledge will exist on a cross-functional team than with a traditional team or individual work arrangement. This removes some of the need for the manager to be 'poaching' employees from other functions, or having to hire new staff.

Whilst teams are usually co-located, they do not have to be. Virtual teams provide managers a way to bring together a group of people that are not geographically located or temporally synchronous. Because virtual teams mean managers are not limited to employees that exist in the office or at the manufacturing plant, it becomes easier to find the required resources when needed (Maurer, 2002). This access to global labour markets is especially useful when an organisation has customers offshore. Being able to provide customers with a local 'face' can be beneficial to customer satisfaction and repeat purchasing (Cascio, 2000). A manager considering a virtual team over traditional task design needs to ascertain if the increased skill base found from utilising out of town or out of country workers is worth the challenges associated with providing a support structure for them.

Some of the benefits of using teams for task design have been stated. As with anything that claims to revolutionise the way work is done, there are considerable drawbacks to be examined. The next section identifies some of these and discusses how managers might experience them.

3. Teams as an ideal job design approach: Refuting evidence

The definition of a team is often not as clear cut as one expects. Bender (1999) illustrates this by comparing Japanese and German teams in manufacturing industries. German teams are more autonomous, diverse, less hierarchical and less standardised than the Japanese teams. By usual definitions one could say that the Japanese teams are really not teams at all, rather a collection of individuals brought together to accomplish a pre-defined task. With this blurring between what a 'team' and 'work group' is in mind, is it worth the manager taking the plunge from pre-defined, highly structured work tasks to the setting up of a team to reap some of the benefits discussed in section 2? This section examines this question and brings to light some of the problems associated with team job design.

This 'leap' may be more of a hassle than the manager really needs. In a highly structured traditional job design approach, the manager identifies the job, defines how to complete it (with help from other knowledgeable staff / consultants) and then selects the workers and provides them with the resources required. When using a team approach, the manager usually identifies the job but creates a team to do the rest. Whilst this approach removes much of the fine grained functional details from the hands of the manager, it requires significant support structures to be in place to aid the team towards a successful outcome. These structures come in the form of technological support (groupware and virtual team support software, Dustdar, 2002; Maurer, 2002), but also in terms of personal support that the manager gives directly to the team. Wageman (2001) provides research that shows some forms of team coaching can positively impact on team performance. This involves providing cues, informal awards and giving problem solving consultation. All of these things take up valuable managerial time that may not need to be spent if a less ambiguous job design approach existed.

Even more time can be spent in dealing with team conflict. Conflict is more likely to happen in a team based environment because of the increased freedom afforded to its members to make decisions that may be disliked by others in the team. Bishop (1999) describes how intense resistance to cross-functional teams can emerge in organisations that have in place a strict hierarchy that do not allow any attempts to flatten it. Other forms of conflict can arise in virtual teams because of cultural diversity and problems with ensuring that all team members have access to the same information (Susman, Gray, Blair and Perry, 2002; Hinds and Bailey, 2000). Corporate 'bullies' can create tension amongst fellow team members by hijacking control over the team (Yandrick, 2001). Conversely, democratic participation can sometimes result in a leaderless team with no real direction (Sinclair, 1992). Conflict is a natural part of any team but it needs to be kept in check if it is to be healthy for performance. The manager using a team for job design could potentially be acting as a fire-fighter, trying to stamp out conflict before it engulfs the entire team. All of this conflict can prove stressful for the team members involved. Rothschild-Whitt, (1986, cited in Sinclair, 1992) found that participation in democratic work groups was often very stressful. This calls into question the issue of improved satisfaction for employees when in a team environment. Higher stress can lead to job dissatisfaction and the potential for increased turnover and lower performance. A manager is not particularly interested in fostering these things.

Other things to consider in determining whether to use a team is the 'fit' of the job to a team approach. Musselwhite (1988) suggests that for some jobs, using a team approach is pointless because there is no interdependence between those doing the job (e.g. a telephone switch board operator or a truck driver). Such tasks may benefit from job crafting, where the individual employee has more control over how their job is carried out. This provides an increased level of meaning to the employee, and can result in productivity gains as the person doing the job is usually in the best position to know how to improve it (Wrzesniewski and Dutton, 2001). The manager who makes excessive use of teams may find that productivity drops because it might be more efficient to design the task and get an individual to carry it out. The result may not be ideal, as only a limited amount of knowledge has been used to find a solution, but satisficing may be all that is required.

As with the fit of the job to a team approach, those members of the team also need to be considered. Handy (1978, cited in Sinclair, 1992) and Belbin (1981, cited in Sinclair, 1992) note that certain types of workers perform better in solitary jobs. Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson and Tesluk (2002) found that having both task and interpersonal skills in virtual teams were crucial in being a successful team member. This indicates the need for managers to evaluate their potential team members for such skills. Here, as in the job fit for the use of a team, a mismatch will more than likely result in poor team performance and reduced satisfaction for those involved.

The number of potential problems facing managers who utilise teams is great. Whether it is dealing with conflict, lack of job satisfaction, power struggles or incompatible employee personalities, considerable effort and time needs to be laid down by the manager to properly utilise teams. Even then there is no guarantee that using teams will offer any real benefits over other forms of job design.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Teams have the potential to bring significant creativity to bear on a job, through the use of diverse membership (as explored in cross-functional teams by Bishop, 1999). This creativity can be combined with increased employee participation and satisfaction to enhance team and organisational performance as stated by Gulowsen (1972, cited in Sinclair, 1992). Sinclair (1992) notes however that the assumption that teams provide satisfaction to its members is debateable. The issue of improved member participation in teams is also questionable, as some members may find it desirable to shirk responsibility by riding on the efforts of others without being noticed. Add to the mix the many difficulties associated with teams such as conflict (Bishop, 1999; Susman et al., 2002; Hinds and Bailey, 2000; Yandrick, 2001), job fit (Musselwhite, 1988) and employee selection (Kirkman et al., 2002) and the question of the most appropriate task design approach quickly becomes complicated.

With that hazy view of team suitability in mind, there are some clear cut situations where the use of teams is beneficial. The idea (as examined by Farr-Wharton, 2003) that the sum of a team's capacity and capability is greater than its individual parts is a powerful one. Team members exhibit behaviour that they would not normally do so in a solitary environment. This behaviour can be to the benefit (increased effort due to competition amongst members) or the detriment (outward conflict that stops all work processes and brings the team to a halt) of the team. This concept can be harnessed to dramatically increase the performance, efficiency, quality and optimality of the end result, be it to solve a complex scientific problem or to design a new manufacturing process. In the former, it might take years of work for a single researcher to find a solution, but with the help of a team of colleagues the solution is found much more quickly, with higher accuracy. In the design of a new manufacturing process, it would be nearly impossible for a single engineer to complete the plans by themselves. The ability to harness a wide skill set is a great advantage when using teams.

Having described two examples where the use of teams makes perfect sense, I now describe a less than clear cut scenario. A construction site manager needs to get a house put up in a new sub division. Does she organise a team to do the work and let them handle exactly how the house gets put up based on the blueprints? An alternative is for her to make a detailed plan about every aspect of the construction task and order individuals to do the work. The selection criterion for this problem is based on a number of variables. One of these will be the capability of the workers that the manager has available to do the work. The more capable they are the more autonomous they can be without guidance; therefore a team approach will suit. Another set of variables is based on the situation and abilities of the manager. If ten houses are being built at once, the manager may be more inclined to delegate the finer points of house building to a team to free up time to ensure the other houses are being built to schedule. Also of interest is how the manager deals with subordinates. One that dislikes dealing with conflict might shy away from the team approach in favour of a more structured implementation, due to the fact teams often present higher conflict levels than hierarchical relationships.

In my belief, there is no definitive true / false response to the statement that teams are the closest managers are likely to come to an ideal job design. As in most things in this world, it all depends. It depends on the environment the manager and the organisation find themselves in. For example, an organisation that exists in a region with a small labour market may require the adoption of global virtual teams to undertake certain projects so that it can harness the required skills. It also depends on the job to be done. Teams are suitable for a large scale engineering job but probably not for assembly line operators. Finally, the suitability of teams for a job depends on the individuals that are to do it. If at all possible the manager needs to select employees that have high task and interpersonal communications skills (Kirkman et al., 2002). By considering all these variables the conscientious manager can make an informed decision as to the suitability of a team process to the implementation of a task.

4. References

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