

Multiple meanings of the high performance workplace: High performance work organisation in low skill services

Ann C. Frost and Peter Berg

University of Western Ontario, Canada and Michigan State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade and a half, the high performance work system literature has highlighted a number of features of work organisation - broadened jobs, increased investment in training, and input into workplace problem solving and decision making - that appear to be associated with desirable performance outcomes both for firms and workers. These characteristics have been identified across a range of industries and by a broad cross section of researchers. Primarily, however, this research has been conducted in manufacturing settings amongst skilled and semi-skilled blue collar workers. To date, we know little about what constitutes a high performance work system model in service settings.

In this paper, we draw upon survey data from 947 service workers employed in U.S. hospitals as nursing assistants, food service workers, and housekeepers, and ask what constitutes a high performance model of work organisation in this population. Our data suggest that high performance models in this setting look quite different from the one that has been documented in blue collar manufacturing settings. More narrowly defined jobs, with adequate staffing, and higher rates of pay appear to produce better outcomes for workers (greater satisfaction and lower stress) as well as for hospitals (lower staff turnover and higher patient satisfaction). Jobs that were redesigned around the manufacturing-based high performance model (broadened, with additional training, and employee input into problem solving) were less successful in producing these performance outcomes.

