

An investigation into the effects of job latitude and acquisitiveness on employee well being

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the consequences for employee well being when employees have latitude in their jobs and seek to maximise the financial rewards of work. Using data from 418 finance industry employees, the results of the hierarchical regression analysis indicated that employees with higher levels of job latitude report lower levels of health problems. Further, employees that are highly acquisitive are more likely to report work overload and health problems. The paper then examines the interaction effects between job latitude and acquisitiveness on employee well being and finds a stronger relationship between work overload and job latitude for those with high levels of acquisitiveness than for those with low acquisitiveness. The findings of the paper suggest that using economic incentives to promote employee work efforts come at a cost to the employee and subsequently to their employing organisation.

Introduction

One of the primary tasks of a manager is maximise the performance of their employees (Ambrose & Kulik, 1999), however, employment contracts are typically 'open ended' meaning that the amount of work effort purchased is not fixed (Braverman, 1974). As a result organisations develop and apply employment practices to encourage employees to work at a high level. The focus of this paper is on the consequences of two contemporary employment practices for employee well-being.

In recent years we have seen a shift towards a greater use of extrinsic rewards, principally pay, through the implementation of performance pay schemes (Shields, 2002). This trend has been driven by at least two factors: first, there is a belief that performance pay schemes result in better employee productivity. In many organisations, the pay budget represents a sizeable cost to the organisation, which can affect the overall financial performance (Shaw, Gupta, & Delery, 2002). There is an extensive body of research that has examined the connection between economic incentives and performance and according to Benabou & Tirole (2003, 489) there is 'a lot of evidence' that they do promote employee effort and performance. The second factor relates to employee pay preferences. As Shaw & Gupta (2001, 301) point out, 'pay is a central feature in the work lives of many individuals and obviously nearly all individuals would rather receive more than less pay.' Organisations have taken this to mean that employees want to maximise their pay through a performance-related pay system (LeBlanc & Mulvey, 1998). At the same time we have witnessed significant changes in the nature of work. Driven by a desire for greater flexibility, organisations have broadened job definitions. This change in the nature of work means the scope of work activities undertaken is within the control of the employees, providing an opportunity to 'decide on how much time to devote to work and how much work is too much' (Peiperl, 2001, 372).

While there is a sizeable body of research that has focused on the upside of these trends, much less work has investigated the potentially negative effects on employee well being. This paper investigates the direct effects of job latitude and pay acquisitiveness on two indicators of employee well being, namely work overload perceptions and work related health problems. The paper further examines the combined effect of job latitude and acquisitiveness on these two measures of employee well being. The next section provides a brief review of the theoretical debates about job latitude and extrinsic rewards. The discussion then moves on to identify specific and testable relationships between employee well being, job latitude and the acquisitiveness. The data, its analysis and interpretation conclude the paper.

Historical and theoretical review

The design of many jobs has changed significantly in Australia, a change that has resulted in greater job latitude for many employees. Up till the 1980's many jobs were narrowly defined. Employees were expected to perform a small number of tasks in a highly repetitive way, often under high levels of supervision. Employees were generally selected for jobs on the basis of their ability to perform effectively in the job for which they were applying. This system of job design was reinforced by federal and state industrial awards: awards typically contained a very large number of job classifications and getting employees to do other tasks on a short-term basis (eg to meet production deadlines) would involve consulting the award to determine the effect on pay and other working conditions (Deery, Plowman, Walsh, & Brown, 2001).

A major impetus for change was globalisation. As the Australian economy was opened up via reductions in tariffs and the floating of the Australian dollar, workplaces had to become more internationally competitive and the key was seen to be greater workplace flexibility. This need to change was made more urgent through a series of national wage case decisions in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission ('the commission'). The Commission provided a direct inducement for change by making some or all of a pay increase contingent on locally negotiated productivity improvements. The Commission also encouraged 'broad banding' of job classifications so that employees could be applied to a range of tasks without creating problems with entitlements (MacDonald, Campbell, & Burgess, 2001). The opportunity to move employees around the workplace as circumstances dictated meant that the employers and employees had to find ways to expand the range of skills possessed by employees. It also meant that the size of the workforce could be reduced, as each employee was able to perform a greater range of tasks.

The flexibility debate not only promoted a review of job design but also about the role and method of pay (van Barneveld & Arsovska, 2001). The role of pay in the employment relationship is contested. On the one hand, industrial relations developed as a field of study as a reaction against the views of classical economists, who considered labour markets to be populated by rational utility or profit maximising individual economic actors (Kaufman, 1993). The labour market was regarded as a relationship of economic exchange in which the services of labour were purchased and sold in a market like any other commodity. In fact, some writers have characterised the greater organisational emphasis on current performance and extrinsic rewards as evidence of a shift back to a transactional approach to employment (Kabanoff, Jimmieson, & Lewis, 2000). On the other hand, motivation theories explicitly provide a role for extrinsic rewards as a means of influencing employee behaviours. For example, reinforcement theory posits that rewards reinforce (that is motivate and sustain) performance, and are best applied directly after the behaviours the organisation seeks to reinforce. Goal setting theory suggests that challenging performance goals promote greater intensity and duration of employee efforts, especially when combined with the receipt of valued extrinsic rewards. HRM professionals should therefore ensure that the reward matches the level of goal difficulty (Milkovich & Newman, 2002). Finally agency theory, states that 'pay directs and motivates employee performance' (Milkovich & Newman, 2002, 286), particularly for complex jobs where the monitoring of employee performance is problematic.

A further permutation in the debate about extrinsic rewards was provided by Deci who argued that extrinsic rewards have a determinantal effect on intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1975). There have been numerous experiments and other studies, which have subsequently been used in meta analyses (Cameron & Pierce, 1994; Deci, Koestner & Ryan, 1999). These meta analyses were intended to provide a definitive position on the relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, though the results are inconsistent. More recently a distinction has been made between interest in extrinsic rewards as a consequence of financial need and acquisitiveness. Financial need is typically operationalised by a combination of measures such as marital status, number of children in the household, alternative sources of income, percent of household income derived from the principal income earner and the number of individuals living in a household (Shaw & Gupta, 2001). Acquisitiveness, on the other hand, has been defined as 'motivation based on the reinforcing properties of material reward' (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989, 303). The importance of this distinction is that highly acquisitive employees will react differently from an employee with a lower level of acquisitiveness.

Hypotheses and rationale

The foregoing discussion suggests demonstrates that many organisations have altered the nature of work and the way in which employees are rewarded. This section will put forward a series of hypotheses about the impact of these changes for employee well being. Two aspects of employee well-being are considered in this paper: work overload and work related ill health. *Work overload* has been defined as the extent to which the 'job performance required in a job is excessive or overload due to performance required on a job' (Iverson & Maguire, 2000). Work overload is a chief factor in studies of stress (Taylor, Repetti, & Seeman, 1997, 434; DeFrank and Ivancevich 1998; Sparks and Cooper 1999). For organisations, work overload has been shown to have a significant negative impact on job commitment among public sector managers (Stevens, Beyer, & Trice, 1978), job satisfaction (Iverson & Maguire, 2000) and on employee perceptions of an innovative organisational culture (Chandler, Keller, & Lyon, 2000). Work overload has a significant positive effect on voluntary turnover (Mueller, Boyer, Price and Iverson, 1994). The second measure of employee well being examined in the present study is *work related ill health*. This refers to both psychological (eg depression, anxiety attacks) and physiological (eg headaches, muscular cramps, ulcers) effects on employees. Employee health is a concern to employees but also to their organisations and society. Ill health can affect both organisational performance through absenteeism, turnover and lower performance and government costs through the effect on the health system (Johnston, 2004).

Job latitude is generally regarded as being good for employees. Jobs with a higher level of latitude can be more interesting and fulfilling for the employee, as they are able to impact aspects of their work process. These employees are often more valuable to their employing organisation and in the labour market as they have demonstrated decision making skills and are able to applied to a range of tasks within the organisation. Further, opportunities to make job related decisions can promote an employees feelings of self worth (Korsgaard & Roberson, 1995) and an enhanced ability to cope with the work environment. Karasek (1979) reported that high job latitude was associated with lower mental strain at all levels of job demands. This discussion suggests the following two hypotheses:

H1: Employees with greater job latitude will report a lower level of work overload than will employees with high levels of job latitude.

H2: Employees with greater job latitude will report fewer work related ill health than will employees with a high level of job latitude.

Both theory and empirical research provide support for a link between extrinsic rewards and employee well being. Identity theory examines the factors that make stressors more or less salient for individuals: '...[in] the logic of identity theory, work related factors that are central to an individuals life should have a greater impact on his/her attitudes and behaviours than those that are more peripheral' (Shaw & Gupta, 2001, 302). Therefore, when the acquisition of money is central to an employee attitudes are likely to be stronger identity relevant stressors. The acquisition of money is now be higher on an employees agenda as a consequence of shorter job horizons (as demonstrated by rising levels of job insecurity (Kelley, Evans, & Dawkins, 1998)). Both Kelley *et al.*(1998) and Lazear (1998) have demonstrated that as perceptions of job security fall, employees seek higher current pay in return for the uncertainty about accessing long term financial benefits such as superannation.

Empirically, Chang (2003) has demonstrated that employees who are place a high value on extrinsic rewards tend to be motivated to exert more effort. Moreover, extrinsically motivated employees will expect that each time a task is performed it will be rewarded, 'perhaps in ever increasing amounts' (Benabou & Tirole, 2003, 503), leading the employee to work at a high level in order to access the extrinsic rewards on offer. This effect may be furthered by the acquisitive employees adoption of a life style and spending pattern that requires this extra income to be sustained, so they need to continue to work at a high level. Not only will highly acquisitive employees work harder they are also more sensitive to work load issues. Lu (1999, 63) has argued that people who have strong extrinsic work motivations such as pay will care more about the demands of their jobs, while Zenger & Marshall (2000) have suggested that imposing high levels of incentive intensity imposes substantial uncertainty and risk on employees, resulting in a range of health related problems.

Use of extrinsic rewards can also impact on the nature of the employment relationship. Benabou & Tirole (2003, 492) have argued that by offering extrinsic rewards the employer is signalling a lack of trust in the employee, which can be a source of concern and subsequent ill health to the employee. More directly, Lu (1999, 68) reports a significant and positive relationship between extrinsic motivation and depression. There were also positive but not significant findings with anxiety and somatic symptoms. She observes that people who are seeking high pay 'will be more sensitive to discrepancies between reality and ideals or expectations hence more easily distressed' (Lu, 1999, 70). In combination, both theory and research suggest the following hypotheses:

H3: Employees who are highly acquisitive will report a higher level of work overload than will employees who are less acquisitive.

H4: Employees who are highly acquisitive will report more work related ill health than will employees who are less acquisitive.

The interaction of high job latitude with high acquisitiveness is expected to result in a high level of work overload and ill health as employees have both the opportunities and the inclination to work to excess. As Shaw *et al.* (2002, 494) have noted, when individuals do not have to rely on one another to accomplish work and individual financial incentives are especially attractive, employees have an incentive to increase effort, potentially to excessive levels or to experience health problems. In other words, acquisitiveness will exaggerate the relationship between job latitude and employee well being.

H5: Acquisitiveness will moderate the relationship between job latitude and measures of employee well being

Method

SAMPLE: The data for the study comes from a self-report survey of employees engaged as call centre workers, financial planners and insurance administrators in the finance industry. There have been significant changes in the nature of finance industry work and pay systems since the 1980's (Kitay & Rimmer, 1997). There have been large-scale job losses and there has been a growth in the number of contingent employees. The industry has also sought to promote employee performance through the use of performance pay. AWIRS 1995 reported that 77% of workplaces with 2000 or more employees had a performance pay scheme for their non managerial employees, the highest level of any industry group (Morehead, Steele, Alexander, Stephen, & Duffin, 1997). Surveys were distributed by internal mail though returned to the researcher directly through the post: 1573 were distributed and 456 were returned generating an overall response rate of 29%. After accounting for missing data, the effective sample size is 418. A comparison of the respondents on the basis of their employer and their union status using t-tests demonstrated no significant differences. Table 1 provides the definitions, items and descriptive statistics for the variables used in the analysis. For all multi-item scales a reliability analysis was undertaken and the Cronbach alphas are also reported in Table 1. In all cases the reliability coefficients were within the recommended range (Nunnally, 1978).

MEASURES: There are two dependent variables: work overload and employee ill health. Work overload was measured using a scale developed by Price & Mueller (1981) and subsequently modified by Iverson (1992). A representative item in the scale is 'my job requires me to work very hard (physically or mentally)'. A five on this scale represents a high level of work overload. The second dependent variable was work related employee ill health and it is composed of fourteen work related health problems. Employees were asked to indicate, on a three-point scale (never, sometimes, frequently) the extent to which they had experience of a list of health problems as a consequence of their work. Higher values on this measure therefore represent more extensive ill health.

There are two independent variables (job latitude and acquisitiveness) and one interaction term (job latitude x acquisitiveness). Job latitude was measured using a scale developed by Smith, Tisak, & Schmieder (1997). The scale has five items (a representative item on this scale is 'my job allows me to make decisions on my own') and a five on this scale represents a high level of job latitude. The variable acquisitiveness has four items that measure (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989) the level of employee interest in the acquisition of money. A representative item on this scale is 'it is important

to me to make lots of money'. It is a five-point scale and a five on this scale represents a high level of acquisitiveness. There are also eleven control variables: to control for the possibility that demographic differences or the work context might affect the predictor and outcome variables. The demographic variables are: the age of the respondent in years, gender, presence of dependents, highest education attained, union membership and income level. The situational variables are: the nature of the performance pay scheme in which the respondent was employed, total hours of work, the level of resource inadequacy, co-worker support and job security perceptions.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS: The survey data was analysed using hierarchical regression (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1989). Control variables were entered in step 1. Job latitude was entered at step 2, acquisitiveness at Step 3 and the two-way interaction of job latitude and acquisitiveness in step 4. A likelihood ratio test was used to test whether the explanatory power of the model had significantly improved with the addition of each stage (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1989). The results of these analyses are reported in Table 2.

TABLE 1
Variable
definitions and
descriptive
statistics

Name	Description	Mean (SD)
Employee ill health	Fourteen items that measure the extent of work related ill health, including headaches, indigestion, feeling depressed, anxiety attacks, muscular cramps, sleeplessness, high blood pressure and ulcers, alpha = .87. Higher values represent a greater experience of work related ill health.	21.93 (5.81)
Work overload	Extent to which performance in a job is excessive, as measured by four items from Iverson (1992), alpha=.74. Five point scale where 5=high level of work overload.	3.53 (.85)
Demographic variables		
Age	Continuous variable measured in years	35.96 (11.00)
Education	Highest level of education is a masters degree = 1, 0 otherwise	.05 (.21)
Gender	Dichotomous variable where female =1, male = 0	.54 (.50)
Income	Continuous variable measured in dollars per year divided by 1000	\$62,082 (\$59,674)
Dependents	Dependents = 1, no dependents = 0.	.43 (.50)
Union	Member of union =1, non members = 0	.51 (.50)
Situational variables		
Co worker support	Co-worker support as measured by three items from House (1981), alpha = .87: Five point scale where 5 = high level of co-worker support.	3.75 (.89)
Pay method	Method of performance pay where 1 = commission and 0 = merit pay	.25 (.43)
Resource inadequacy	The level of resource inadequacy as measured by two item measure derived from (Iverson, 1992), alpha = .87. Five point scale where 5 = high level of resource inadequacy	3.29 (1.13)
Secure	Three item measure from (Oldham, Kulik, Stepina, & Ambrose, 1986), alpha = .76) . Five point scale where 5 = high level of job security	3.32 (.88)
Total hours	Continuous variable that measures the total number of hours of work each week	43.93 (11.91)
Independent variables		
Acquisitiveness	Motivation based on the acquisition of material rewards using a four item measure derived from (Cassidy & Lynn, 1989), alpha = .70. Five point scale where 5 = highly acquisitive.	3.43 (.83)
Job latitude	Six item measure of the level of job latitude an employee has in their job from (Smith <i>et al.</i> , 1997), alpha = .89). Five point scale where 5 = high level of job latitude	3.35 (.87)
Interaction variables		
Acquisitiveness *job latitude	Interaction of acquisitiveness and job latitude (items above)	.14 (.75)

Results

Table 1 provides an overview of the respondent characteristics. The average age of all respondents was just under 36 years and 54% of the respondents were female. The average salary for respondents was just over \$62,082 per year and 51% of respondents were union members. The average level of work overload was 3.53, which was higher than in a number of comparable studies. Lower levels were reported by Chandler *et al.* (2000) who reports a mean of 2.80 in a study of operational level employees, by Iverson & Maguire (2000) for miners working in a remote location and by Iverson & Pullman (2000) for hospital workers; hospitality workers (mean = 3.25) and for bank employees (mean = 3.26) (Deery & Iverson, 1996). The mean for employee ill health was 21.93. The highest potential score was 42, suggesting that work related ill health was not a wide spread problem.

The top half of Table 2 shows that entering the demographic and situational control variables in an equation in which *work overload* is the dependent variables yielded a significant equation and an overall explained variance of .3021. In step 2, job latitude was entered into the model, which was a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .0952$, $p < .10$) of work overload, but only at the 10% level. Hypothesis H1 stated that there would be a negative relationship between job latitude and work overload, so is therefore rejected. In Step 3 acquisitiveness was entered and was significant in a positive direction. As predicted (hypothesis H3) acquisitiveness was associated with higher levels of work overload ($\beta = .1051$, $p < .05$). The last step (step 4) in the regressions was the inclusion of the interaction term. Table 2 shows that acquisitiveness moderates the effect of job latitude on work over load perceptions ($\beta = .1042$, $p < .05$). Therefore hypothesis 5 is also supported. The addition of each step improved the explanatory power of the model (as shown by the results of the log likelihood test) and the overall explained variance was 31.84%.

In order to better understand the significant interaction effect between acquisitiveness and job latitude for work overload, split group regression analysis was undertaken (Aiken & West, 1991). First the sample was split into low (minus one standard deviation) and high acquisitiveness (plus one standard deviation). Then regression equations of work overload on job latitude for low acquisitiveness and high acquisitiveness were generated. Regression coefficients indicated that the work overload – job latitude relationship was positive and significant for high acquisitiveness ($\beta = .1821$, $p < .001$) but not for low acquisitiveness ($\beta = .0089$, ns). In other words, the results indicate that acquisitiveness had both a direct and significant effect on work overload but also moderated the relationship between job latitude and work overload such that the relationship was stronger at higher levels of acquisitiveness.

The bottom half of Table 2 shows that entering the demographic and situational control variables in an equation in which *work related health issues* is the dependent variables yielded an overall explained variance of .2443. In step 2 job latitude was entered into the model which was a significant negative predictor of health issues ($\beta = -1.464$, $p < .001$). Hypothesis H2 stated that higher levels of job latitude would result in fewer work related health issues and is therefore supported. In Step 3 acquisitiveness was entered and was found to be a significant and positive correlate of work related health issues ($\beta = .6423$, $p < .05$). As predicted acquisitiveness was associated with higher levels of health issues and therefore hypothesis H4 was supported. The last step in the regressions was the inclusion of the interaction term, which was not significant, therefore hypothesis 5 is not supported in relation to work related ill health.

TABLE 2
Results of
hierarchical
regression
analyses#

Dependent variables	Entry β	Final β	Overall vif	Adj R ²	Δ Adj R ²
Work overload (n= 418)					
Step1:					
Age	-.0085**	-.0071*			
Gender	.0830	.0932			
Dependents	.0571	.0707			
Education	.1544	.1904			
Union	.0642	.0729			
Income	-.0000	-.0005			
Total hours	.0191***	.0185***			
Resource inadequacy	.2593***	.2716***			
Co worker support	-.0306	-.0347			
Pay system	.0191	-.1317			
Job security	-.1634**	-.1843***	1.39	.3021	
Step 2: Job latitude	.0889*	.0952*	1.45	.3056	.0035*
Step 3: Acquisitiveness	.0957**	.1051**	1.43	.3120	.0064**
Step 4: Job latitude x Acquisitiveness	.1042**	.1042**	1.41	.3184	.0064**
Health issues (n= 421)					
Step1:					
Age	-.0251	-.0208			
Gender	1.549***	1.319**			
Dependents	.9243*	.8335			
Education	.4142	.6706			
Union	.7094	.6817			
Income	.0004	.0029			
Total hours of work	.0501**	.0689***			
Resource inadequacy	1.783***	1.593***			
Co worker support	.0956	.2401			
Pay system	-4.375***	-3.414**			
Job security	-2.002***	-1.672***	1.39	.2443	
Step 2: Job latitude	-1.464***	-1.4925***	1.45	.2734	.0291***
Step 3: Acquisitiveness	.5524*	.6423**	1.43	.2793	.0059**
Step 4: Job latitude x Acquisitiveness	.1381	.1381	1.41	.2779	-.0014

Standardised regression coefficients shown are from the equation at the step entered ('entry β ') and from the final equation ('final β '); *** p<.001; ** p<.05; * p<.10

Discussion and conclusions

It has been almost 20 years over which workplaces and their participants have been encouraged to raise the level of efficiency and productivity. Two mechanisms through which organisations have sought improvements have been to increase job latitude and to shift to a more extrinsically based, principally pay, reward system. Overall, the paper demonstrates that higher levels of job latitude can result, contrary to expectations, in work overload but not to the extent of higher levels of work related ill health. This may be because the workload expectations of an employee with a high level of job latitude can be ambiguous. The tasks to be performed can change regularly as the circumstances of the organisation dictate. While the employee may have received training for all these tasks, the limited amount of time spent actually performing each task may be limited, reducing the overall level of proficiency. In order to compensate for lower level of proficiency, the employee has to work at a higher level and, as Taylor *et al.* (1997) report, employees who work at too many tasks tend to report more stress, practice poorer health habits and report more health complaints.

Organisations are attracted to the use of financial rewards as a means of affecting employee behaviours. What this study demonstrates is that employees who are particularly interested in the acquisition of money do respond to the incentive but at the cost of higher levels of work overload and ill health. Or as Slater (1980, 127) notes 'getting people to chase money... produces nothing but people chasing money' and the chase is resulting in a reduction in employee well being. Diminished employee well-being can be a problem for organisations. Higher levels of work overload have been associated with lower job satisfaction, organisational commitment and higher levels of voluntary turnover. Ill health is associated with higher absenteeism and lower productivity. Organisations should therefore consider the role of pay relative to other extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. Finally, employees with both a high level of job latitude and acquisitiveness were more likely to report work overload than employees with a low level of job latitude and acquisitiveness. The present study therefore suggests that it is important to examine the interplay between aspects of an organisations employment system in order to understand the implications for employee well being.

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