

by **Mark Goodridge & Mike Thackray**

Bringing Life Back to Work

The current work buzz is all about Place, Time and Mind. The Place where we work - home, office or a hybrid of the two? Or maybe a second home, beach or park? Time - set times or flexitime? synchronous or asynchronous? And Mind - the health and well-being impacts of remote working, mental health, family health.

But with all this talk about Hybrid working, what about the job itself? And how do we manage, co-ordinate and control work out of sight of supervision and management?



Exercising Control

Conventional ideas of supervision and management are breaking down in the face of remote and hybrid working. So much of what we know about relating to and enabling our teams for high performance depends on work being completed at the same time and in the same place. Leaders have developed expectations of colleagues being present and assessing that they are 'putting in the time'. There is an expectation of being able to look over shoulders and see what people are doing, to witness how they relate to others and how they react when you give them instructions. Leaders also have expectations of informal interactions - to have a laugh, a moan, eat a sandwich together or give spontaneous praise and recognition.

Visual technology such as Zoom, Meet and Teams does a great job in overcoming many of the communication challenges and may even offer some advantages over face-to-face interactions, but their shortcomings in key areas are also becoming increasingly apparent.

Some of these shortcomings can be overcome by looking to the global corporations. They have great experience in managing dispersed, remote workforces across different places and times and have managed to achieve a high level of commitment to the virtual organisation. Specifically, we need to pay more attention to *what* we are asking people to do, and not just *where* and *when* they do it.

The Industrial Model of Job Design

Many jobs have evolved upon a now-outdated mode of supervision and management style. The design of work is still dominated by an industrial model: break down tasks into replicable activities, codify them in a process manual and assign people to do them. Where exceptions occur, then tasks get pushed up to a higher supervisory level for discretion to be exercised or a rigid algorithm applied. The problem is that such ideas of work design require an outdated form of supervision and leadership; the tasks themselves have little variety, meaning or intelligible purpose, so degrees of coercion, incentivisation and control have to be applied.

'Job design' has fallen out of favour as a key component of productivity and performance. It has been replaced by the ideas of process design and systems efficiency. Yet there are those who keep the concept of thoughtful job design alive. Robert Greene's "*Mastery*" (1) and Richard Sennet's "*The Craftsman*" (2) (in very different ways) build on the idea that *intrinsic motivation* comes from interesting and fulfilling work. We need to think about designing jobs around our new notions of time, place and mind.

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The 'What' and the 'How' of the Work

With an increasingly diverse and dispersed workforce we need to enable a stronger sense of self-motivation and self-drive, because we no longer have direct and immediate capability to supervise and control. Previous management fads, from quality of working life and quality circles to job enrichment and autonomous teams have faded, but at their heart is a vital message that is as relevant now as it has ever been - hierarchical power is no longer effective.

If our jobs do not offer a sense of worth and achievement, then cyber slacking, family distractions, or the appeal of the beach will become overwhelming. As conventional ideas of supervision break down, we need new ways of keeping our remote teams motivated and committed.



Job Characteristics and Motivation

One model (3) that has stood the test of time sets out five job characteristics that impact on three psychological states critical to engagement and motivation:

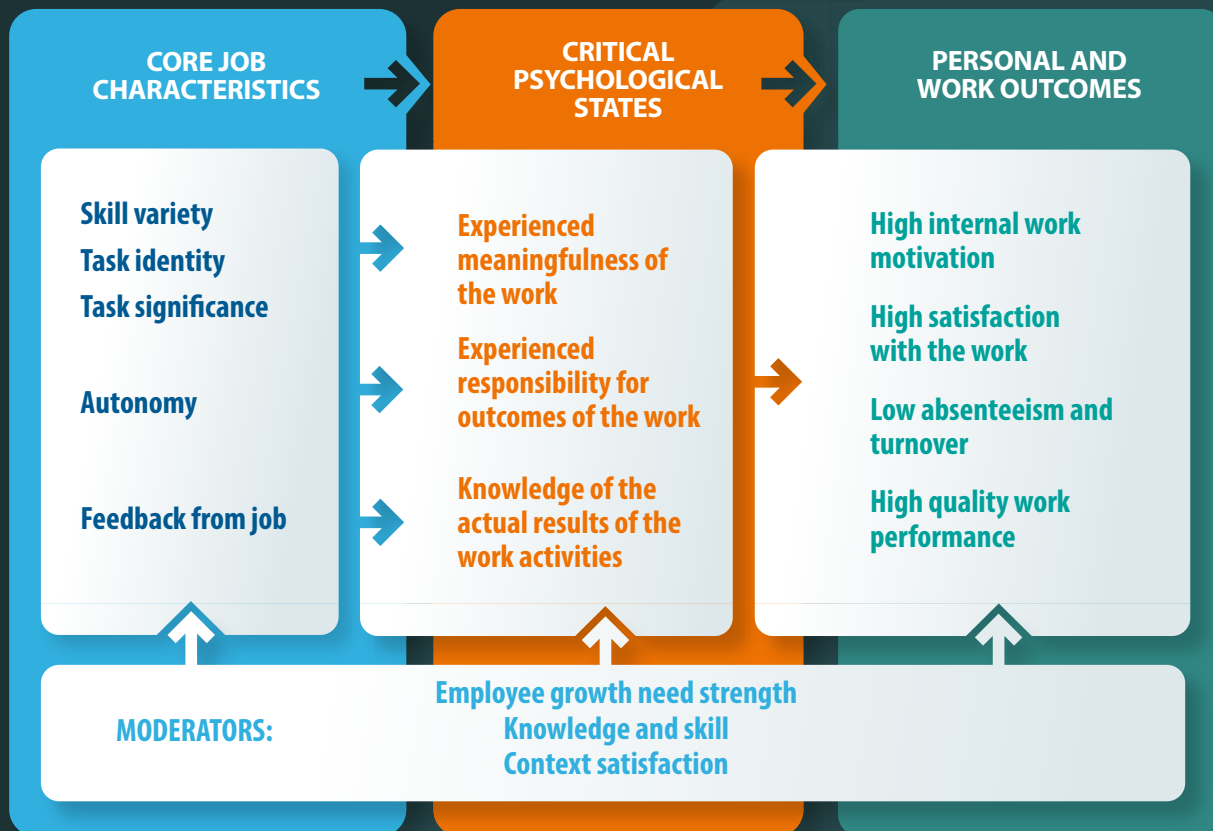


DIAGRAM 1: Job Characteristics Model, Hackman & Oldham (1975, updated 1980)

According to Hackman & Oldham, high engagement is related to experiencing three psychological states whilst working:

- 1. Meaningfulness of work** - namely that the work itself has meaning to you and does not occur just as a set of movements to be repeated. The idea that performing the work should be motivating in and of itself is fundamental to intrinsic motivation;
- 2. Responsibility** - that you have been given the opportunity to be a success or failure in your role because you have been given sufficient freedom to take action. And finally;
- 3. Knowledge of outcomes** - important not only to be able to make changes as you undertake the work, but also to promote the idea that the work, including performance data, is yours to own.

To achieve these positive psychological states there are five key characteristics of any role:

1. Skill Variety

There is often a tension in any multi-skilled team between efficiency and variety. Getting people to focus on a small aspect of the whole makes perfect sense when the team is under greatest pressure, but what is gained in terms of efficiency is often lost through engagement and motivation. Where people feel they are only using a narrow range of their talents, boredom can quickly set in, and important skills that may have taken years to learn go unused.

2. Task Identity

This is best explained by imagining the work of an old production line assembling cars. The 'scientific approach' would be to have each person located at a particular point and be responsible for one part of the car assembly. It seems easier, quicker and makes rational sense, but it is also very unrewarding as the worker never gets to see the end product rolling off the assembly line complete and ready to drive. Task identity is about being able to see that your role is part of a worthwhile task, with a tangible outcome.

3. Task Significance

The next critical job characteristic is in being able to identify the task as contributing to a wider purpose, to society or a group over and beyond the self. People will be far more motivated if they can see that they are contributing to something worthwhile, than if they believe the only thing they are creating is greater shareholder value. Task significance is about allowing people the chance to see and experience the impact of their roles, and how it has benefited others.

4. Autonomy

Autonomy is essentially about allowing the role holder to make decisions commensurate with experience and knowledge, and to deliver role outcomes without constant supervision or direction. The main enemy of autonomy is often fear of making mistakes, where decisions or tasks are removed from people who are skilled enough to do it. This is especially demotivating for experienced workers who by and large know what they are doing, and do it well.

5. Feedback

This might include performance measures, contact with end users and customers, customer satisfaction scores, to thoughts on how well people are working in line with organisational values. The point of feedback is simply to provide information to role holders so that they can decide themselves to make changes to the way they operate in order to deliver better outcomes.

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The most satisfying job in the world?

Long before I studied psychology, I worked a summer job as a greenkeeper at a local golf course. When I was first introduced to the model of job satisfaction it became clear why I had found this one of the most rewarding jobs I'd ever had, as it ticked all five of the characteristics set out above.

The role was varied, and involved activities from cutting grass, building walls and planting trees (Skill Variety). Each task had a clear outcome, and once it had been completed you could see the fruits of your labour (Task Identity). Our small team was allowed to decide the order and manner in which we completed the various tasks with relatively little outside interference, as long as we delivered good outcomes (Autonomy). And finally, the feedback provided on the task was immediate. If you veered off course, you could literally see it in the lines on the grass and didn't need a more senior supervisor to provide you with a progress report (Knowledge of Outcomes).

Some roles lend themselves more easily to certain aspects of the model than others, but a tweak in one or two of these areas can make a big difference to the way your team feel about the work they undertake.



It is important to remember that being engaged does not correlate perfectly with being satisfied... It is quite possible to be satisfied with your working conditions, pay, environment and general working life *without* being particularly engaged in the work of the organisation itself. Whilst this will result in a fairly pleasant place to work, it will not necessarily result in people driven to make a difference and deliver for the sake of the organisation.

Neither does having fully engaged employees necessarily result in people who are easier to manage. *Caring* about the business of the organisation means that people are far more likely to challenge decisions that they believe go against what it is trying to achieve. Far from being a problem, having a team of people who care and are willing to ask questions is exactly what high performing organisations need in order to make better decisions.

The Solutions:

The simple answer to those concerned about how much effort is being applied in the absence of constant supervision is not to replicate it virtually, but to make the role itself engaging and rewarding enough to maintain people's interest. The lure of other activities vying for attention lessens if the job itself is enough to engage.

Whilst building engagement is at the forefront of most forward looking people teams – many seem to focus on activities on the periphery of people's roles, and fewer and fewer on building the sort of real engagement that comes from the core of the role itself.

By applying techniques such as the job characteristics model, OE Cam can help you to achieve that purpose-driven organisation and build higher performance through higher engagement.

Let's revisit the fundamental principles of Job Design and put the life back into work...



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Mark is Chairman at OE Cam and has built a reputation for his effective facilitation and development of Boards of Directors in both the public and private sectors. This has taken him to several countries and across a wide spectrum of organisations. His incisive and clear thinking, combined with his application of robust methods and tools, provides his clients with meaningful outcomes that add real value to them as individuals, as a Board and as a business. Mark's focus is on better business outcomes, on supporting while challenging Board effectiveness, on enabling greater personal and collective effectiveness.

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1. "Mastery" by Robert Green (2012) Profile Books (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Mastery-Robert-Greene-Collection/dp/178125091X>)

2. "The Craftsman" by Richard Sennett (2009) Penguin Books

(https://www.amazon.co.uk/Craftsman-Richard-Sennett/dp/0141022094/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=The+craftsman+sennett&qid=1632397829&s=books&sr=1-1)

3. Job Characteristics Model by Professor Richard Hackman & Professor Greg Oldham (1975) https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Job_characteristic_theory