The contribution of job design to workforce participation and productivity

"An intergenerational and culturally diverse workforce requires a new way of thinking in job design opportunities that are 'meaningful' to the worker."

INTRODUCTION

Intense global competition, changing social and demographic trends, advances in technology; the emergence of new economies and the rise of virtual corporations not to mention changes to employment legislation - all create endless opportunities and great challenges for Australian businesses.

Battled with an ageing population and shrinking workforce, organisations are doing more with less and as a result, focus is moving away from traditional human resources processes to more sophisticated organisational design strategies and approaches.

The Australian Government's recent release of the 2015 Intergenerational Report provides insight into such challenges facing Australia. However, ***driving higher levels of prosperity through economic growth, will also require increasing participation and productivity through opportunities that are 'meaningful' for the worker.*** Older Australians and women to enter or re-enter and stay in work requires a new way of thinking.

Australia's ageing population and shrinking workforce is influencing current policy discussions of higher immigration rates. IBISworld reports that in 2014-15, migration intake is expected to reach 203,800 people, 90% above that seen in 1999-2000. Multiculturalism introduces great opportunities and diversity of thought for organisations who are prepared to embrace the many benefits associated with a culturally diverse workforce. Designing meaningful jobs that take into consideration the varying skill levels and cultural differences won't be an add-on but a major competitive advantage that is likely to underpin many workforce initiatives.

The traditional notion of going to 'the office' is also shifting. The flexibility created with advancing technology means most jobs can be performed anywhere. We are therefore likely to see increases in the hours worked leading to greater productivity and the emergence of virtual organisations or hybrids of such as meaningful ways of designing jobs.

In light of these overwhelming challenges, we review the contribution of job design to particular organisational challenges such as attracting, retaining and motivating talent in the context of an ageing, intergenerational and culturally diverse workforce.

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Referred to as the 'building blocks[1] which underpin critical human recourse processes and functions such as recruitment, selection, training and development, performance management, reward and workplace relations, job design approaches are seen as a critical human resource systematic practice that aids organisations in achieving higher performance outcomes.

There have been many documented[2] approaches to job design with overwhelming support that such processes positively adds value to an organisations' performance.
As the '…..process of identifying the tasks, responsibilities and context of a role, and the knowledge, skills and abilities required to fill the position'[3], job analysis and design sets the framework necessary to attract, retain and motivate talent. The process is seen as the first steps for organisations in building effective workforces and organisational capability, participation and productivity.

Analysing and defining a job assists in the attraction and selection process. It sets the parameters in which to design specifications of the role in the advertisement and assists in accurately attracting the right candidates with the right skill set. Once the right candidate is appointed, the job description clearly outlines what the expectations of the role will be and how they will be performed and to some extent, managed.

The process serves as the basis of key HRM decisions across a number of interrelated areas (which directly impact attraction, retention and motivation of employees, such as training and development, performance appraisal, compensation and health and safety[4]). There is enough supporting literature to expect a positive impact of job design on organisational performance[5].

Due to the complex and turbulent global environment, ***the need to analyse jobs beyond the standard approaches of job-related data (task responsibilities, knowledge, skills and abilities, working conditions etc) has been a key focus for HR professionals.*** The competency-focused approach (critical incident approach) places greater emphasis on motivation, adaptability, teamwork orientation and other similar characteristics of employees considered essential for successful job performance.

This approach is not new to many HR professionals, the issue now becomes a means of taking this approach to the next level and factoring in the many challenges associated with an ageing and shrinking workforce. What is the compromise between skill, knowledge and competency when organisations need to factor in the varying levels of skill and knowledge associated with an intergenerational and culturally diverse workforce?

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[1] De Cieri et al. 2008; Nandervic, Compton and Baird 2008
[2] Wilhelm, 1990; Pearn and Kandola, 1993; Gatewood and Field, 1990; Nankervis, Compton & Baird, 2008; De Cieri et al.,2008
[3] AHRI Research Staff; 2000
[4] Cascio, 1998
[5] Siddique, 2004

The competency-focused approach to job design places greater emphasis on motivation, equally, incorrect analysis and design of jobs can impact on employee retention and motivation. Contributing to the misalignment between business strategy and HR, inaccurate data gathering and classification of jobs has the potential to leave employees confused about the purpose of their role and the contribution they make to the overall success of the organisation.

In majority of cases, employees accept a position with an organisation based on the job description. Clearly then, if jobs are inaccurately designed and misrepresented, they very quickly impact motivation levels. Employees begin to develop trust issues with the employer and their desire to remain with the organisation is greatly reduced. The desire to therefore participate and contribute productively is no longer meaningful. As our population ages the ability to keep older works engaged they must first feel as though they are contributing to an organisations performance in a meaningful way. A misrepresentation of jobs and equally work environments that do not value diversity (age, gender, ethnicity, culture) is a sure way of reducing participation and productivity.

Organisational commitment and job satisfaction are two factors of employee turnover and absenteeism. This is strongly influenced by: increased employee participation in the decision making process; the degree in which employees are supported by their manager and immediate co-workers; job satisfaction and the clarity of what their job entails and what performance outcomes are expected of them.

Proven approaches to increasing participation and productivity levels include increasing the complexity of jobs through such interventions as job enlargement, job enrichment and the construction of jobs around socio-technical systems[6]. ***Additionally, job rotation and self-managed work teams continue to improve the quality of work life and work-family balance. Such approaches create meaningful ways in engaging older workers and women returning to work.***

Such approaches to job design illustrate an important insight[7]; that the nature of work has a substantial impact on an employee's performance and attitude. Although there is considerable job enrichment through the adoption of these approaches, they also present disadvantages. Disadvantages include increased training time; lower utilisation levels; greater likelihood of error and greater chance of mental overload and stress. With an ageing workforce and the projected decline in participation rates, it will become increasingly difficult to minimise the risk associated with such approaches and organisations will continue to produce more with less employees. Advances in technology and intra organisational social platforms, can however assist in minimising such risks by streamlining job processes for smarter, efficient means of producing outcomes.

Multiculturalism: In 2014-15, migration intake is expected to reach 203,800 people. This is 90% above that seen in 1999-2000. ***The migration intake is expected to rise over the next five years, boosting growth in the size of the working age population.*** Multiculturalism introduces great opportunities and diversity of thought for organisations who are prepared to embrace the many benefits associated with a culturally diverse workforce. ***Designing meaningful jobs that take into***

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[6] Griffin and McMahan 1993; Dunphy 1987
[7] Wallage 1991

consideration the varying skill levels and cultural differences won't be an add-on but a major competitive advantage that is likely to underpin many workforce initiatives. As many benefits as this introduces, the challenges will continue. Therefore introducing training and development opportunities and fostering an 'inclusive' and 'supportive' environment with the necessary business support systems in place will ensure adequate transition.

Creating flexible opportunities in the way jobs are designed and importantly the way work is conducted through new and improved workplace design is going to be essential in increasing productivity and participation for older Australians and women re-entering the workforce. The traditional notion of going to 'the office' is also shifting. The flexibility created with advancing technology means most jobs can be performed anywhere. Therefore the design of jobs need to take these changing factors into consideration as the need for new methods of performing work and bringing teams together (intergenerational and multicultural) changes.

Managing knowledge: Over the years, particularly in the last decade, knowledge management has become a critical focal point for organisations desperate to maintain market share. This phenomenon is not only exasperated by the fact that our population is ageing, but as the war for talent intensifies a greater importance is placed on retaining top talent and holding onto important knowledge as employees retire and leave the organisation. Knowledge is seen as a catalyst for innovative ways in servicing customers and increasing participation and productivity.

Creating flexible retention strategies to hold onto older workers is top on the HR agenda, however finding ways to identifying, capture and share that knowledge would mean the difference between increased organisation capabilities and declining organisation capability with regards to business continuity and productivity.

As important as managing intellectual capital is in today's complex economy, the attraction, retention and motivation of knowledge workers is where organisations can truly experience innovation, participation and competitive advantage. *Keeping knowledge workers motivated requires unique methods of job design. This will certainly be the case for Australia's younger generation as new entrance to the workforce.* Jobs for knowledge workers are designed taking into consideration[8]:

- that the nature of tasks does not program the worker
- they are self-managing with greater autonomy and responsibility
- responsibility for innovation
- are offered ongoing development and learning opportunities
- they are managed based on quality derived rather than quantity
- they must be considered as assets not costs

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[8] De Ciere et. Al 2008

CONCLUSION

With the advances in technology and the emergence of new economies we need to challenge the way we think about jobs, how they are designed and organised in order to address the challenges associated with an intergenerational and diverse workforce.

There is supporting evidence that flexible approaches to job design contribute to an organisations' ability to build capability, increase participation and productivity. There is also supporting evidence that flexible approaches to job design addresses prevailing issues such as absenteeism, turnover and diversity.

As the 'building blocks' of all HR functions, organisations can select a variety of job design approaches to best suit the needs of their organisation and the markets in which they compete. It creates the foundation for establishing appropriate policies and procedures in the attraction and selection of highly effective workforces in a continuously changing local and global economy.

Looking beyond the existing boundaries of work and creating meaningful jobs that engage and increase participation and productivity requires innovation and a new way of working. It will require great leadership in organising businesses and collaboration across and between non competing industries in the sharing of resources so that new ideas and approaches are created which fosters the endless opportunities associated with a diverse and intergenerational workforce.

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