

# **Working hard or hardly working?**

## **Researcher studies effects of job simplification on employee productivity**

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Outsourcing. Offshoring. Compartmentalizing. More than corporate buzzwords, these trends are redefining the nature of work for millions of Americans, as well as their counterparts all over the world. But what are the ramifications of these trends for the people who actually do the work?

That's a question that Stephen E. Humphrey, an assistant professor of management at Florida State University, poses in a new study published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*. Titled "Integrating Motivational, Social, and Contextual Work Design Features: A Meta-Analytic Summary and Theoretical Extension of the Work Design Literature," the study indicates that various efforts to increase efficiency by simplifying workers' job responsibilities may in fact be leading to lower employee job satisfaction and productivity over time.

"In a globally competitive marketplace, companies are trying to introduce efficiencies wherever they can to improve their financial performance for stockholders," Humphrey said. "One way they do that is by designing, or redesigning, jobs to make them more narrowly focused on specific tasks. However, while this may improve productivity in the short term, it appears to create a new set of problems in the longer term."

Humphrey collaborated on the study with Frederick P. Morgeson, a professor of management at Michigan State University, and Jennifer D.

Nahrgang, a doctoral student at Michigan State. In conducting their study, the three summarized the results of more than 40 years of earlier research, comprising 259 studies and almost 220,000 workers, to analyze the effects of work design on employee attitudes and productivity. They noted several important findings. Among them:

- Simplifying tasks generally led to lower performance ratings and worker satisfaction.
- Having more autonomy on the job was related to better performance, higher satisfaction, and lower feelings of exhaustion.
- Having a socially supportive workplace was related to greater job satisfaction, lower feelings of exhaustion, and strongly reduced the likelihood of wanting to leave the job.
- People who work interdependently with others have better performance ratings, lower stress, lower turnover intentions, and greater work and organizational satisfaction.
- Receiving frequent feedback from others increased job satisfaction, reduced stress and turnover intentions, and increased performance.

“The results of this research clearly show that organizations which focus on providing job flexibility, opportunities for social interaction and performance feedback can produce highly performing, highly satisfied workers who have low levels of stress, anxiety and burnout, and who are uninterested in searching for ‘greener pastures,’” Humphrey said.

“However, organizations that move toward the simplification and independent completion of work will find that workers will be dissatisfied with their work and will perform at a lower level over time, with higher levels of stress.”

Unfortunately, that seems to be the direction that workplace design is headed.

“We’re seeing many job functions that American workers used to do --

computer programming, data entry and call center operations, for example -- being sent overseas or contracted out to other U.S. companies that specialize in those areas. The employees who used to perform these tasks often find themselves either out of a job or in one that is less challenging and less fulfilling.”

For corporate America, the costs of a demoralized work force, measured in decreased productivity and increased turnover, may offset many of the cost savings that they had been hoping to achieve, Humphrey added.

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