

Freedom's just another word for employee satisfaction

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Workers who feel they have autonomy – that they are free to make choices in the workplace and be accountable for them – are happier and more productive according to an extensive research literature review. Yet there's no universal cross-cultural definition of autonomy.

What people from one culture perceive as [workplace](#) freedom, those from another may view as simple disorganization. This is one of the conclusions of a chapter featured in a new book on workplace autonomy, *Human Autonomy in Cross-Cultural Context: Perspectives on the Psychology of Agency, Freedom, and Well-Being* (Springer), that's coauthored by professors Marylène Gagné and Devasheesh Bhawe from Concordia's John Molson School of Business.

"Autonomy is important in every culture," says Gagné, about her chapter entitled, *Autonomy in the Workplace: An Essential Ingredient to Employee Engagement and Well-Being in Every Culture?*

"The perception of autonomy has very positive effects on workers," she continues. "However, managers can't simply export North American methods of granting autonomy anywhere and expect them to work. Even in Canada, approaches to giving workers more autonomy need to be constantly rethought as the country becomes more multicultural. People don't always react the same way to management initiatives as they did in the past."

No single definition of autonomy

Autonomy can take many different forms. Organizations may let employees set their own schedules, choose how to do their work or even elect to work from home. No matter how autonomy is defined, when people feel they have latitude the results are impressive. Potential benefits include greater employee commitment, better performance, improved productivity and lower turnover.

"Autonomy is especially likely to lead to better productivity when the work is complex or requires more creativity," says Gagné. "In a very routine job, autonomy doesn't have much impact on productivity, but it can still increase satisfaction, which leads to other positive outcomes. When management makes decisions about how to organize work, they should always think about the effect on people's autonomy."

Paradoxically, some employers are now actually reducing workers' autonomy by monitoring behaviour on workplace computers, or even on the phone or in the car. It's another reason, says Gagné, why cartoons like Dilbert are so popular. "They strike a responsive chord in many people because they show what the work environment has become for some individuals," she says.

More research needed on workplace evolution

With the workplace constantly evolving and globalization increasingly important, cross-cultural research into workplace [autonomy](#) is more important than ever. Until recently, most management research was conducted in North America. As a result, managers in other countries have little to guide them as they develop techniques that work in their own cultural context.

To help address this lack, Gagné is now studying leadership behavior in several countries including China and Italy.

"We're trying to see how leadership behaviors affect employee motivation, and if the same behaviors in different countries have the same effect," says Gagné. "Sometimes, they do not. For example, in some cultures, bosses can't ask the opinion of subordinates, because it makes them appear weak. So managers in these environments have to find other ways to make people feel autonomous. There is no simple recipe."

Provided by Concordia University

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