

The general link between worker happiness and productivity challenged

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Managers encouraging employees to be more proactive and flexible do make gains in performance and productivity. But this is at the expense of employee job satisfaction, according to the latest research in the journal *Human Relations*, owned by The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and published by SAGE. Increased expectations from their employers may lead employees to perceive a less secure and more demanding work environment.

Researchers led by Stephen Wood, from the University of Leicester, set out to test a widely held [assumption](#) - that direct employee involvement methods can lead to high levels of worker job satisfaction, which in turn lead to a better performing organization. Armed with data from the UK's Workplace [Employment Relations](#) Survey 2004 survey, the researchers used [statistical methods](#) to look at in the effects of two distinct management models: enriched job design and high involvement management (HIM).

[Statistical analysis](#) of data from 14,127 employees and 1,177 workplaces shows that HIM is directly and positively related to labour productivity, financial performance, and quality, but not to [absenteeism](#). The researchers also found a direct relationship between HIM and job satisfaction and [anxiety](#) – but surprisingly, it was a negative: HIM may be a source of dissatisfaction with the job and of anxiety. In fact, the negative effect of HIM on job satisfaction depresses its overall positive effects on organizational performance.

The enriched job design approach to management also had a positive relationship with labour productivity, [financial performance](#) and quality but this was positively related to job satisfaction, though not workplace anxiety. Moreover, the job satisfaction explains how the enriched job design affects performance.

The enriched job design approach offers employees discretion, variety and high levels of responsibility; while the HIM model encourages wider organizational involvement such as team working, idea-capturing schemes or functional flexibility (the ability to take on aspects of others' roles). Enriched job design concentrates on the employee's core job, while HIM is about organizational involvement, which entails workers participating in decision-making beyond the narrow confines of the job.

HIM originated in the 1990s, and a lot of research has followed on how this approach improves performance. However, to date most of this research has focused on the outcomes for organizations, with little attention to the effect on employees' satisfaction and well-being.

According to the authors, HIM entails a qualitative change in demands, not a simple quantitative change in effort levels. It may be that management's approach toward encouraging employees to be proactive and flexible creates anxieties and dissatisfaction. Increased expectations associated with involvement may actually make employees more stressed. In enriched job design, individuals have greater responsibility and autonomy, possibly offering more choices and pleasurable experiences that contrast with feelings evoked by a pressured environment.

"Treating enriched job design and HIM as discrete has certainly been vindicated by our findings, as has taking a multi-dimensional approach to well-being," Wood says. "The study offers further grounds for encouraging policy makers and managers to put job quality high on their

agendas."

Workplace data were collected by face-to-face interview with a manager in each workplace, and through a survey of employees.

More information: Enriched job design, high involvement management and organizational performance: The mediating roles of job satisfaction and well-being by Stephen Wood, Marc van Veldhoven, Marcel Croon and Lilian M de Menezes is published today, January 20th in *Human Relations*. hum.sagepub.com/

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