

Should companies let employees choose their tasks?

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Letting employees select their own tasks is a popular means of increasing work satisfaction. However, managers should also consider the nature of the task and the employees' specialization before letting them select their own, suggests a new study led by UC Riverside and published in *Organization Science*.

Traditionally, managers allocate tasks to employees who are expected to produce a defined output. As organizations must increasingly respond to markets and opportunities quickly and decisively, they have begun to experiment with letting employees choose their own tasks. There is to

date little hard data, however, to help managers determine the best task-allocation strategy to optimize worker productivity and satisfaction, and the organization's success.

Marlo Raveendran, an assistant professor of management in UC Riverside's School of Business and the A. Gary Anderson Graduate School of Management, led an international team of researchers who studied when and why self-selection may outperform allocation of work by a manager within an organization. They found that manager-led allocation tends to perform better than self-selection when employees have a broad skill range, tasks are highly interdependent, and coordination requirements are high. Self-selection tends to perform better than managerial allocation when employees are highly specialized, tasks are fairly independent and when new workers join a firm or project over time.

"We tend to think of the upside of self-selection as providing greater motivation for employees and better information on their own skills," Raveendran said. "However, we found that even in the absence of motivational and informational considerations, self-selection can outperform managerial allocation depending on the employees' degree of specialization and the nature of work."

The researchers developed an agent-based model to see whether self-selection may have performance benefits over managerial allocation even in the absence of heightened job satisfaction. The model showed the skill-to-task fit tends to be higher under self-selection than under managerial allocation, but at the cost of over- and under-staffing of tasks. In self-selection, employees often pick their tasks without considering other employees' skills, while managers may give away a task to an [employee](#) today for which a better-skilled employee may come along later.

The trade-off between self-selection and managerial allocation rests on a trade-off between interpersonal coordination failure under self-selection and intertemporal coordination failure under managerial allocation. This trade-off exists in addition to motivational and skill or information advantages that usually benefit self-selection.

"We provide a deeper understanding of the mechanism underlying the relative performance differences between self-selection and managerial allocation of employees to tasks that goes well beyond the expected motivational and informational advantages that intuitively characterize self-selection," Raveendran said. "The results of our analysis offer a window into the conditions under which each form of intraorganizational division of labor may have relative advantages."

The research adds rigor to the question of when to use self-selection as a form of [task](#) allocation within organizations. Managerial allocation has many coordination advantages, but self-selection likely outperforms it under a confluence of specific conditions: When employees are very skilled but at only a narrow range of tasks, tasks are independent, and employee availability is unforeseeable.

The researchers hope these results can be used to inform, if not guide, managerial thinking on when and how to use self-selection as an allocation process within the firm.

Raveendran was joined in the research by Phanish Puranam of INSEAD in Singapore and Massimo Warglien at Ca'Foscari University of Venice in Italy. The paper, "Division of labor through self-selection," is published in *Organization Science*.

More information: Marlo Raveendran et al. Division of Labor Through Self-Selection, *Organization Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1287/orsc.2021.1449](https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2021.1449)

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