Hackman and Oldham Job Characteristics Model

The Job Characteristics Model was proposed by Richard Hackman and Greg Oldham in the 1970s, with a key paper published in 1976. It says that the design of a job itself can motivate people, and not only pay or supervision. Five core job characteristics create three psychological states: work that feels meaningful, a feeling of responsibility and knowledge of results. When these states are present, the model predicts higher motivation, better quality of work and greater satisfaction. We look at the five characteristics one by one.

1. Skill Variety

Skill variety is the degree to which a job requires a range of different skills and activities. A job that uses several talents feels more interesting than one that repeats a single movement. It is not about adding random extra tasks, but about using more of what people can do.

Example: A restaurant cook who only chops vegetables all day gets bored. Asking whether the job uses several skills, the manager adds menu planning and a weekly tasting, and the cook becomes interested again.

At work: Lina leads a claims team in which each person only types data. She asks whether the job uses several skills, and adds customer calls and simple analysis to each role. The team becomes more interested.

2. Task Identity

Task identity is the degree to which a job lets someone complete a whole and identifiable piece of work from beginning to end. Doing one visible piece of work, instead of a small fragment, gives a clear sense of ownership.

Example: A carpenter who builds a whole chair can see the finished result, while a worker who only sands one part never does. Asking whether someone can see a whole piece of work, the workshop lets each worker build a complete chair.

At work: In the team that Lina leads, one person only registers claims and another only closes them. She asks whether someone can see a whole piece of work, and gives each handler a claim from the first call to the final payment. The handlers feel ownership of their claims.

3. Task Significance

Task significance is the degree to which a job affects the lives or work of other people, inside or outside the organisation. People tend to work harder when they see that their effort matters to someone. Together, skill variety, task identity and task significance shape the first psychological state: experienced meaningfulness of the work.

Example: A hospital cleaner who knows that clean rooms protect patients sees the work differently. Asking whether the job matters to others, the supervisor introduces the cleaners to the nurses, and the work feels more important.

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At work: Lina asks whether the job matters to others and invites a customer to explain how a quick payment helped after an accident. The team sees the human result of its work.

4. Autonomy

Autonomy is the degree of freedom, independence and discretion that a job gives in scheduling the work and deciding how to do it. It produces the second psychological state: experienced responsibility for the outcomes of the work. Autonomy does not mean a lack of guidance, because limits and goals remain clear.

Example: A teacher who may choose how to explain a lesson feels more responsible for the class results. Asking who decides how the work is done, the school gives the teacher this choice within clear goals.

At work: Lina asks who decides how the work is done, and lets handlers organise their own day as long as deadlines are met. They take more responsibility for solving problems.

5. Feedback from the Job

Feedback from the job is the degree to which doing the work itself gives clear information about how well it is going. It produces the third psychological state: knowledge of the results. This is different from comments by a manager, because the information comes from the work itself. Without it, people cannot tell whether their effort works.

Example: A baker sees right away whether the bread has risen well. In a shop with no oven window, asking whether the work itself shows how we are doing leads to a glass door, so the result becomes visible.

At work: Lina asks whether the work itself shows how we are doing, and shows each handler the share of claims closed without errors. The handlers see their results every day and correct small mistakes quickly.

Conclusion

In summary, the Job Characteristics Model by Hackman and Oldham shows that job design can motivate people. Skill variety, task identity and task significance create meaningful work. Autonomy creates responsibility, and feedback gives knowledge of results. Together these states tend to support motivation, quality and satisfaction. Before trying to change a person, we can first look at the design of the job.

Sources

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