

Job Design from an Alternative Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore a theoretical aspect of job design in a way that departs from the dominant paradigm. The functionalist perspective is regarded as the dominant paradigm in the study of organizations (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Scientists working within the functionalist framework, in their effort to predict and control, rely on the scientific method for analysis and explanation of phenomenon. An alternative manner of analysis may help researchers gain a better understanding of job design from the standpoint of the participant. One alternative way to look at job design is from the interpretivist perspective that constitutes the focus of this paper. First, job design is defined from the functionalist perspective. Next we will turn to the interpretivist perspective for suggestions on analysis of job design. The paper then includes theorization about job design from the interpretivist perspective. Following the theorization are excerpts from journal articles that represent suggestions for analysis of job design from the interpretivist perspective.

Key Words: Job design, analysis, interpretivist, functionalist



Introduction

Job Design in the Functionalist Paradigm

Job design is defined as “the application of motivational theories to the structure of work for improving productivity and satisfaction” (Daft, 1994: 530). Job design has also been defined as “the process by which managers decide individual job tasks and authority” (Gibson, Ivancevich & Donnelly, 1994: 505). The meaning derived from these definitions refers to job design as something that is used and decided upon by managers of the organization. For purposes of this paper we will look at how researchers study job design and how organizations have used job design analysis.

Researchers analyzing job design from the functionalist perspective rely on gathering information through instruments or tools such as the Job Diagnostic Survey (Hackman & Oldham, 1975) and the Multimethod Job Design Questionnaire (Campion & Thayer, 1985). The results obtained depend on quantifying the responses from workers prompted by the JDS and JFDQ instruments. The tools used to analyze job design attempt to tap the worker’s outlook on his or her job through a method couched in the scientific method. It is interesting that these tools come from long established beliefs about the instrumentality of organizations. Morgan (1997: 15) states that because of the Industrial Revolution, it’s the organization’s dependence on tools and machines that required organizations to adapt to the needs of the machines. Thus the information from these tools that was obtained from workers is systematically calculated to produce a “score” which is then used to make predictions about outcomes. Such outcomes generated are employee motivation and satisfaction that are important to the organization. The management or dominant coalition of an organization places a high level of meaning to these outcomes because such phenomena as motivation and satisfaction are assumed to influence organizational performance.

It is the organization’s performance that drives management or the dominant coalition to place emphasis on the information received from job design analysis. Management is interested in the motivation and satisfaction of the workers because the workers’ performance is the means by which organizational goals can be achieved. The performance of the organization may also ultimately reflect on management’s ability to effectively manage employees and maintain smooth operations of the organization. So to the extent that management can utilize information that may affect the organization’s performance, job design analysis plays an important role in constructing an essential part of that information.

Job Design from an Interpretivist’s Perspective

The interpretivist’s perspective strives to obtain understanding about how an individual comes to have their knowledge. The interpretivist paradigm’s history stems from the German idealist tradition maintaining that reality is found in the spirit or idea rather than in the data of sense perception (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

The interpretivist researcher, however, much more than the functionalist researcher concentrates on a framework centering on the participants and how the participants make sense of the world around them. Another characteristic of the

interpretivist researcher that deviates from the functionalist framework is the relationship between the researcher and the participants. The interpretivist opposes the idea of an objective functionalist researcher and holds that the researcher cannot detach himself totally from his work (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The alternative perspectives ‘emphasize that science is basically a process of interaction, or better still engagement’ (Morgan, 1983: 13). The interpretivist researcher should attempt to place himself as much as possible in the same world of the participants. The researcher’s ability to step into the participants’ point of view allows a focus on the participant’s perspective. Again, it is the participants’ way of understanding and way of gaining knowledge that comprises the focus of the interpretivist’s work.

We will look at the interpretivist framework for analyzing job design from each of the four dimensions that build the assumptions of approaches to social science. The four dimensions of ontology, epistemology, human nature and methodology represent ways in which researchers think about the sociological landscape and construct ways to conduct their research (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). When a researcher accepts the assumptions of a paradigm and that paradigm’s view of the world, the researcher then accepts the research methodology accompanying the paradigm. Each assumption has a polar attribute that represents an objective and subjective nature or view of the world. The four assumptions represent a continuum with the polar views representing extremes and are categorized as subjectivist and objectivist (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The subjectivist view will correspond with the interpretivist perspective and the objectivist perspective will correspond with the functionalist perspective. For purposes of this paper, the polar extremes will be emphasized for juxtaposing the views.

Ontology

Ontology captures the assumptions of the basic essence of the phenomena being studied. The essence of the phenomena pertains to whether it is a hard, concrete reality referred to as realism which is contrasted to the view that the phenomena lies within the consciousness of the participant (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). From the interpretivist’s point of view the essence of phenomena is socially constructed, named by the participants and is referred to as nominalism. Job design would be viewed from the interpretivist’s perspective as being real only in the mind of the participant. In other words, job design is understood from the way that the worker has come to know his job. The design of the job is constructed through the participant’s perspective. This constructed reality by the participant stands in sharp contrast to the functionalist perspective which views the job design as a reality that exists outside the perspective of the participant. The functionalist views the job design as the set of written descriptions of actions, methods and techniques that compose the requirements of a particular job. This functionalist perspective is underscored by the definition of job design referred to earlier which described job design as a procedure used by managers (Gibson, et al., 1994).

Epistemology

Epistemology from the subjectivist’s and interpretivist’s standpoint is based on antipositivism, which means that knowledge is built from one’s experiences and is not

analyzed for purposes of generalizing to overall encompassing laws (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Epistemology deals with how one comes to know and understand their own world. The assumption regarding epistemology from an interpretivist's perspective would be that knowledge is highly individualized. One's knowledge about job design then cannot simply be packaged, shipped and transferred to another. The participant has come to know his or her job through their own unique experiences. The uniqueness makes chances for replication by another individual unlikely so that the no two people will know the job in the same way. The functionalist would assume that the job design stands on its own as a phenomenon without being enacted upon by a participant. Functionalists regard job design as predictable, measurable and can be analyzed through positivism. The functionalist assumes that job design can be known and understood removed from the individual. For example, the knowledge can be transferred in complete form from one person to another person through the use of written procedures.

Human Nature

Human nature portrays the way in which individuals behave in their world. The extreme views are voluntaristic and deterministic from a subjective and objectivist viewpoint respectively (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). The voluntaristic view suggests that individuals are free to act in whatever way they wish in any situation. The deterministic view holds that people are constrained by the social situations of every day life and thus are not free to act. The totally voluntaristic or deterministic view of job design is somewhat difficult to imagine. Job design as phenomena from the organization's perspective draws a picture of how the individuals should go about accomplishing their tasks which implies the worker is constrained by the job design. The voluntaristic extreme perspective, however, would emphasize that the person has chosen to accept the job and chooses each day to either do or not do the tasks of the job.

Methodology

As briefly stated before in this paper, when a researcher adopts a particular paradigm, he or she also adopts a research method that carries with it assumptions about the phenomena being investigated. The functionalist paradigm relies heavily on the scientific method or nomothetic approach and its "recipe" for establishing reliability and validity so that the laws generated may be used to predict and control the phenomena.

The interpretivist paradigm reflects the scientific method that emphasizes predicting and controlling phenomena. The interpretivist's perspective focuses on understanding the "how" of the individual's understanding. Thus the researcher attempts to gather information through the perspective of the participant. The ideographic method relies on information that is obtained from the participants that give detail on their background and their history (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). A research approach is provided through ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology is the study of everyday actions of an individual and offers a way researcher can study how the person comes to understand their world through routine events. Ethnomethodology gives to "the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded extraordinary events" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979: 247). The information gathered through an interpretivist's perspective

places a great deal of weight on the context surrounding the information. This means that the researcher takes into account the social environment of the participants that would influence the participants' experiences. In this case the researcher considers how the social influences contribute to the participant's construction of knowledge and understanding of his or her job.

An Interpretivist Theoretical View of Job Design

The interpretivist approach to job design analysis would gather information from the participant that would reflect that person's unique interpretation of the job. Information would not simply be calculated from answers given on a pre-fabricated questionnaire. Rather, information would be collected that told a detailed story of how the participant came to know how to do whatever it is that he or she does when doing their job for the organization. The information takes into consideration history of the participant that could explain mental evolutions or learning. The participant could also describe events that occurred which changed how the participant either behaved or thought in regards to their job. The interpretivist's method of gathering information about job design would be highly individualized and would focus on understanding how the participant came to know what he or she knows about their job.

The interpretivist's focus on understanding job design is different from the functionalist attempt to understand job design. The interpretivist seeks understanding not to educate management or the dominant coalition about probable outcomes of motivation and satisfaction that are assumed to be linked to organizational performance. The understanding that is gained from analyzing job design exists to communicate how people have come to understand their jobs. The importance of the research is to generate findings that explain how individuals make sense of their world. In regards to job design, the researcher aims to convey how the participants came to have knowledge of the portion of their world that is composed of by their job.

The interpretivist approach to researching job design begins and ends with the participant. The functionalist approach to job design analysis concentrates on the organization's definition of job design and why job design impacts organizational performance. Thus the interpretivist search for understanding of job design may benefit the participant more than the organization. This outcome of benefit to the participant solely for the participant's sake stands in contrast to the functionalist perspective. Benefit solely to the participant for their sake means that the information provided by the interpretivist's research is not to be used by management or the dominant coalition. The understanding and knowledge gained through the interpretivist's research exists for the participant and is not generated in the pursuit of organizational performance. The interpretivist perspective is concerned with the individually created reality of the world (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

Research Demonstrating an Alternative

As discussed at the beginning of this paper, the functionalist paradigm is dominant. Therefore the majority of research concerning job design has been generated

with a functionalist perspective. This section refers to journal articles that seem to be pointing in the direction of the interpretivist perspective.

Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) proposed that the social information processing perspective emphasizes context when analyzing job design. The social information processing model is offered as an alternative to generally accepted methods of studying individual attitudes and behavior related to job analysis. The social information processing perspective stems from the fundamental premise that individuals adapt attitudes, behavior and beliefs to their social context and ‘that one can learn most about individual behavior by studying the informational and social environment within which that behavior occurs’ (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978: 226). The point of the article is that the social information-processing model is offered as an alternative because studying the context of individuals adds insights into the understanding of the human behavior. It is interesting to note that Salancik and Pfeffer receive some criticism for not offering a research design recipe. Suggestions are made from a functionalist perspective to extend research that can empirically support the social information-processing model (Zalesny & Ford, 1990).

Another journal article, which discusses organizational analysis, describes a methodology incorporating multiple paradigm research (Hassard, 1991). In the case study work routines are studied through an interpretivist perspective. The researchers use ethnomethodology to understand how the worker makes sense of their work. A great deal of information was obtained by accompanying the worker throughout the day and asking the worker for explanation of his actions (Hassard, 1991). The thick data obtained by the researcher using ethnomethodology would not likely have been grasped from a questionnaire.

Most recently, (Clegg & Spencer, 2007) offer a new model that illustrates job design is circular in nature thereby emphasizing a process that takes into account the individualistic perspective of the employee holding the job. The authors contend that the dated Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) continues to be at the core of job design theory. However, the changing nature of jobs due to the global emergence of e-business and call centers cannot be ignored and therefore a new model is presented. Self-efficacy is the center of Clegg and Spencer’s (2007) model and its relationships to performance, perceived competence, trust, role adjustment, job content and knowledge provide a more complete and modern illustration of job design. Moreover, the authors are in agreement with Morgan’s (1997: 274) assessment that organizational behavior, like all things in nature, does not move in straight lines, but rather flows in “loops”.

Conclusion

This paper is written to communicate the way job design can be researched from an alternative perspective. The interpretivist’s perspective offers a methodology that provides a way to gather rich data about how individuals come to know their job. The information obtained by an interpretivist researcher is a contrast to the functionalist researcher who gathers data that can be used by the organization. Their interpretivist provides information formulated to communicate understanding of how people make sense of their world.

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