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# Job design research and theory: Past, present and future $^{\star}$

## Greg R. Oldham<sup>a,\*</sup>, Yitzhak Fried<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> A.B. Freeman School of Business, Tulane University, 7 McAlister Dr., New Orleans, LA 70118, United States <sup>b</sup> Rawls College of Business, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 79409, United States

### A R T I C L E I N F O

#### ABSTRACT

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Keywords: Job design Job crafting Job enrichment Job control Job characteristics This article reviews the research and theory that have focused on the design of jobs in organizations. We begin by summarizing some of the earliest work on this topic and then move to a discussion of several approaches to job design that attempted to address the shortcomings of this work. Next, we discuss several streams of contemporary research that have expanded the scope or deepened our understanding of job design. We conclude with a discussion of some future directions for research with an emphasis on job crafting, the effects of new work arrangements on the design of jobs, generational differences and reactions to job design, cultural differences and job design, and the impact of job design on organizational structures and employees' personal characteristics.

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#### 1. Introduction

Over the past fifty years, few topics in the organizational sciences have attracted as much attention as job design (Clegg & Spencer, 2007; Fried, Levi, & Laurence, 2008; Hofmans, Gelens, & Theuns, 2014). The purpose of this article is to review the ideas, research and theory that have addressed this topic and to lay out several new directions for future research. We begin by defining job design and discussing the early work that was instrumental in shaping the direction of research on the topic. We then move to a discussion of the state of current research and theory on job design. Finally, we conclude with some ideas for future research.

#### 2. Early work on job design

At its most basic level, job design refers to the actual structure of jobs that employees perform. Thus, job design focuses squarely on the work itself—on the tasks or activities that employees complete for their organizations on a daily basis. The earliest work on the topic of job design can be traced to the writings of Babbage (1835) and Smith (1850) who argued that if jobs were specialized and simplified to the greatest extent practicable, employees would be able to hone their job-related skills and devote their full attention to very few tasks. These enhanced skills and focused attention were then expected to contribute to improved employee efficiency at work.

Job simplification and standardization were also critical parts of the scientific management philosophy developed by Taylor (1911). Taylor's basic idea was to design entire work systems with standardized operations and highly simplified jobs so that employees had little personal discretion at work and any unnecessary motions could be eliminated (Lawrence, 2010). Also, in scientific management there was little opportunity for employee involvement in the design process itself—management designed jobs and imposed these designs on employees in a top-down fashion.

Scientific management had a substantial impact on the job design practices of many firms. For example, in a study of manufacturing firms in the 1950s, researchers showed that most jobs were designed consistent with scientific management principles (Davis, Canter, & Hoffman, 1955). During that same period, research also began to show that many employees did not care much for the simplified jobs they were required to perform in scientific management—so much so that they often behaved in ways that negated the efficiencies that had been built into the work. Such counter-productive behaviors included tardiness and productivity restriction (Walker & Guest, 1952).

In an effort to deal with these counter-productive behaviors, a number of scholars developed approaches to job design that would allow employees to achieve high levels of performance without incurring the costs associated with simplified work (see Davis & Taylor, 1972). Many of these approaches were based on Herzberg's (1966) Motivation-Hygiene Theory which posited that

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*E-mail addresses:* goldham@tulane.edu (G.R. Oldham), yitzhak.fried@ttu.edu (Y. Fried).