Linda Harmon and Veritas Oversite Corp: A Job Characteristics Case

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Abstract. Job design is an important aspect of job satisfaction and motivating employees to maximize productivity. This job design exercise examines important characteristics including skill variety, task identity, task significance, task autonomy, and job feedback, as found in the job characteristics model. Students often struggle to visualize the components of job characteristics theory in many organizational behavior classes. This exercise offers a short, anonymous, but biographical case that examines job characteristics theory in a practical setting. Teaching notes and recommended solutions to the discussion questions are provided as well as a final decision point for the focal entity, Linda Harmon at Veritas Oversite Corp. Additional guidelines are provided in the teaching notes for using the case in-class and for out-of-class assignments.

Keywords: job design, job satisfaction, job characteristics theory, case studies, organizational behavior, human resource management.

1. Learning Outcomes

After reading and analyzing this case, students should be able to:

1. Recognize the different characteristics and critical psychological states in the job characteristics model.

2. Examine specific examples of job characteristics found in an organizational setting.

3. Assess how the presence or absence of job characteristics affects psychological states and job satisfaction.

4. Recommend changes to job characteristics that would alleviate poor job satisfaction.

2. Introduction

The modeling and simulations office at Veritas Oversite Corp was looking for a project manager to manage interdisciplinary teams in developing software and systems for aircraft (the job description used in the position announcement can be found in Appendix A). Linda Harmon was recently downsized as a financial program manager, but she offered many of the certifications that Veritas was looking for. Linda had little experience with technology development, but she had managed several multi-million-dollar projects in her previous job (A copy of Linda's resume is found in Appendix B). She was eventually hired by Veritas after a short interview process that offered little insights into the job itself. Her offer letter was for $105,000 whereas her previous position had paid $130,000. While this new position at Veritas offered less pay than her previous position, she was attracted to the offer due to better benefits and a sense of job security. Veritas has a long history of steady growth, better retirement options, and many employees stay there for the duration of their career.

Linda considers herself to have mostly external motivation towards work and is motivated on the personal side by providing for her family and paying the bills. Her husband Mike recently left a good paying job to pursue a new career and is currently in school pursuing the necessary degrees to start his new job. Linda and Mike have three children, so flexibility and pay are extremely important as they allow her to spend time with them while still being the primary income earner.

As she entered her new role, Linda found that she would be leading functional teams through acquisition processes related to specific aircraft, working on software development, and managing cybersecurity requirements related to her projects. Several of these projects were funded by international partners, something that Linda had familiarity with in her previous position.

3. The Job Characteristics Model and Theory

Developed by Drs. Greg Oldham and J. Richard Hackman after a study of 658 employees in 62 jobs across seven different organizations, the job characteristics model is a theory of work design, that remains the primary basis for job design

today (Hackman & Oldham 1976; Parker, Van den Broeck, & Holman 2017). The job characteristics model includes five characteristics:

1. Skill variety—how tasks vary and the level of challenge the tasks provide.

2. Task identity—determines if tasks have a defined beginning, middle, and end. Connects satisfaction with completing a goal.

3. Task significance—the meaning that employees get from their role in an organization.

4. Task autonomy—how much control employees have over how they carry out their work.

5. Job feedback—amount and level of feedback employees receive regarding their performance.

When a job fulfills all five of the characteristics, this leads to three critical psychological states including:

1. Meaningful experience of work.

2. Experienced responsibility for the outcomes of the work.

3. Knowledge of the actual results for work activities.

Specifically, variety, identity and significance lead to meaningful work experience, autonomy leads to responsibility, and feedback leads to knowledge of results. These three states in turn lead to increased job satisfaction and job performance (Hackman & Lawler 1971; Oldham & Fried 1987). Importantly, these relationships are moderated (relationship strengthened or weakened) by an employee's knowledge, skills, and a desire for personal accomplishment (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski 2010). Multiple meta-analyses (statistical study of studies) over the past 45 years have offered refinements in the model, including that workers currently perceive greater levels of variety, autonomy, and significance than when the model was developed in 1975 (Fried & Ferris 1987; Wegman, Hoffman, Carter, Twenge, & Guenole 2018). Despite these refinements, these meta-analyses found that the core relationships still hold despite changes in the nature of work, demonstrating the robust validity of the job characteristics model. A visual illustration of Hackman and Oldham's model is provided in Appendix C of this case.

Past research has demonstrated that individual aspects of the job characteristics model are directly influenced by the behaviors and actions of the leader. For example, job autonomy is significantly related to employee

empowerment and flexibility stemming from high leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship[1] (Kim, Lee, & Jang 2017), and job feedback quality and quantity is enhanced by higher LMX (Fried, Levi, & Laurence 2007). While many of the individual aspects of the job characteristics model are directly influenced by the actions and behaviors of the leader, it has also been argued that the relationship works in the opposite direction. Past research has suggested that job characteristics can enhance the quality of the LMX relationship (Kim & Taylor 2003). Therefore, while the relationship with one's leader can certainly impact job satisfaction and other related outcomes, it is encouraged that students focus on the five job characteristics in examining this case.

4. Linda's Job Characteristics at Veritas

When Linda started at Veritas, she quickly noticed that she did not have as much freedom as she did in her previous job with a smaller private company. Her senior managers at Veritas expect Linda to make decisions regarding her projects, but her immediate supervisor Duane Bartinelli rarely allows this. He often opts to take ownership of the situations rather than let his employees do their job. Duane even excludes the individual project managers from long term planning for new projects and annual budget discussions that directly affects the project managers. While Duane often makes the decisions, this also caused issues as he uses Linda as a scapegoat when things are going poorly.

For example, Linda received an email from Duane with a long history of replies related to one of her projects including back and forth with the external customers. Duane had overpromised a delivery based on funding and time and was now asking Linda to manage an impossible delivery. As a further frustration, when Linda asks for support and advice from her supervisor and senior leaders, she is often told, "It's your projects, you run them." She is rarely given any additional support, resources, or training from her leadership when requested. She once asked for clarification on the expected number of users for a simulator she was developing, only to be told by Duane that she would receive that information when he felt she needed it. The information was never provided to Linda, and she could not determine these numbers through her team.

Additionally, despite the international sources of funding on her projects, Duane often treated funding the same way. Linda had always been taught that legally, domestic and international funding sources have different oversight requirements for how they are tracked, reported, and utilized. When asked, Duane dismissively responded by saying, "no, that doesn't matter – money is money."

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1. Leader-member exchange (LMX) is a leadership theory that examines the quality of the relationship between a leader and individual followers. Exchanges are determined to be either high- or low-quality with high-quality exchanges being marked with higher trust, open flow of information, and a variety of other positive outcomes (Scandura, Graen, & Novak 1986).