

# Unleash the power of your workforce

Strategies that enrich employees' jobs and stimulate their intrinsic motivation will unlock a workforce's creativity, writes **Sharon K. Parker\***

**A**s organisations struggle to be competitive in the global marketplace, employees who 'do as they are told' are no longer sufficient. The times require employees who think for themselves, use their judgment and make self-directed improvements, especially where their responses cannot be anticipated and scripted. Creative individuals who come up with novel and useful ideas for products, services and processes are also of fundamental importance in the modern workplace, where innovation provides a competitive edge.

Our research program at the AGSM addresses the fundamental question of how organisations can obtain this type of workforce.

## TYPICAL APPROACHES

A popular approach in the search for talent is to recruit and hire the most creative and proactive individuals. This seems logical in a world where human capital and knowledge have never been so important, but it is both limited and limiting.

First, there is little point placing the most proactive and creative employees in work situations that do not allow or motivate them to use their talents.

Second, the recruitment approach is based on the traditional assumption that creativity and innovation are the rare talents of extraordinary people. So it doesn't help the majority of employees to become more creative, and it ignores the role of the work environment.

A more contemporary assumption is that all humans with normal capacities are able to produce at least moderately creative and proactive work in some domain, some of the time, and that the work

environment influences the level and frequency of these behaviours.

Organisations can, therefore, do something more effective than chasing after a limited number of talented people; they can promote creativity and proactivity in their entire workforce.

Competitive advantage will not come from either focusing entirely on selecting creative and proactive employees or concentrating on creativity training. Employees might come back from training programs energised and enthused for a few weeks, but this eventually wanes. There is little systematic research evidence to suggest that such programs have benefits beyond the initial, feel-good phase. Creativity training, like talent searches, makes no odds if employees are not motivated or given the opportunity to be creative in their workplace.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF INTRINSIC MOTIVATION

Research has identified three broad determinants of creativity and innovation:<sup>1</sup>

- high-level expertise
- creative thinking
- motivation.

Expertise is the foundation for all creative work. People are unlikely to generate creative ideas in areas where they do not have considerable expertise. Creative thinking, such as taking on new perspectives and suspending judgment of novel ideas, provides the 'something extra' in creative performance.

Expertise and creative thinking largely determine what a person can do, but motivation determines what a person will do. Without motivation, an individual is unlikely even to suggest, much less to implement, creative ideas they might have as a result of

their expertise and creative thinking.

People are motivated by intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic motivation comes from a deep interest and involvement in the task, from curiosity, enjoyment or personal sense of challenge. Extrinsic motivation comes from trying to attain a goal apart from the work itself, such as obtaining rewards, a high salary or meeting a deadline.

All evidence suggests that intrinsic motivation is more important than extrinsic motivation for stimulating proactivity and creativity. There is even evidence that some forms of extrinsic reward can stifle creativity and innovation. Managers should, therefore, aim to enhance their employees' intrinsic motivation, rather than focusing solely on aspects such as tight deadlines, salaries or other extrinsic factors.

One of the most important factors is enrichment of jobs. Unfortunately, many executives talk about empowering people, but the reality is usually far from the rhetoric. Many employees still work within bureaucratic constraints, unable to fully utilise or develop their talents.

Enriched jobs are those in which employees can use a variety of skills and talents; have the opportunity for skill development; can complete a whole and identifiable set of tasks from beginning to end; have autonomy and discretion over key decisions, such as how and when tasks are carried out; receive feedback about their performance so that they can monitor progress; and have clear goals and consistent performance expectations.

Enriched jobs have been shown to promote learning, develop the confidence to carry out broader tasks and encourage an active approach to solving problems. Jobs



## Designing work environments to enhance intrinsic motivation

Research has identified three ways that organisations enhance intrinsic motivation and, hence, creativity:

**1** Enriched jobs and supportive management practices. These are characterised by challenging and autonomous work, diverse but cohesive work groups and supportive and non-controlling supervision.

**2** A culture that supports innovation. The company or organisation has goals for creativity, encourages risk taking and free exchange of ideas, legitimises constructive dissent and stimulates participation.

**3** Adequate resources. Creativity needs time, funding, expertise and training.

supervisors, set and monitored their goals, allocated tasks and liaised with customers. Employees moved from an attitude of 'that's not my job' to a more flexible and proactive

view of their role. They achieved dramatic performance gains, including slashing lead times from 14 weeks to two days.

In another study, jobs were made less challenging with the introduction of a moving assembly line.<sup>3</sup> The line moved every two hours, and employees were powerless to change it. A year after the line was installed employees were less motivated, less interested in learning new things, more depressed, less confident in their abilities and less committed to the organisation. Lead times were shorter, but there was also evidence that accidents increased and quality deteriorated.

A similar study by Harvard professor Teresa Amabile and her colleagues showed that downsizing can also have a negative effect on employees' creativity.

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that are tightly supervised offer little opportunity for decision-making and provide insufficient motivation for employees to be proactive and creative.

### HOW TO DESIGN CHALLENGING AND ENRICHED JOBS

One of our studies compared employees' intrinsic motivation in two companies.<sup>2</sup> The first introduced a just-in-time initiative with

training and communication to increase people's understanding of the strategic principles involved, but there was no change to the design of work. This company achieved only modest performance improvements from its JIT system.

The second company also used training and communication, but dramatically redesigned the work to enrich jobs. Self-managing team members, rather than direct



Associate professor Sharon K. Parker.

These examples show how the introduction of challenging and enriched jobs can enhance employees' intrinsic motivation and, hence, their proactivity and creativity, while the removal of challenge and autonomy can dampen and diminish these behaviours.

### IT'S REALITY, NOT RHETORIC, THAT COUNTS

The company that introduced the moving assembly line published a mission statement claiming: "We are dedicated to exceeding customer and company expectations with high quality, superior products and services, in an environment of employee involvement and commitment." They further stated that one of their core values was "... empowerment; devolving decisions to the lowest level of knowledge."

Unfortunately, the gulf between what organisations espouse and what they actually do is all too common. Many executives

report having 'self-managing teams' in place, but in reality their employees are constrained by bureaucratic procedures. Job feedback is punitive rather than informative, and the opportunities for employees to develop new skills are blocked by excess workloads and understaffing

Empowerment initiatives will have little or no impact on employee innovation unless they are aligned with what supervisors and managers actually do. The fact that so few organisations actually implement appropriate work designs and management practices means that those that do are likely to obtain a strategic advantage.

### BEST PRACTICE

Studies have shown that organisations with innovative human resource and management practices perform more effectively.

For example, one study<sup>4</sup> showed that companies that were one standard deviation higher in their use of high-performance work practices outperformed their mainstream competition in profits, market capitalisation and employee turnover. Most dramatically, their sales per employee were US\$27,000 higher.

The conclusion from this more general research is that developing people through enlightened HR and management practices provides a competitive edge. Researchers are now trying to establish why this is so. One hypothesis is that these practices stimulate greater proactivity and creativity. This is yet to be empirically tested, but the research described suggests it is a plausible one. ☺

## Future research

Our future research program at the AGSM aims to continue rigorous investigation into how to enhance proactivity and creativity in the existing workforce. Organisations that choose to participate in our research program can benefit from the following research activities:

- a systematic assessment of the intrinsic motivation, creativity and proactivity of the workforce.
- an evaluation of the organisation's culture, job design and management practices.
- the design of an evidence-based intervention to enhance employee creativity and proactivity, such as introducing enriched jobs.
- evaluation of the effects of the intervention on employees' intrinsic motivation, creativity and proactivity.
- development of recommendations for further enhancement of employee creativity and proactivity.

Strategically focused organisations interested in participating in the research program should contact Sharon Parker, e-mail:

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\* Associate professor Sharon K. Parker is the subject leader for 'Redesigning the Organisation' in the AGSM's Graduate Certificate in Change Management, and a senior research fellow in the Centre for Corporate Change.

### FOOTNOTES

- 1 T.M. Amabile, 'Motivating creativity in organisations: on doing what you love and loving what you do' in *California Management Review*, 40, 1, pp. 39-58, 1997.
- 2 S.K. Parker, T.D. Wall and P.R. Jackson, 'That's not my job: developing flexible employee work orientations', *Academy of Management Journal*, 40, 899-929, 1997; 'No easy roads to employee involvement' in *Academy of Management Executive*, 12, pp. 83-84, 1998. Research translation (by S.R. Peck) of Parker, Wall and Jackson: 'That's not my job: developing flexible employee work orientations'.
- 3 S.K. Parker, 'How to create a passive, depressed and low-commitment workforce: a longitudinal study'. Manuscript in preparation.
- 4 M. Hucelid, 'The impact of human resource management practices on turnover, productivity and corporate financial performance' in *Academy of Management Journal*, 38, p. 645, 1995.

### FURTHER READING

- Proactivity and creativity**
- 1 J.M. Crant, 'Proactive behaviour in organisations', *Journal of Management*, 26, 3, 435-462, 2000.
  - 2 D.J. Campbell, 'The proactive employee: managing workplace initiative', *Academy of Management Executive*, 14, 52-66, 2000.
  - 3 A. Cummings and G.R. Oldhman, 'Enhancing creativity: managing work contexts for the high potential employee', *California Management Review*, 40, 1, pp. 22-38, 1997.
  - 4 S.K. Parker, 'From passive to proactive motivation: the importance of flexible role orientations and role breadth self-efficacy', *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 49 (3), pp. 447-469, 2000.
  - 5 S.K. Parker and C.A. Sprigg, 'Minimising strain and maximising learning: the role of job demands, job control and proactive personality', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84 (6), pp. 925-939, 1999.
  - 6 R.W. Woodman, et al., 'Toward a theory of organisational creativity', *Academy of Management Review*, 18, pp. 293-321, 1993.

### Work design and enriched jobs

- 7 S.K. Parker and T.D. Wall, *Job and Work Design: Organizing Work to Promote Well-Being and Effectiveness*, Sage Publications, California, 1998.
  - 8 R. Forrester, 'Empowerment: rejuvenating a potent idea', *Academy of Management Executive*, 14, pp. 67-80, 2000.
- Innovative HR and its link to corporate performance**
- 9 C.A. O'Reilly III and J. Pfeffer, *Hidden Value: How Great Companies Achieve Extraordinary Results with Ordinary People*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, 2000.
  - 10 B.E. Becker and M. Hucelid, 'High performance work systems and firm performance: a synthesis of research and managerial implications' in G.R. Ferris (ed.), *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, JAP Press, Greenwich, Conn., no. 16, pp. 53-101, 1988.