Organizational Factors Associated with Job Characteristics: Evidence from Frontline Service Employees

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Job design is an effective manner for influencing the conduct of employees. However, research has not yet considered how job characteristics are associated with other organizational factors to promote employee attitudes and behaviors in a more sustainable way. The authors develop a structural model that addresses this gap with data from services. The results provide broad support for the proposed model, indicating that, perceptions of a customer-oriented culture, autonomy, and behavior-based evaluation systems are associated with task variety, identity, and supervisory support.

Keywords: job characteristics; frontline employees; services marketing

Introduction

Customers’ perceptions of service quality are strongly influenced by what happens during the service encounter (Bitner, 1990; Zeithaml, Bitner, & Gremler, 2006). Not surprisingly, attention to frontline employees is considered one of the key areas where organizations can build their competitive advantage (O’Hara, Boles, & Johnston, 1991). For these reasons organizations ‘must find ways to effectively manage their customer-contact employees to help ensure that their attitudes and behaviors are conducive to the delivery of service quality’ (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996, p. 52).

One way of inducing certain responses from employees is through job design, which has been shown to affect employees’ intrinsic motivation and performance, and employee customer orientation. The aim of this work is to research contextual factors associated with enriched jobs, which are consistent with customer-oriented behaviors and, ultimately, employee performance. We believe that it is not enough to build jobs with certain characteristics to induce employees to engage in certain practices. This is an effort that must be complemented with the development of an appropriate organizational context that supports and sustains employee perceptions about organizational priorities. Our view stems from Hackman and Oldham’s (1980, p. 155) contention that implementing ‘substantial changes in jobs that persist over time requires attention to the systemic properties of organizations’. This view is consistent with the assertion of Hartline, Maxham, and McKee’s (2000, p. 36) that ‘when a customer-oriented strategy is adopted, several structural and procedural mechanisms within the firm must come into alignment before effective dissemination can occur’.

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However, the contextual factors associated with specific job designs have been unexplored in extant literature. Therefore, our research, apparently, provides the first piece of evidence concerning organizational factors that fit with enriched jobs. This will provide a more complete understanding of how managers can develop strategies to motivate sustainable employee behaviors through job-related characteristics and its context.

The model

Research background

The model we develop concerning the organizational aspects associated with certain job designs, draws on the job characteristics model (JCM) of worker motivation developed by Hackman and Oldham (1975), and we adapt that for the specific aims of this research. The purpose of the JCM is to provide a framework that can be used to examine current jobs and assess how they can be changed to improve employee motivation and performance. The basic premise of the JCM is that job performance, motivation and satisfaction are a function of task design (Becherer, Morgan, & Richard, 1982). Generally, motivation is the result of rewards, which can be either intrinsic or extrinsic to the performance of job activities. Task design is considered to provide a means for an intrinsic reward because it provides self-generated motivation from ‘the feeling of accomplishment that arises from successful activity performance’ (Thakor & Joshi, 2005, p. 585). Not surprisingly, job design has proved to be an important driver of job satisfaction and performance (e.g. Becherer et al., 1982; Dubinsky & Skinner, 1984; Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Tyagi, 1985), and creativity (Hatcher, Ross, & Collins, 1989; Oldham & Cummings, 1996; Tierney & Farmer, 2002).

The JCM comprises four core job dimensions, these being, task variety, identity, autonomy, and feedback (Hackman & Lawler, 1971). Variety is the degree to which a job requires an employee to perform a variety of different activities and to exercise diverse skills. Jobs with these characteristics should stretch the skills and abilities of employees. Identity refers to a job requiring the completion of a whole and identifiable piece of work from an employee, such as doing a job ‘from beginning to end with a visible outcome’ (Hackman & Oldham, 1980, p. 78). Jobs with high levels of variety and identity provide salespeople with the feeling that their job is meaningful and worthwhile. Autonomy is the extent to which an employee enjoys freedom and discretion in scheduling the work and the procedures to carry out his or her work assignments, providing a sense of responsibility for outcomes of the work. Feedback is the extent to which an employee obtains clear and direct information regarding his or her performance. Hackman and Lawler (1971) focus on the feedback inherent to the job itself but recognize that this can also be provided by colleagues, customers, and management. Lack of information about one’s job performance implies that the employee has no reason for feeling good or bad about that performance, and this reduces internal work motivation.

Research hypotheses

To promote organizational performance, it is wise to stimulate employee customer-oriented behaviors, as they produce benefits superior to other selling approaches in a
number of situations (e.g. Boles, Babin, Brashear, & Brooks, 2001; Keillor, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2000; Martin & Bush, 2003; Saxe & Weitz, 1982). Of particular concern for organizations is, therefore, how to disseminate their customer-oriented focus to influence the behavior of frontline employees in an appropriate manner. Job design is one of the tools that can be used to accomplish that. However, job characteristics should be associated with other organizational practices so that the positive consequences of job enrichment persist over time (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), and this has been neglected in the literature.

With marketing control theory as a background, Hartline et al. (2000) proposed several mechanisms for the dissemination of a firm’s customer-oriented strategy, and these included empowerment and behavior-based evaluation systems, which we incorporate in our model. To be successful, however, the practices engendered by management to foster the desired behaviors, including job design and other organizational systems, must be perceived as such by employees. In fact, research indicates that ‘individuals do not respond to the work environment directly, but must first perceive and interpret their environment’ (Carr, Schmidt, Ford, & DeShon, 2003, p. 605). Hence, employee behavior is influenced not by the objective characteristics of the job and respective environment, but rather by the employee’s perceptions about his or her job and its context (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Consequently, our model focuses on the perceptions of frontline employees about the characteristics of their jobs and the surrounding environment. The model developed is presented in Figure 1, and is subsequently explained.

**Perceived customer orientation of the firm**

Employees will be motivated to implement the extra effort required by a customer-orientation approach, which has been linked with a superior performance, to the extent to which they perceive this to be a central value of the organization (Thakor & Joshi, 2005). A firm’s customer orientation can be defined as ‘the set of beliefs that puts the customer’s interest first, while not excluding those of all other stakeholders such as owners, managers, and employees, in order to develop a long-term profitable enterprise’ (Deshpandé, Farley, & Webster, 1993, p. 27).

Culture can be considered a type of management control particularly relevant for service organizations, because of the difficulty in establishing and measuring formal output controls objectively, and that arises from lower task standardization (Hartline et al., 2000). In order to affect employees, however, this culture must be appropriately disseminated and perceived to inspire customer-oriented behaviors (Hartline et al., 2000; Kelley, 1992).

**Autonomy**

The higher the employee’s perceived autonomy, the higher the feelings of personal responsibility concerning work outcomes (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). Hence, employees are likely to work smarter and harder at satisfying customers’ needs (Sujan, Weitz, & Kumar, 1994). Furthermore, frontline employees need to be flexible and innovative given the non-routine nature of their job (Dubinsky et al., 1986). With autonomy, frontline employees will be able to customize the service through an adaptive behavior and/or service offering adaptation (Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996). Autonomy also leads to quicker responses to customers, better service recovery,
word-of-mouth advertising, more new service ideas, more enthusiastic interactions with customers, and more confident employees (Bowen & Lawler, 1992). In summary, customer focused firms should use empowerment to disseminate their customer focus, thus enabling their employees to serve customers (Hartline et al., 2000, p. 38). In practice, however, managers’ actions will result in appropriate employee performances as long as employees feel empowered because their firms are customer focused. Employees should perceive autonomy as a means to serve customers in more effective ways. This also implies that perceptions of a firm’s customer focus serve as a guide to the deployment of autonomy. We thus propose the following:

H1: Perceived customer orientation of the firm is positively associated with perceived autonomy.

Behavior-control systems
Behavior-based evaluation is a form of control that attempts to influence employee behaviors (e.g. courtesy and friendliness) that are consistent with organizational customer values, rather than reward employees upon their work outcomes (e.g. sales volumes). The utilization of behavior-based evaluation is particularly suited for
service organizations, where customers value technical service as well as process quality. Boundary spanning jobs in services involve a great deal of interpersonal interaction that makes it less feasible to strictly adhere to routines, and to operate uniform guidelines and procedures (Schneider, 1980). Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman (1988) consider that behavior-based evaluation is likely to reinforce the behaviors from employees that are coherent with customers’ expectations of service quality. Therefore, to promote employee performance, customer-oriented firms should use behavior-based evaluation mechanisms. However, and again, for this to translate into appropriate employee performances, employees must understand that they are evaluated on the basis of behavioral criteria because their employer is aiming at customer satisfaction. In this context, perceptions of the customer focus should serve as a guide for the choice of behaviors. We thus predict the following:

H2: Perceived customer orientation of the firm is positively associated with perceived behavior-based evaluation.

Task variety and identity

Customer-oriented employees are expected to have the competencies to execute behaviors that assist the long-term satisfaction of customers. If employees face a job low in task variety, the range of activities over which they exert command is restricted. It follows that they will have few opportunities ‘to explore and manipulate their environments and to gain a sense of efficacy by testing and using their skills’ (Hackman & Oldham, 1980 p. 78). This will not enable employees to expand their competencies, limiting their capacity to serve customers.

When salespeople have jobs low in identity, the range of stages of the service delivery process over which they exert control is rather sparse. The limited contact with the customer means that salespeople will develop a partial understanding of the customer’s needs. Additionally, frontline employees will not develop as warm and enthusiastic relations with customers. This implies that, in order to obtain good performances, customer focused firms should build variety and identity into the jobs of frontline employees. However, it is only when employees perceive their jobs as being rich in identity and variety as a means of generating customer satisfaction that the practices of managers will translate into appropriate behaviors. We thus predict the following:

H3: Perceived customer orientation of the firm is positively associated with perceived task variety.
H4: Perceived customer orientation of the firm is positively associated with perceived task identity.

Supervisory and peer support

Hackman and Oldham (1980), when they defined feedback, focused on the information that can be obtained directly from the job, but also recognize that it can be obtained from other sources, such as supervisors and work colleagues. Frontline employees, particularly in service settings, due to the inseparability of production and consumption, already get a great deal of feedback from customers. Furthermore, research based on the JCM, such as that carried out by Dubinsky and
Skinner (1984), and Sims, Szilagyi, and Keller (1976), considered scale items concerning information obtained from superiors. For these reasons we consider, in this work, not the feedback obtained directly from the work but, more holistically, the support provided by supervisors and peers.

Supervisory support concerns the level of trust, interaction, and assistance between each other (O’Hara, Boles, & Johnston, 1991). Such support is important for role formation and for proper communication (Dubinsky et al., 1986). Supervisors provide prompt performance feedback, demonstrate appropriate behaviors (Feldman, 1976; van Maanen & Schein, 1979), and help develop expectations of rewards for service excellence (Schneider & Bowen, 1995). The importance of a cohesive peer group resides in the fact that group members work as a team to accomplish organizational goals. Supportive colleagues provide emotional support, help with difficult situations and disseminate knowledge and behaviors associated with service quality (Redman & Mathews, 1998).

The heterogeneity, intangibility, and inseparability of production and consumption of services create many problems for the service delivery process (Zeithaml et al., 2006). Additionally, the boundary-spanning role of frontline employees means that role stress is intrinsic to their jobs (Nonis, Sager, & Kumar, 1996; Walker, Churchill, & Ford, 1975), and this adversely affects employee effectiveness. Consequently, customer-oriented firms should design jobs with a high degree of supervisory and peer support, to help employees dealing with the problems associated with service delivery. This support will be effective to the extent to which it is seen as a way of accomplishing certain goals. On the basis of these arguments, we predict the following:

H5: Perceived customer orientation of the firm is positively associated with perceived supervisory support.
H6: Perceived customer orientation of the firm is positively associated with perceived peer support.

**Autonomy**

**Behavioral control systems**

Behavioral control ‘focuses on performance criteria that are consistent with the behavioral requirements of empowerment (e.g., making decisions, exercising authority, serving customers’ needs)’ (Hartline et al., 2000, p. 38). Hartline and colleagues add that because employees with autonomy will make mistakes, the utilization of output-based criteria will penalize employees in ways that will end up damaging customer service. Consequently, the provision of autonomy should be accompanied by the utilization of behavior-based criteria. However, this will result in the desired performances as long as employees perceive that their autonomy is associated with behavioral rather than other evaluation criteria. We thus propose the following:

H7: Perceived autonomy is positively associated with perceived behavior-based evaluation.

**Task variety and identity**

Jobs that are low in variety will not promote the stretching of skills, and are likely to undermine the benefits of autonomy. Developing jobs high in autonomy and low in
task variety, for example, is likely to shortcut the creativity potential associated with autonomy, as creativity is fostered by the accumulation of diverse knowledge and experiences, and these are the result of jobs with varied tasks.

When employees have jobs low in identity, they will have limited intervention in the service delivery process, and their interaction with customers is restricted. The limited contact with customers, together with the partial understanding of customers’ needs, implies that employees will develop less interesting new service ideas, and will be less creative and quick at responding to customers. Consequently, low task identity can severely limit the benefits of autonomy. The provision of autonomy should, therefore, result in tasks that are high in variety and identity. This will be particularly important for boundary spanning personnel in services, where process quality is valued heavily. Consequently, employees perceiving empowerment should also perceive that they command tasks that are rich in variety and identity. Otherwise, employees will feel that they have no room to exercise their autonomy. As such, we offer the following:

H8: Perceived autonomy is positively associated with perceived task variety.
H9: Perceived autonomy is positively associated with perceived task identity.

Supervisory and peer support includes feedback about individual performance, assistance to an employee in dealing with difficult issues, demonstrating appropriate behaviors, and offering emotional support. Thus, the granting of autonomy should result in job arrangements ensuring the provision of appropriate support from both colleagues and supervisors to help the contact employee deal with the difficulties inherent in his or her job. If appropriate supervisory and peer support is not provided to frontline employees, the organization runs the risk of having burdened employees with autonomy, and finding they deliver inconsistent service and make bad decisions (see Bowen & Lawler, 1992). This is consistent with social learning theory, which contends that behavior development is affected to a large extent, by mentors (Bandura, 1977). Given the variety of problems intrinsic to service delivery (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985), such support will help employees learn and develop the skills to exercise their authority in appropriate ways. Consequently, empowered employees must feel that they are sufficiently supported to deliver the desired behaviors. Accordingly, we offer the following:

H10: Perceived autonomy is positively associated with perceived supervisory support.
H11: Perceived autonomy is positively associated with perceived peer support.

Behavior control systems

Task variety and identity

Behavior control systems reward employees based upon the appropriateness of their behaviors. This implies that employees must have the possibility of choosing between different courses of action in performing their roles, and jobs low in task variety and task identity are likely to restrict such options. Therefore, when managers adopt behavior-based evaluation systems they should develop jobs rich in variety and identity. This will only become effective, however, when employees perceiving to be evaluated on the basis of their behaviors also perceive that they are responsible for tasks with variety and identity, otherwise frustration will occur. We thus advance the following:
H12: Perceived behavior-based evaluation is positively associated with perceived task variety.
H13: Perceived behavior-based evaluation is positively associated with perceived task identity.

Supervisory and peer support
A supervisor who focuses on the development of the skills and abilities of salespeople enables and motivates employees to learn new ways of performing a task (Weitz, Sujan, & Sujan, 1986). Kohli, Shervani, and Challagalla (1998, p. 266) also point out that ‘by helping salespeople understand, for example, how to negotiate better or make a superior presentation, managers can enable salespeople to improve their competences’. This suggests that for behavior-based evaluation mechanisms to produce greater effects, managers should build an appropriate support from both supervisors and peers, so as to help frontline employees develop and choose appropriate behaviors. This kind of supervisory and peer support becomes especially important in non-routine situations such as those faced by service contact employees and where behavior-based evaluation is employed. Thus, we offer the following.

H14: Perceived behavior-based evaluation is positively associated with perceived supervisory support.
H15: Perceived behavior-based evaluation is positively associated with perceived peer support.

Supervisory support
Most supervisors want their employees to be satisfied with their jobs (Johlke & Duhan, 2000), in part because job satisfaction is related with employee organizational commitment and performance. An important facet of job satisfaction involves peers (Churchill, Ford, & Walker, 1974). Thus, supervisors are likely to contribute to the development of a work environment where colleagues support each other. Consequently, when employees perceive their supervisors to be supportive, they should also perceive that there is a good atmosphere among colleagues, as this is likely to be seen as, at least in part, the result of supervisory care. We thus offer the following:

H16: Perceived supervisory support is positively associated with perceived peer support.

Research method
Sample selection and data collection
To collect the quantitative data needed to test the conceptual framework, we obtained the collaboration of two companies in the telecommunications sector, which were judged to provide sufficient variability in terms of organizational contexts and of employee behaviors. Employees in these two companies were responsible for selling services and equipment, answering customer inquires, and dealing with billing. A self-administered questionnaire and a covering letter reinforcing the purpose of the study and ensuring confidentiality, was distributed to 125 employees in each company. Of the 250 questionnaires, 76% were returned to the researchers. After deletion of incomplete questionnaires, we obtained a usable
response rate of 65%, corresponding to 170 questionnaires. The typical contact person was female (69.4%), single (52.4%), with high school completed or nearly completed (40.6%).

**Measures**

The pilot-tested questionnaire contains measures that are based on established scales (see the Appendix, Table 1). We used multiple-item seven-point scales ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The measure for customer orientation of the firm was based on the customer orientation component of the market orientation scale developed by Narver and Slater (1990). The measures of autonomy, variety, and identity were based on Sims et al. (1976), who adapted the scale from Hackman and Lawler (1971). The items for behavior-based evaluation were drawn from Bush et al. (1990). Supervisory support was measured using items from the Leader Member Exchange scale (Graen, Liden, & Hoel, 1982), and peer support was measured with items from Moos’ (1981) Work environment scale manual.

**Measurement analysis**

A preliminary data analysis was performed to detect ill-fitting items including item-to-total correlations and exploratory factor analysis, which indicated that all scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Path from</th>
<th>Path to</th>
<th>Ho</th>
<th>Standardized structural coefficients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer orientation of the firm</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>$H_1(+)$</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Behavior-control systems</td>
<td>$H_2(+)$</td>
<td>.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task variety</td>
<td>$H_3(+)$</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task identity</td>
<td>$H_4(+)$</td>
<td>.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor support</td>
<td>$H_5(+)$</td>
<td>.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer support</td>
<td>$H_6(+)$</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Behavior-control systems</td>
<td>$H_7(+)$</td>
<td>.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task variety</td>
<td>$H_8(+)$</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task identity</td>
<td>$H_9(+)$</td>
<td>.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor support</td>
<td>$H_{10}(+)$</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer support</td>
<td>$H_{11}(+)$</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior-control systems</td>
<td>Task variety</td>
<td>$H_{12}(+)$</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Task identity</td>
<td>$H_{13}(+)$</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor support</td>
<td>$H_{14}(+)$</td>
<td>.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer support</td>
<td>$H_{15}(+)$</td>
<td>-.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor support</td>
<td>Peer support</td>
<td>$H_{16}(+)$</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

Model fit: Relative Chi-square ($\chi^2$/d.f.)=1.36, d.f.=406, Goodness of Fit Index (GFI)=.83, Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)=.95, Comparative Fit Index (CFI)=.95, and Root Mean Square Error Approximation (RMSEA)=.05.

**p<.01; *p<.05.**
were uni-dimensional. We then submitted the remaining items to a seven-factor confirmatory factor analysis to further assess the psychometric properties of the scales. The initial measurement model was refined with the elimination of a few items with high residuals and modification indices. The overall Chi-square of the re-specified model is statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 551$, d.f. = 353) but the remaining measures indicate good fit (Goodness of Fit Index (GFI) = .83; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = .92; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = .93; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = .06). The magnitude of residuals and modification indices was low, thus providing further evidence of uni-dimensionality.

Cronbach alphas meet the .80 level, except for task variety (.63). These results indicate that the scales are internally consistent. Convergent validity is indicated by significant path coefficients from latent constructs to the manifest indicators, and this is observed in this study. To assess discriminant validity we compared the correlation between any two constructs with the corresponding Cronbach alphas. In this case, all correlations are below their corresponding Cronbach alphas, and thus discriminant validity is obtained. The Appendix presents univariate statistics, correlation coefficients, and Cronbach alphas.

**Results**

Having established the validity of the multi-item scales, we proceeded with the estimation of a structural model to test the hypotheses. Table 1 reports the fit of the model and estimated structural paths. Overall, these indices indicate a good model fit ($\chi^2 = 553.13$, d.f. = 406; GFI = .83; TLI = .95; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .05).

The results provide support for the majority of the hypotheses put forward in this work. The only paths that are not significant are those relating the customer orientation of the firm, autonomy, and behavior-based evaluation, with peer support. In addition, the modification indices reveal that no other path is significant, and this also shows the robustness of the hypothesized model.

**Discussion and implications**

Managers must engender a number of mechanisms to maximally influence employee behavior. Job design has proved to be an important way to influence the behavior of employees. The aim of this study was to examine whether certain contextual factors are associated with enriched jobs, which have been associated with an important number of outcomes, including job satisfaction, performance and employee customer orientation. Thus, our study addresses Hackman and Oldham’s (1980, p. 155) contention that ‘it appears more appropriate to view changes in how work is structured as involving alterations in how the organization as a whole functions’. The organizational factors associated with job design is a topic which, however, has been completely neglected in extant literature. Given that organizational systems will result in the desired employee performances to the extent to which they are recognized as such by employees, we focused the research on frontline employees’ perceptions of organizational factors and of job characteristics.

To obtain customer-oriented behaviors and performance from employees, firms should develop a customer-oriented approach, as this serves to focus the efforts of the entire organization. However, this is a driving force that must be appropriately disseminated throughout the organization (Kelley, 1992). Autonomy
and behavior-based evaluation are two mechanisms that are associated with a firm’s perceived customer priority, in accordance with hypotheses H1 and H2. The significant positive link between perceived firm customer orientation and autonomy, contrasts with that obtained by Hartline et al. (2000), who predicted, but did not find, empowerment to be a direct dissemination vehicle of a firm’s customer-oriented strategy. A possible explanation for these different results is related with the measurement unit, which in this study is the employee, and in Hartline and colleagues’ study, is the manager. As employees react to their perceptions of the work environment, our results indicate that managers should use empowerment as a dissemination mechanism, in order to reinforce the desired employee behaviors.

The linkages between a firm’s customer orientation and job characteristics receive further support with the acceptance of H3, H4, and H5. These hypotheses predicted a positive association between perceptions of the firm’s customer orientation and task variety, identity, and supervisory support, respectively. H6, however, is not supported, as a firm’s customer orientation is not related with peer support. Hence, the results suggest that perceptions of a firm’s customer focus provide employees with directions for the exercise of autonomy, for obtaining the rewards associated with the behaviors that the organization values, for guiding how they execute tasks that are rich in variety, identity, and in dealing with supervisors.

The results also support most of the hypotheses involving autonomy, which is positively related with behavior-based evaluation, task variety, identity, and supervisory support, but not with peer support. Thus, hypotheses H7, H8, H9, and H10 are supported, but not H11. Employees perceiving themselves to be empowered also perceive that they are being evaluated on the basis of their behaviors. This is a form of control that rewards employees according to how they make decisions and serve customers’ needs, and thus managers should consider its use to reinforce behaviors consistent with a customer-focused strategy.

The relationships observed between autonomy and the remaining job characteristics indicate that when frontline employees feel empowered, they also perceive themselves to have jobs high on variety, identity, and supervisory support. This result suggests that to take advantage of the different benefits associated with empowerment, managers should design jobs rich in variety, identity, and supervisory support. These associations are important because customers are more satisfied when they are served by employees with the ability, willingness and competence to solve their problems (Bitner, 1990; Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990).

Behavior-based evaluation is also positively associated with task variety, identity, and supervisory support, conforming to H12, H13, and H14. However, the results fail to support H15, which predicted a positive relationship between behavior-evaluation and peer support. This also indicates that when designing enriched jobs managers should consider the complementary role of behavior evaluation mechanisms.

Finally, it is interesting to note that employee perceptions of a firm’s customer orientation, autonomy and behavior evaluation are similar, in that these variables are associated with task variety, identity, and supervisory support, but not with peer support. This might be explained by the fact that relationships with colleagues may be determined, to a large extent, by the personality of employees in the work environment. As such, broad management mechanisms, including a customer-oriented culture, autonomy, and the utilization of behavior-based evaluation may
not be effective at producing peer support. Supervisors, however, and following the acceptance of H16, because they are in the field, may have a more determining effect on the development of good working relationships between colleagues.

Overall, the results indicate that, in the perceptions of employees, jobs high in task variety, identity, and supervisory support, are associated with perceptions of a customer-oriented culture, autonomy, and behavior-based evaluation systems. By developing job designs that possess the appropriate organizational background, managers will be able to reduce inconsistencies, mitigating the development of role stress and other negative outcomes, and reinforce the desired employee behaviors in the long term. As Kelley (1992, p. 34) noted, ‘ultimately, how effectively an organization conveys its values and expected behaviors to its employees impacts the satisfaction of its customers, the long-term relationship between the organization and its customers, and the profitability of the organization’. Given the broad support obtained for the model, we can claim that it provides valuable insights into such issues.

Limitations and future research directions

The contribution of this study lies in enlightening ideas on how certain organizational characteristics are associated with job design. Notwithstanding, this contribution should not be considered without an appropriate understanding of its limitations, which suggest a number of research avenues. First, our findings come from a sample composed of only two companies, which necessarily places limits to generalization. Additionally, these two companies are from the telecommunications sector and, therefore, there is the risk that the findings may not be replicated in other settings, although we must note that the findings, generally, confirm the theoretically driven hypotheses. We also relied on single informants to collect the data on the dependent and independent variables, thus raising the possibility of same-source bias.

The study also relies on self-reported, perceptual measures, which, despite being extensively adopted in the literature, face several shortcomings (Johnston & Futrell, 1989; Sims et al., 1976). Notwithstanding, Hackman and Lawler (1971) argue that employees’ responses to the job are determined by their perceptions of, rather than the objective characteristics of, jobs. The results of our study are also affected by the study’s cross-sectional design, which does not allow the identification of causal relations.

The JCM comprises a number of dimensions. However, Sims et al. (1976), for example, comment that this is not an exhaustive list. They suggest that there are other relevant job characteristics such as task complexity, task responsibility, and task challenge that deserve research attention. With regard to marketing control systems, current theory identifies a number of control forms (Jaworski, 1988; Jaworski, Stathakopoulos, & Krishnan, 1993), and the links of these with job characteristics and employee customer orientation can also be investigated. This will promote knowledge of the mechanisms available to managers to foster the performance of frontline employees.

References


Appendix 1

*Scale items*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer orientation of the firm</td>
<td>At this company the customer’s needs always come first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We measure customer satisfaction regularly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This company is deeply committed to improve customer service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>This company is committed to understanding customers’ needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>I enjoy great freedom in performing my job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am encouraged to find solutions to resolve problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am encouraged to take initiative in this work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I am allowed to do my job as I consider best</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task variety</td>
<td>I have little chance to do different things (rev)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I perform different tasks frequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I use different skills and talents in this job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I do the same things over and over again (rev)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task identity</td>
<td>I have the opportunity to do an entire piece of work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I perform a lot of work from beginning to end</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In this job I have a complete view over the stages of the work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I just perform small parts of the job (rev)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior-control systems</td>
<td>Performance evaluation assesses my commitment to customer satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performance evaluation is based on my ability to resolve customer problems in an effective manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performance evaluation considers my commitment to the organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performance evaluation considers my ability to innovatively deal with unique situations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Performance evaluation considers my contribution to customer satisfaction and retention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor support</td>
<td>My supervisor shares job-related information with me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My supervisor helps me solving problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I receive little guidance from my supervisor (rev)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I have good relationships with my supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer support</td>
<td>My work colleagues are helpful and supportive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is a cohesive atmosphere among the employees of this firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The employees in this firm share work-related information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My peers help me in the way I should perform this job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Descriptive statistics, correlation matrix, and reliability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Stand. Dev.</th>
<th>$X_1$</th>
<th>$X_2$</th>
<th>$X_3$</th>
<th>$X_4$</th>
<th>$X_5$</th>
<th>$X_6$</th>
<th>$X_7$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Customer orientation of the firm ($X_1$)</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.91</td>
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<tr>
<td>Autonomy ($X_2$)</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task variety ($X_3$)</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task identity ($X_4$)</td>
<td>4.17</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.53</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior-control systems ($X_5$)</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>1.52</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor support ($X_6$)</td>
<td>5.99</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer support ($X_7$)</td>
<td>5.80</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.47</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* Diagonal entries are Cronbach alpha’s coefficients.