

The importance of job quality characteristics for current and prospective employees

Abstract

Organisations require effective human resource (HR) management policies to address the diversity of a workforce which varies by age, ethnicity, educational background and professional experience. Multigenerational or cultural perspectives should be employed to improve knowledge about workforce diversity and work characteristics. Understanding the significance of various of the latter and how people perceive them in the context of job quality is critical for reducing stress, increasing motivation and improving job performance. The purpose of this article is to determine the significance of job quality for both current and future employees. It reveals a difference in how this is perceived or valued when viewed from the perspective of a student considering employment compared to that of an existing employee. Managers must evaluate which characteristics influence an employee's or student's perception of meaning; and they should also create environments that foster individual performance in their respective roles. Furthermore, identifying variations in work characteristics can lead to the future design or enhancement of human resource tasks.

Keywords: work characteristics, human resource management, job quality, motivation, job enrichment

Introduction

Demographic developments, together with economic, technical and cultural changes, need parallel improvements in how employment is structured and performed (Egri and Ralston 2004). Over the last few decades, organisations have seen a significant transition in their workforce characteristics (Kundu et al. 2016). Multigenerational lenses should be employed in both theory and practice to acquire a deeper understanding of workforce diversity in general and the nature of job characteristics in particular (Hernaus and Vokic 2014). Moreover, job characteristics may influence an employee's opinion of job meaningfulness as they are an acceptable concept for enriching jobs in organisational contexts (Michael et al. 2012), with a corresponding impact on job quality.

Employees' regard for job meaningfulness may optimise organisational outcomes based on task orientation and the presence of reliable, fulfilling and relationship-based actions (Corley and Gioia 2011). Research demonstrates that well-designed jobs are a positive influence on work attitudes and behaviours (Hossam 2009). Knowledge of employee attitudes is therefore crucial for the creation and functioning of HR practices since these influence employee characteristics in the workplace

(Armstrong and Brown 2019). Researchers argue that job characteristics have some explanatory power regarding transformative leadership and employees' in-role behaviours and work-related outcomes (Gillet and Vandenberghe 2014).

Additionally, job characteristics tend to affect mental health and engagement via two psychological pathways: the health impairment process; and the motivational process (Bakker and Demerouti 2017). Job characteristics are particularly acknowledged as an essential work environment predictor of turnover intention (Griffeth et al. 2000) and have a crucial role in explaining work-life conflict (Michel et al. 2011).

This article's main goal is to assess the desired traits of the workplace from the viewpoints of current and future employees. It also assesses whether these two differing views on workplace traits can be consistent with each other. Today's organisations face various challenges, one of which is retaining talented employees. Identifying workplace characteristics helps managers understand what employees value in their organizations. Additionally, evaluating these characteristics provides a basis for developing HR policies and procedures that reflect the values and preferences of current employees and students as they get ready to become future employees or entrepreneurs. The article thus aims also to explore these issues to assist organisations in Albania develop modern HR policies, and quality jobs, that contribute to Albania's integration in the EU and enhance the experience of work for employees.

It is important to note that studies of this nature are lacking in developing countries like Albania, despite significant sociodemographic inequalities and the high migration rates which prevail in the country.

Literature review

The issue of job characteristics has attracted widespread research study during the last few decades. The job characteristics model (JCM), developed by Hackman and Oldham in 1975, is among the most recognised frameworks for understanding job adjustment and enhancement (Hossam 2009). According to Hackman and Oldham (1975), job characteristics can influence job outcomes by affecting an employee's perception of the value and responsibility of their job, as well as their control over job results, which in turn can influence employee work motivation. The authors highlight five 'core' job characteristics (skill variety, task significance, task identity and autonomy, and feedback) as possible motivating factors at work. Employees perform better, experience greater satisfaction and motivation, and are less likely to exhibit absenteeism or withdrawal behaviours when their jobs are designed with a focus on these five characteristics (Fraccaroli et al. 2017).

Humphrey and colleagues (2007) present a meta-analytic analysis of the JCM model, identifying a positive correlation between all five motivational characteristics and job satisfaction, growth satisfaction and intrinsic work motivation. Furthermore, their study reveals a strong relationship between these five characteristics of organizational commitment and involvement at work, along with a significant, albeit smaller, correlation with absenteeism. In conclusion, the employment characteristics that have a positive impact on employees' psychological states can enhance intrinsic

motivation at work, improve work performance quality and increase job satisfaction (Han et al. 2020).

Karasek's 1979 job-demand-control (JDC) model is recognised for its significant theoretical and practical contributions to organisational understanding of job quality. The model suggests that psychological strain comes not just from one part of the work environment, but also from how the demands of a job and the freedom that workers have to make decisions together affect them. The central assumption of the JDC model is that having control can reduce the impact of job demands on psychological strain and contribute to increased employee job satisfaction (Kain and Jex 2010).

The extended job-demands-control-support (JDACS) model explains how job characteristics influence employees' psychological wellbeing (Karasek and Theorell 1990). The JDACS model suggests that social support can help reduce stress (Rodríguez et al. 2001), while Hausser et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis, finding that jobs characterised by high demands, limited control and minimal social support were associated with lower job satisfaction. Research utilising the JDC and JDACS models has primarily focused on examining the relationship between job characteristics and negative indicators of workplace wellbeing (Chambel et al. 2017).

Demerouti et al. (2001) propose a job demands-resources (JDR) model, originally developed to investigate the causes of employee burnout and disengagement, as well as their effects on organisations. Job characteristics can be categorised as either demands or resources based on an individual's evaluation (Annink et al. 2016). Job demands refer to:

... aspects of the job that require sustained physical or mental effort and are therefore associated with certain physiological and psychological costs (Demerouti et al. 2001);

while job resources are defined as:

... aspects of the job that may aid in achieving work goals, alleviate job demands, and foster personal growth and development. (Demerouti et al. 2001).

Job demands and job resources are typically inversely related. High job demands, such as excessive work pressure and emotionally taxing interactions with clients, can hinder the effective utilisation of job resources (Hill et al. 2012). The JDR model makes a valuable practical contribution by analysing the occupational and personal characteristics that influence employee health and wellbeing and their associated consequences, such as job performance (Schaufeli and Taris 2014).

Methodology

The study reported on in this article was part of a larger research project examining interactions among a wider set of organisational and human resources issues, the goal being to provide a descriptive analysis of the importance of work and work characteristics to Albanian employees. For a better cross-generational perspective and a more thorough analysis, data was collected from both current employees

and university students as prospective employees, using the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) Work Orientation module. ISSP has run continuous cross-national surveys over the years, covering several important topics related to work, including work centrality, work characteristics, social inclusion, work-life conflict and job satisfaction.

The first part of the study provides an overview of the importance of work in people's lives based on the following statements:

A job is just a way of earning money – nothing more

and:

I would enjoy having a paid job even if I did not need the money.

Respondents indicate their level of agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (5).

After completing a look at the overall centrality of work, the study then turned to an examination of work characteristics which respondents regarded as desirable. Current and prospective employees were asked how important they considered the following work characteristics:

- job security
- a high income
- good opportunities for advancement
- an interesting job
- a job that allows someone to work independently
- a job that allows someone to help other people
- a job that is socially useful
- a job that involves personal contact with other people.

Respondents again indicated their level of importance on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 'not important at all' (1) to 'very important' (5).

Analysis

The study involved 287 participants, consisting of 142 students and 145 employees (see Table 1). Fifty-five per cent were women and 45 % were men; while 63 % were 18–30 years old, followed by 26 % who were 31–45. Around 48 % have completed or were pursuing master's degrees, while the same percentage had bachelor degrees. Though few, the remaining participants had secondary education or doctoral degrees, specifically among the sub-sample of employees.

Most of the students surveyed (68 %) were in their first year. The survey revealed that 41 % were studying finance and accounting, 34 % were focusing on business administration and 25 % were pursuing degrees in economics.

The data regarding employees indicate that the majority, 37 %, were employed in the information and communications sector, followed by 23 % who worked in financial and insurance activities. Sectors such as health, education and public services account for much of the remainder. More than half of employees, 55 %, were in non-

managerial roles while 14 % held low-level managerial positions, 20 % were middle managers and 10 % high-level ones.

Table 1 – Demographic data

Participants	
Students (n=)	142
Employees (n=)	145
Gender	
Female	55 %
Male	45 %
Age	
18–30	63 %
31–45	26 %
46–60	9 %
Over 60	1 %
Education level	
High school	2 %
Bachelor	49 %
Master's degree	48 %
Doctorates	1 %
Year of study (students)	
First year	68 %
Second year	5 %
Third year	27 %
Field of study (students)	
Finance	41 %
Business administration	34 %
Economics	25 %
Employment (employees)	
Information and communications	37 %
Financial and insurance activities	23 %
Health	10 %

Education	13 %
Public sector	8 %
Private services	9 %
Type of work (employees)	
Specialist roles below management	55 %
Low-level managers	14 %
Middle managers	20 %
High-level managers	10 %

Employers and students exhibit differing perceptions when analysing the average values of the significance of employment. Students had a greater average degree of agreement with the statement that ‘A job is merely a means of earning, nothing more’, achieving a mean score of 2.35 compared to one for employees’ of 2.09. However, such a low score indicates a broad level of disagreement with the statement, suggesting that a job is significant for both groups of respondents (students and employees alike).

Centrality of work

Responses to the statement ‘I would enjoy having a paid job even if I didn’t need the money’, reveal a similar, yet reversed, average, indicating notable consensus. Students have a mean score of 4.04, slightly exceeding that of employees (3.91). Many individuals thus express a desire to work for personal development or to gain experience, even when financial necessity is absent. Employees, however, who have typically achieved a certain level of professional success, exhibit less enthusiasm than students. Employees tend to adopt a realistic perspective on work that considers both intrinsic and extrinsic benefits, while students often maintain an aspirational viewpoint that prioritises the intrinsic rewards.

The centrality of work for both employees and students is connected to Albania’s long communist history which has left a permanent mark on the value of work in society. A study by Volk and Halder (2018) nevertheless highlights a growingly significant difference in such perceptions. In stark contrast to the value placed on work during the communist era, people in most former socialist countries in eastern Europe now view employment merely as a means to earn income.

Table 2 – Centrality of work

Statements	Mean	
	Students	Employees
A job is just a way of earning money – nothing more	2.35	2.09
I would enjoy having a paid job even if I didn’t need the money	4.04	3.91

Desirable work characteristics

Table 3 highlights the four most significant job characteristics for both students and employees: job security; having a high salary; opportunities for career advancement; and having an interesting job. Each group ranked these characteristics differently in terms of their importance.

Students rate career advancement (4.64) as their top priority, closely followed by job security (4.63), having a high salary (4.44) and having an interesting job (4.36). Students view career development as an essential aspect of work because it directly aligns with their long-term professional goals and aspirations. They aim to establish a stable career that provides opportunities for long-term growth and security. Professional development offers the chance for personal growth, increased responsibility, enhanced skills and knowledge, and potentially higher salaries in the future. These results align with the results of the study by Rosch and Collins (2020) which indicates that the younger generation aims to become workplace leaders in the future. According to Carnegie (2023), the younger generation mainly prioritises financial gain. For Generation Z, salary and compensation are more important than workplace engagement as their parents' struggles during the financial and economic recession of 2008–09 have fostered a strong desire for financial security.

In contrast, employees place job security (4.39) as their top priority, followed by having a high salary (4.35), an interesting job (4.32) and then opportunities for career advancement (4.23). The minimal variations in these results indicate that employees consider all of these characteristics important, although they prioritise them in a specific order. Compared to students, employees favour job security and higher pay as the main characteristics of job quality. Employees are active participants in the labour market and are faced with uncertainties arising from economic fluctuations and market dynamics. For them, job security and financial stability take precedence over career advancement as these are the factors that have a direct impact on their personal and family lives. Such findings correspond with research conducted by Volk and Hadler (2018) suggesting that high income holds less significance in western European countries like Norway while it is more important in eastern European ones like Albania.

Table 3 presents the ranking of job characteristics based on the priorities established by students and by employees. Students rated 'socially useful' as the fifth most valued characteristic (3.94), followed closely by 'working independently' (3.93), 'helping other people' (3.76) and 'contact with others' (3.51). Employees also placed 'socially useful' as the fifth most valued characteristic (4.16), followed by 'helping other people' (4.15), 'working independently' (4.10) and 'contact with others' (3.88).

When examining what students and employees seek in a career, it is evident that their perspectives on work values share both similarities and differences. Generally, employees place greater emphasis on the social and intrinsic aspects of work compared to students. Conversely, students typically favour extrinsic and future-oriented factors. Whereas employees value social interaction, autonomy and interpersonal relationships in their work, students focus more on job attributes which are related to security, compensation and opportunities for future career advancement.

Table 3 – Desired job characteristics

Statements	Mean	
	Students	Employees
Job security	4.63	4.39
High income	4.44	4.35
Good opportunities for advancement	4.64	4.23
An interesting job	4.36	4.32
A job that allows people to work independently	3.93	4.10
A job that allows people to help others	3.76	4.15
A job that is socially useful	3.94	4.16
A job that allows personal contact with others	3.51	3.88

Conclusion

This study has examined the characteristics of job desirability between two groups: current employees and recent university graduates. The findings reveal that, while these groups share some priorities, they also have distinct preferences regarding particular job characteristics.

The results indicate that both students and workers recognise the overall importance of having a job, but they differ in their views on what contributes to job satisfaction. Students are focused on their professional development and actively seek opportunities for growth, placing a strong emphasis on building their careers and achieving stability. In contrast, employees tend to prioritise security and salary over career advancement. According to research on generational and career stage differences (Zaniboni et al. 2013), students favour job security, a competitive salary and opportunities for advancement in their selected fields.

This outlook suggests a future-oriented mindset that stems from economic concerns and aspirations for consistency in an ever-evolving work landscape. Conversely, current workers with actual work experience place a higher emphasis on the intrinsic and social aspects of their jobs such as the ability to work independently, assist others, have a positive impact on society and get along with colleagues. Consistent with previous research (Perry et al. 2012; Truxillo et al. 2012), evidence shows that individuals benefit from the help of experienced colleagues who build relationships within the organisation and with other employees.

Human resource management policies and practices are significantly influenced by generational differences in how individuals assess both the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of a job. To develop and implement work tasks and HR operations effectively, companies must take these differences into account. For example, younger employees or those considering making job applications may favour positions that

provide clear opportunities for career advancement and financial stability. Conversely, strategies to retain current employees might include the creation of a more welcoming workplace, offering greater flexibility in work schedules and designing roles that contribute positively to society. As workers progress through their careers, their needs and aspirations evolve, and this two-pronged approach addresses that dynamic. Additionally, enhancing employees' intrinsic motivation can be achieved by implementing feedback systems, promoting collaboration and allowing individuals to work in ways that align with their preferences.

Human resource management strategies that address both the immediate needs of new employees and the long-term goals of existing ones can enhance workplace morale, retention and productivity. As Albania continues to integrate into the European labour market, future research could build on these findings by exploring changes in employment preferences over time or the differences across various industries.

The study has a couple of limitations worth mentioning in conclusion. First, a larger sample size, which includes students from various fields of study or employees from different industry sectors, could enhance the generalisability of the results. Second, incorporating qualitative analysis, such as would be achieved by conducting interviews, might provide more in-depth information about participants' choices regarding job characteristics and the overall nature of their perspectives on job quality. These limitations can serve as a foundation for future research.

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