



Reduce harmful work stressors.  
Improve job quality and health.

# Healthy Work **Strategies**

## **Increasing job control and reducing other job stressors among call center workers in England**

This participatory job redesign project was done in a call center department of the United Kingdom Civil Service that deals with transportation issues. The department consisted of call center agents, office staff, team leaders, and managers. The call center agents handled customer questions, payments, and bookings for transport organizations.

Based on discussions with University-based researchers, labor union representatives suggested to call center managers that efforts should be made to improve agents' job quality. For example, increase the variety of tasks employees do, their responsibility for tasks, their job control, the feedback they get on their work, and having clearer performance criteria. Such changes in working conditions could lead to more psychological well-being among employees and better job performance. The call center managers agreed and were supportive.

### **Survey**

First, a survey was given by the researchers to all employees (completed by 96 of 120, 80%), and team leaders completed a survey about each team member's performance.

"Job-related well-being" was measured by asking employees how much they felt content and enthusiastic and did not feel anxious or depressed. Employees were asked how much they felt the organization had fulfilled its obligations to offer job "variety, skill development, control, constructive feedback and meaningful work".

"Job performance" was measured using 12 questions, including in-role performance (for example, "This employee meets the formal performance requirements of the job") and behaviors that benefit other workers (for example, "This employee helps others who have heavy workloads") and that benefit the organization (for example, "This employee gives advance notice when unable to come into work").

### **Intervention Planning Process/Employee Participation**

Teams were then randomly assigned by the researchers to either an “intervention” group or a comparison (“control”) group.

Workers in the intervention group, facilitated by the researchers, worked in small groups to identify job tasks and obstacles that prevent effective working. Employees rated and discussed the advantages and disadvantages of different strategies to improve working conditions, employee psychological health and job performance. This process included a discussion of the survey results. Then, employees, management, and researchers met to propose changes to working conditions, which were agreed to by management. This process was not conducted in the comparison group.

## **Proposed Changes to Working Conditions**

### *Administrative tasks*

Call center agents were given responsibility for tasks and timeframes previously done by the team leaders. These included organizing break and lunch times, logging working time activities, logging performance data, rotating responsibility for collecting all agents’ performance data, and managing and recording agent flextime.

### *Complaint e-mails*

Agents were given greater discretion over whether to transfer “minor” customer questions and complaint e-mails to a centralized complaints unit and greater discretion over whether to respond to complaint e-mails immediately. Previously, all complaint e-mails had to be transferred, which was a source of much frustration to the call center agents.

### *Training*

Employees were provided with training on team administrative tasks, how to deal with complaints, and how to write e-mail complaint responses.

### *Performance management*

Agents and team leaders clarified the performance criteria by which agents were assessed. Agents and team leaders clarified and simplified the performance feedback form on which agents were provided their performance assessment, and agents were given responsibility for organizing their own and other team members’ performance statistics.

### *Team briefings*

Agents were given responsibility for running and delivering weekly team briefing sessions.

## **Carrying Out the Changes to Working Conditions (Implementation)**

Employee teams carried out the changes within four months and monitored the impact of the changes, on work time. The researchers attended team meetings to discuss progress and raised questions with management if employees were experiencing problems in implementation. At the last team meeting, employee representatives, team leaders, and managers confirmed that each initiative had been fully implemented.

## **Impact of Changes to Working Conditions**

Two to three months after changes to jobs were implemented, surveys were conducted among employees and team leaders (completed by 107 of 118, 82%). The surveys showed increases in job control in the intervention group, but decreases in the comparison group. They showed decreases in feedback in the comparison group, but no change in the intervention group. The surveys also showed decreases in well-being in the comparison group, but no change in the intervention group. All three of those results show a better situation over time in the intervention group than in the comparison group. (But, it is also unclear why feedback and well-being decreased in the comparison group.)

However, both groups showed increases in job performance, and only small changes in whether the organization “fulfilled its obligations to offer job variety, skill development, control, constructive feedback and meaningful work”. The researchers were able to sort out some of those impacts. For example, they found that the intervention improved job performance, if job control also improved. And, the intervention improved employee well-being and “organization fulfilling its obligations,” if job control and performance feedback improved.

One limitation of the study was that it was not possible to measure whether the effects of the changes in working conditions were sustained or improved over a longer time period, such as six months or one year.

## **Conclusions**

Positive effects of this participatory job redesign project were seen on some working conditions, and on employee psychological health and well-being. In addition, positive impacts of the project were seen on some other measures, such as job performance and “organization fulfilling its obligations” for those workers who had improved working conditions.

The key aspects of the project that seemed to make a difference were support from the labor union at the workplace, support from management, employee participation in the project (they helped to define the problems and proposed and carried out solutions), greater clarity on performance criteria, and surveys conducted before and after the project was carried out.

## Reference:

Holman D, Axtell C. Can job redesign interventions influence a broad range of employee outcomes by changing multiple job characteristics? A quasi-experimental study. *J Occup Health Psychol.* 2016;21:284-295.