Management 2.0

Job Crafting and Positivity: Learning from Research about Behavior at Work

Patricia Katopol

After the staff meeting, Melissa returned to her office, shut the door and sat down with a sigh. She was proud of her position as Assistant Collections Manager for a mid-sized private university library and had worked hard to get there, but lately the job had changed. Budget cuts meant fewer purchases. Faculty members sent heated emails asking why this book or that journal wasn't available. Even basics like paper for the printers had been cut. She was grateful that she still had a job and that no one had been laid off, but after two people resigned because there was no money for raises, no one had been hired to replace them, either. Everybody was doing a lot more work, and not always the work they had been trained to do. Melissa thought about leaving, but she knew that many colleges were having budget problems. Maybe the best thing to do was to stay put and keep quiet. If the administration instituted layoffs, she didn't want to be on the list.

If things are uncomfortable for Melissa, they are really uncomfortable for Sonia, the library's director, who has to deal with Melissa's issues as well as those of the rest of the staff. Anyone would be demoralized by the constant state of uncertainty, employees who were silent and sullen one minute and loudly complaining the next, and staff who had to be coerced to do the minimum work required, much less to do anything extra. In the midst of these difficult economic times, Sonia wondered how she could make life at work better for herself and her staff.

In this issue, I suggest how managers can support job crafting and positivity in order to create a productive workplace that is also a happier workplace. Think about what your organization would look like if all of your staff thought their work had meaning, that they were making a difference, and that someone (you?) appreciated their efforts? Managers seeking a positive environment, good employee morale and commitment, even in the face of difficulties and crisis, may want to consider how job crafting and positivity might operate in their organization.

Creating Meaningful Work by Job Crafting

With downsizing and the recession, many people are working in stressful environments. How can they do their work and that of laid-off co-workers as well? Economic conditions may make them feel they have no alternative but to keep their current job, with their mouths shut and heads down, or be unemployed. In addition to any economic concerns they may have, baby boomers have reached the age where they start to examine their lives and wonder whether the work they do is meaningful. Before retiring, can they look back on their working lives and say they made a contribution to the world? Whether they are in the job because they have to be or

because they still want to be, how can staff create more meaning in the work they do? One way is *job crafting*.[1]

What is job crafting and what does it have to do with meaningful work? Let's start with what kind of work is meaningful? Is it work that other people think is important? Do you have to be a firefighter or Peace Corps volunteer to have meaningful work? Thankfully, the answer is 'no.' Meaningful work is that which is significant. Work can be made significant by the worker, so that even a routine or distasteful job can be made meaningful.[2] One way people can make their work meaningful is to *craft* their job by exercising direction over it. [3] Jobs can be crafted via

- Task crafting – the employee can add or omit tasks from the job description or can decide how much attention, energy or time to give different tasks. For example, she may decide to give pointers on how to use the OPAC to new patrons at the reference desk rather than taking the easier route of just finding the resource herself.

- Relational crafting – employees determine with whom they will interact at work. A cataloger may decide to talk more to the reference staff about their jobs in order to obtain insights about the patron experience. This knowledge can inform her cataloging work.

- Cognitive crafting – changing how employees see the job. In this case, a student whose job is to shelve books starts to see his job as helping other students have an easier time finding the resources necessary to get their work done, rather than thinking of it as just putting books on the shelf.

Crafted jobs become meaningful and motivate people to do their best. They provide employees with an intrinsic sense of satisfaction, identity, and reward within the current job description. They can be proud of their work because they know that the extras that they do positively affects their organization.[4]

Almost every job has opportunities within it for innovation, change, and revision – if management is open to letting employees find and act upon them. Rather than being a 'cog in a wheel,' those who craft their jobs "may alter their work identities by altering how they use the physical space at work, the temporal dimensions of their work, and many other features of work."[5]

Shiny, happy, positive people

Job crafting may help workers be more positive because they have more ownership of the work. Positive people experience "joy, hope, gratitude, interest, serenity or inspiration. It is the day-to-day pleasant experiences that leave a person feeling happy and satisfied."[6] Cabrera suggests that being in a positive environment can provide mental, social, psychological, and health benefits.

The mind of a positive person is open to alternatives and can see a bigger picture, whereas negativity narrows the focus. So, because they see more (that is, they get more information), positive people make better decisions than those with a negative mindset.

Does your staff groan when someone's name is mentioned for a team? Socially, positive people have better relationships. Since so much work is done in teams or in combination with other organizations or organizational units, having positive people who are better at relationships and cooperating with others is a boon to the organization. Positive people "exchange more information, are better at coordinating their efforts and have less conflict."[7] People like positive people. They want to work with them. They are more cooperative and form relationships that help get work done.

Psychologically, positive people are more confident than those who are negative. They set higher goals for themselves and come back quickly from adversity. If they can't meet a goal, they don't give up, but try again, confident that they will reach the goal at some point.

Being positive also has tremendous health benefits. Positive people "have lower blood pressures, lower heart rates, lower levels of stress-related hormones, and stronger immune systems."[8] Positive employees have fewer sick days, lower health care costs, and are more productive than negative workers. They also enjoy longer lifespans. So, being positive is good for the individual and good for the workplace. Considering these benefits, how can you as a manager encourage a positive environment? Cabrera suggests six essentials:

Positive thinking – Did you know you can train yourself to be more positive? You can make the effort to see the good and ignore the little aggravations of life. When you meet with staff, do you always focus on what is wrong, or do you say something positive, something supportive? Are you grateful for the good work that your staff does? Do you tell them? Imagine if every time you saw your boss, your significant other, or your friends, that all they had to say to you was negative? How long would you want to be around them? How much effort would you put into the relationship? Probably not much. It is good for you to think about what you are grateful for, instead of focusing on what you don't have. This should not be news. I'm pretty sure most our mothers told us the same thing. Not only will being grateful make you a more positive person, it is also good for your staff to hear that you are grateful for what they do. Don't be afraid to praise people – and don't wait for big things to happen before you praise them. They won't slack off if you praise them – and they may even work harder for you.

Positive relationships – These are based on elements set forth previously, such as recognizing the good that others do, as well as trusting others to do their best, and respecting their opinions. Another aspect of forming relationships involves knowing something about the people with whom you work. What do they do for fun? What are their families like? I started my professional work life back in the days of power dressing and erasing every sign from your office that you were a wife or mother. For example, your office was not supposed to have pictures of your children because that might indicate that you weren't serious about your job. But partitioning off your life like that doesn't work in the long run. We spend so much of our waking life at work; the

environment is more positive if people feel that they can be themselves and that others can know them as their authentic selves.

Strengths – Are your employees working in jobs that use their strengths? They may not be able to tell you what their strengths are because people are often unaware of what they do well. Also, some people are uneasy calling attention to themselves. As a manager, you can help people learn what their strengths are. What do they do well? What do they do quickly that takes others a long time? What aspects of their job make them smile? Does this person get frequent complements from patrons or other staff? How good do they make others feel when they work with them? When you find strengths in your staff, comment positively on them as you see them. Don't let them go unnoticed and don't wait until the annual review.

Empowerment – When people know what their goals are and can work to reach them, they feel empowered. This isn't as simple as it seems. Almost all of us have worked in organizations where we were effectively stopped from doing our jobs well. Maybe we were set up to fail by not having the tools we needed to get the job done. Maybe we were hamstrung by having to work according to outmoded work processes when we could see how those processes should change. There's nothing like being told 'we don't do it that way,' without even examining the suggestion to see if it would be useful, to make someone feel powerless and disrespected. You can empower people by letting them have as much freedom to do their job as you can. Don't stand over them, don't micromanage. If the job is completed satisfactorily, does it really matter how it was done? Can't you trust your people to do the work you hired them to do?

Meaning – As discussed previously, most people want to find meaning in their work. At least part of that meaning can be ascertained by the organization's mission statement that is understood and agreed upon by the employees. Whether it is to serve the public, students and faculty, or industry workers, that mission to serve should be part of why everyone does his or her job in an information organization. On a daily basis, people often forget the mission because they are too busy with everyday tasks. You can help your staff find meaning by reminding them of the organization's mission. Remind staff that they aren't just attending to the nitty-gritty of work, but that what they do has an impact on people. Frequently, the services provided by information organizations can change lives. How great is that? How meaningful is that? Don't let the mission get lost in the everyday.

Well-being – Are you afraid to have fun at work because you think staff will like it too much and not do their jobs? Relax. People spend a lot of time in the workplace. If things are going well, your staff is putting in their full effort to get the work done. Occasionally, everyone could use a little downtime. I worked for one organization that had birthday cake and a get together for the whole organization to celebrate all of the birthdays each month. In addition to cake, it also gave staff 'approved time' to talk to people in other departments and learn what was going on across the organization. Expenditures for fun activities should be part of your budget. And even if you think you can't squeeze another dime out of your budget, there are still ways to have fun; you just have to be resourceful. On an organizational level, if you have the ability to influence employee benefits, can your organization offer child or elder care benefits? Can you offer a

flexible work day? Some organizations allow employees to donate sick days to co-workers facing long term illnesses and who have run out of their own sick days. Such policies foster relationships, support a belief that the organization is socially responsible, and make it likely that employees will take pride in working for their employer. You may come up with other polices that would make employees feel that they work for an organization that cares about them as an individual.

Finally, one way to encourage a positive environment at work is to discourage incivility.[9] In most organizations, you don't have to look far to find just a few examples of incivility – passing the blame, talking down to co-workers, making it difficult for people to do their jobs well, forgetting to say 'please' and 'thank you,' withholding information, using email to demean workers or to avoid talking to them in person, and the old office kitchen standard – leaving your mess for someone else to clean up. These little, and not so little, digs into everyday life at work create stress and wear people down. And because they happen so often, they may be considered just part of life at work, but they don't have to be, and they don't go unnoticed by the person on the receiving end. Incivility can destroy relationships, it can cause good workers to leave, and make people avoid being themselves at work, for fear of ridicule.

What can you do?

As a manager, you can help create a positive environment by allowing people to craft their jobs so that they find meaning in their work. You can encourage staff to keep your organization's mission in mind and how their personal beliefs and values align with those of the organization. You can encourage positive relationships and a sense of fun at work. And, you can help people find their strengths, which will benefit the organization, but also help the individual employee work with a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment. What would it be like to have staff that comes to work with a smile and puts in their full effort? What would it be like to have staff that feels empowered so that they aren't afraid to suggest innovations and who know that they are seen as complete human beings, not just a worker at a job? What would you do to create and work in an environment like that?

Notes

1. Berg, J., Dutton, J. and Wrzesniewski, A**.** (2013). Job Crafting and Meaningful Work, eds. Bryan Dik, Zinta Byrne and Michael Steger. *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace,* Washington : American Psychological Association, 81-104.

2. Ashforth, B. E. and Kreiner, G. E. (1999). "How Can You do it?": Dirty Work and the Challenge of Constructing a Positive Identity*, Academy of Management Review*, 24: 413-434.

3. Wrzesniewski, A. and Dutton, J. (2001). Crafting a Job: Revisioning Employees as Active Crafters of Their Work, *Academy of Management Review*, 26(2): 179-201.

4. Berg, J., Dutton, J. and Wrzesniewski, A**.** (2013). Job Crafting and Meaningful Work, eds. Bryan Dik, Zinta Byrne and Michael Steger. *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace,* Washington : American Psychological Association, 81-104.

5. Ibid, 195

6. Cabrera, E. (2012). Six Essentials of Workplace Positivity, People & Strategy, 35(1): 50-57.

7. Ibid, 51.

8. Ibid, 52.

9. Pearson, C. and Porath, C. (2009). *The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility Is Damaging Your Business and What to Do About It.* New York:Portfolio.

Patricia A. Katopol (patricia-katopol@uiowa.edu) is Assistant Professor of Library and Information Science at the University of Iowa.