

HOW TO CREATE WORKABLE JOBS?

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This article is a translation of the following article (in Dutch):

Van Houdt, S., Dams, F., & Eeckelaert, L. (2022). Hoe werkbare jobs creëren? *Over.Werk. Tijdschrift van het Steunpunt Werk*, 32(2), 84-92. Retrievable at:

<https://www.steunpuntwerk.be/publicaties/hoe-werkbare-jobs-creëren>

Abstract

Recent figures from the Flemish Workability Monitor show the most worrying workability scores in education, the health care sector and food industry. The scientific literature establishes a relationship between employees' work experience and job content and work organisation. Thus, in order to create workable jobs, work has to be organised differently. In both the food and residential care sectors, two innovation projects ran between 2018 and 2021 to adapt work organisation in an integral way.

Employees in the participating organisations were surveyed at the start and at the end of both projects using 'Werkmeter' ('WorkMeter'). WorkMeter is a scientifically-based worker survey, which focuses on work experience, job content, work organisation, work relations, working circumstances, and employment conditions. Based on these data, a cross-sectional workability analysis was conducted. These quantitative data were complemented by qualitative data on the change processes of each organisation studied, through participant observations and interviews.

Respectively 380 and 432 employees in four food companies and 1589 and 1277 employees in 18 residential care centres participated in both the first and second measurements. The results of these surveys showed that the job content of jobs differed. These differences also translated into work experiences: employees in jobs with few job demands and job controls ('passive jobs') or jobs with more job demands than job controls ('high strain jobs') experienced higher recovery needs and lower engagement. The results also showed that employees are more engaged when they have sufficient learning opportunities in their jobs. In both innovation projects, learning opportunities were increased by expanding horizontal and vertical task variation and by making teams more multidisciplinary. It was also found that employees experience less work stress when they can shift tasks themselves throughout the day and thus cope with unexpected disturbances in the daily planning. Finally, shared leadership and the support of direct managers in their change process were also found to be prerequisites for successful implementation of organisational change.

Introduction

The workability of jobs in the Flemish labour market has been mapped by the Stichting Innovatie & Arbeid (SERV) via the 'Workability Monitor' ('Werkbaarheidsmonitor') since 2004. Figures from the most recent 2019 survey show that education, the food industry and the health care sector in particular have worrying workability scores (Bourdeaud'hui, Janssens, & Vanderhaeghe, 2019).

Innovation projects ran in both the food and residential care sectors between 2018 and 2021. The aim of both projects was to improve the quality of work by organising work differently.

During these projects, nine food companies and 20 residential care centres were supported and guided in (re)designing their work organisation. On the one hand, this guidance consisted of forming

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'learning networks'. These are collective sessions where insights and experiences were shared and the progress of individual trajectories monitored. In addition, the participating organisations were also followed up and guided individually. The starting point was to place the ownership of the change process as much as possible within the organisations themselves.

Workitects, a centre of expertise on work organisation, coordinated both projects, acted as a 'sounding board' and shared insights on an integral approach to organisational design and development. In addition, Workitects also had a research role, with the central research questions being:

1. What do we learn in terms of workability in the participating food companies and residential care centres?
2. What is the impact of the change processes and organisational interventions on workability in the participating organisations?

The link between organisational structure and workability

What are workable jobs?

A workable job is defined as one in which there is a balance between the tasks the employee is expected to perform (job demands) and the resources or controls the individual has to meet these expectations (Karasek, 1979). Workability is an indication of good job design.

The job demands of an individual job are determined by the distribution of tasks between departments, between teams within a department and between individual employees within the same team. The division of responsibilities between departments and within hierarchical levels also limits the degree of autonomy in a job. In other words, the job demands as well as the job controls can be at the level of one's own job or the relationships between jobs or people (such as direct colleagues, superiors and other departments).

Three dimensions in balance

Research shows that it is relevant to further divide job demands and controls into three dimensions: knowledge-intensity, information-processing and planning, which is further broken down into planning decision and planning execution) (Nurski & Maenen, 2020). Within the *knowledge-intensity* dimension, we focus on the balance between the new knowledge and skills an employee needs when doing a job on the one hand, and the opportunities this employee has to learn while working on the other. In terms of *information-processing*, it is about what information an employee needs and to what extent this information is available to that employee. Whereas *planning decisions* (long-term planning) pertain to choosing what work ought to be done within a given time frame, *planning execution* (short-term planning) is about how the sequence and pace of work is organised once priorities have been rank-ordered by planning-decisions. In a job, it is important to set the right job controls against the right job demands.

The impact of job content and organisational structure on work experience

Job characteristics influence an individual's work experience. The term work experience refers to the way an employee experiences work. An individual can get energy from work. But work can also cost energy. In many jobs, positive and negative work perceptions occur together. For example, an employee may be very engaged (positive) but also experience stress (negative) at the same time. It is therefore important to pay attention to both dimensions when analysing work experience. A job

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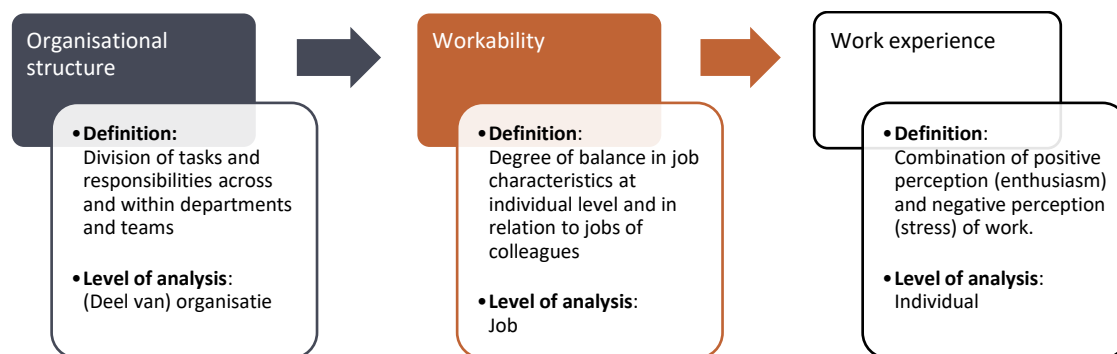
with a lot of stress, combined with a lot of enjoyment, can give a better work experience than when this stressful job gives little job enjoyment (De Witte, Notelaers, & Vets, 2010).

Although workability and work experience share some common characteristics, both concepts are analysed at a different level. Whereas workability says something about the quality of work, work perception is about how the employee experiences the job. Work experience is measured at the level of the individual, but is at least partly caused by characteristics of the job. It has been shown several times in the scientific literature that there is a strong relationship between characteristics of a job and the work experience of the individual performing the job (Hackman & Oldham, 1976; Karasek, 1979; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001; Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005).

Comprehensive framework on workability

The comprehensive framework for the workability analysis is shown in Figure 1. Organisational structure is defined as the distribution of tasks and responsibilities across departments or teams (macrostructure) and within those departments or teams (microstructure). This concept is analysed at the level of the organisation or part of it, such as a department or team. From this follows job workability, defined as the degree of balance in job characteristics at the individual level and in relation to colleagues. This concept is measured at the level of a job. The consequences of choices made regarding organisational structure and job content are reflected in employees' work experience. The latter concept is measured at the level of the individual. With this, both the Work Design literature (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006; Humphrey, Nahrgang, & Morgeson, 2007) and the Job Demands-Control/Resources models (Karasek, 1979; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001) are combined in a model that explains both stress (exhaustion) and engagement through the balance in job characteristics.

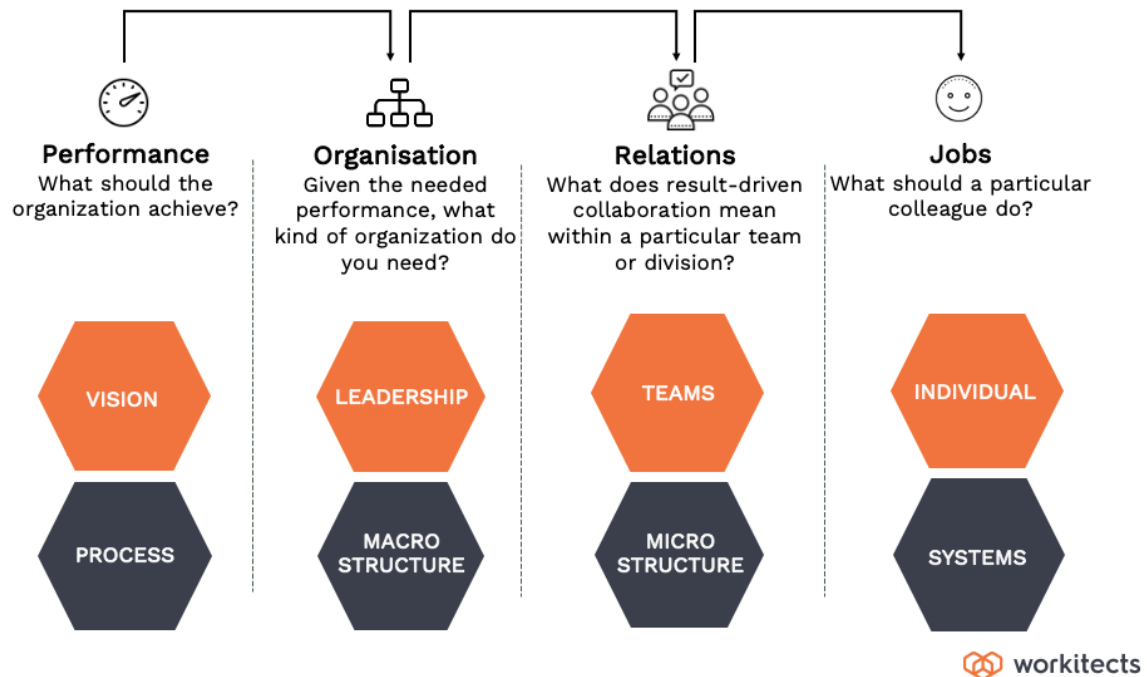
Figure 1: Structure, workability and work experience



Organisational canvas for an integral approach

The connection between the workability of an individual job and the underlying organisational structure becomes clear when an organisation is approached in an integral way. The 'organisational canvas' of Workitects (Figure 2) makes this explicit by relating eight essential building blocks for organisational design and development. This canvas provides a guide for organisations to make thoughtful choices to organise work differently. Over the course of both projects, the participating organisations carried out various interventions on the different building blocks of the organisational canvas (Maenen, 2018; Eeckelaert & De Craecker, 2021).

Figure 2: The organisational canvas by Workitects.



Method

The workability analysis in both surveys used an online workability survey, WorkMeter^{1,1,1}. This questionnaire was developed on the basis of scientific insights and years of practical experience to identify the effect of work organisation on workability. WorkMeter analyses well-being at work and gathers insights on work experience, job content, organisational structure, work relations, work circumstances and employment conditions. By uncovering the link between organisational structure and work experience, WorkMeter provides insights to detect the right actions to improve the workability of jobs in organisations.

Employees from the participating organisations in both the food and residential care sectors received an invitation to complete WorkMeter both at the start (in 2018 and in 2019) and at the end of the projects (in 2020 and 2021, respectively). Based on these data, supplemented by data on the change processes obtained through participant observations and in-depth interviews, multiple case studies were carried out.

Results

Response

In the food sector, the survey was conducted in nine Flemish food companies, with a total of 1433 respondents. In four of those companies, two surveys were involved, both at the start and the end of the project. At a first measurement in those four companies (2018), 380 employees completed the survey. At a second measurement (2020), there were 432. The response rate increased from 77% to 87% (Eeckelaert & Nurski, 2021).

In 2019, 1697 out of 2203 employees from 20 residential care centres participated, corresponding to a response rate of 77%. In 2021, 1277 out of 1982 employees from 18 residential care centres

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completed the survey (two residential care centres did not participate in the second measurement). The response rate was 64% (Dams, Van Houdt, & Eeckelaert, 2022).

Differences in job content and work experience between functional groups

To make statements about job content, employees in both sectors were divided into a number of functions. Employees in food companies were categorised into four major functional groups, while employees in residential care centres were categorised into 13 jobs groups.

The cross-sectional analysis of the questionnaires in nine food companies showed that, on average, the managerial/staff and production support group (support functions such as technical service, quality, ...) have a more 'active job' compared to their colleagues from production and logistics. This means that on an individual level they have more job demands and more autonomy, particularly for the knowledge and planning dimensions. For information, the available job controls turned out to be insufficient for the job demands.

In terms of work experience, these job characteristics translated into higher perceived time pressure and a greater intent to leave. The group of managers/staff also reported the highest recovery need, but also the highest engagement and enthusiasm. The concept of 'recovery need' involves the extent to which employees need to recover after a day's work and gauges work stress. In production support, recovery need was lowest among the four groups, as were engagement and satisfaction.

Production and logistics employees had more 'passive jobs', with fewer individual job demands and job controls. Especially for knowledge and planning, the job controls were lower. The average time pressure, recovery need and intent to leave were found to be lower for logistics and production employees than the industry average. Logistics employees were also on average more satisfied than their colleagues in the other job groups (Eeckelaert & Nurski, 2021).

As in the food companies, the managers of the residential care centres involved reported the most job demands and controls. Logistics, cleaning and kitchen workers appeared to have rather 'passive jobs'. Of all jobs, they reported the least job demands and autonomy. Cleaning employees were found to have more autonomy than their colleagues in logistics and kitchen.

The jobs of nurses and care assistants were found to be unbalanced across all participating residential care centres. They experienced more job demands than controls. Especially for knowledge, and to a lesser extent also for information, there was an imbalance among nurses. Furthermore, there was also a large variation in job content between the care workers at different residential care centres.

These differences in job content also translated into the work experience scores. Directors and managers in residential care centres were the most enthusiastic and experienced a relatively low recovery need. Nurses and care assistants experienced lower engagement and higher recovery needs (Nurski, Eeckelaert, & Van Houdt, 2020).

Impact of the changes on job content and work experience

The results of the second measurements provided insight into the impact of work organisational changes on job content and work experience.

In the four food companies where two measurements took place, employee engagement increased by 10% and recovery need decreased by 12%. Across the four companies and all employees, autonomy in terms of knowledge and short-term planning was found to have increased markedly (Eeckelaert & Nurski, 2021).

Across all residential care homes and functions studied, over the course of the project, engagement was found to decrease by 4% and recovery needs to increase by 10%. The variation in job content at the start of the project for both job demands and controls in terms of knowledge, information and planning increased. These differences in changes in job content also translated into a different impact on work experience: in some residential care centres lower work experience was measured, while in other residential care centres work experience improved (Dams, Van Houdt, & Eeckelaert, 2022).

On-the job learning increases the enthusiasm of workers

The analyses based on the WorkMeter data showed that knowledge autonomy has a strong impact on employee engagement. In other words, having the freedom to learn new knowledge and skills on the job is highly motivating (Nurski & Maenen, 2020). Learning opportunities can be increased in different ways. The participating organisations in both projects implemented various interventions that can have an impact on employees' learning opportunities. Through 'job enlargement', employees can take on additional executive tasks. In a food company, for example, this could involve operators learning to operate multiple machines or production lines, thus creating more variation and allowing the company to work more flexibly (Eeckelaert & Nurski, 2021). In a residential care home, this could mean making all employees in a (multidisciplinary) team responsible for aspect 'life and living' of residents or by introducing project work (Dams, Van Houdt, & Eeckelaert, 2022). A second type of intervention involved 'job enrichment'. In this case, the job is enriched with specific regulation tasks. In food companies, for example, operators were given more impact on daily scheduling and/or quality control (Eeckelaert & Nurski, 2021). Also in residential care centres, employees were given more regulating tasks around planning, quality, ordering, administrative follow-up and teamwork, among others (Dams, Van Houdt, & Eeckelaert, 2022).

Planning autonomy lowers the need for recovery

Analyses showed that disturbances in the daily planning have a stress-increasing effect. Being able to cope with unexpected events during the day, by shifting tasks yourself, was found to be an important buffer against stress. Increased autonomy in work scheduling was observed in the four food companies. This increase also helped explain the decrease in recovery needs. In the residential care homes surveyed, there were found to be large differences between planning demands and autonomy. Giving staff more responsibility can help cope with disturbances in planning. More multidisciplinary collaboration can also have an impact on this (Dams, Van Houdt, & Eeckelaert, 2022).

Collaboration in teams

Creating more multidisciplinary teams also creates new interdependencies towards colleagues in terms of knowledge, information and planning. The analyses showed that when employees reported that colleagues had valuable knowledge, they experienced more learning opportunities in their daily work. A similar pattern was true for information: employees who reported needing information from their colleagues reported having a lot of access to information. Regarding scheduling, the results revealed that the more employees depended on team members for their planning, the less opportunities they had to manage their schedules themselves. This relationship is rather small, but significant.

In the food companies, the results showed that knowledge sharing had generally increased across all participating organisations within their own team or department. The results also showed that

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employees in food companies were more likely to step in for each other within the team (Eeckelaert & Nurski, 2021).

For the residential care homes studied, results related to team interdependence and availability in terms of knowledge and planning also showed significant differences (Dams, Van Houdt, & Eeckelaert, 2022).

The analyses further showed that there was a strong link between emotional and instrumental support from colleagues: colleagues who help each other in terms of knowledge, information and planning also assist each other more on an emotional level and vice versa.

Towards a different style of leadership

A different way of working also requires a different way of leading. The results from the residential care project showed that head nurses experienced fewer learning opportunities at the second measurement and had fewer opportunities to cope with increased disturbances. This may also explain the lower engagement and higher recovery needs of head nurses at the end of the project (Dams, Van Houdt, & Eeckelaert, 2022).

Employees in five residential care centres reported experiencing more steering and coaching from their manager. The managers in these residential care centres had attended a programme to strengthen themselves in their new role as coaches. The emotional support employees experienced from their manager was found to have increased in these residential care centres. Within the residential care project, team members were found to have become less dependent, on average, on their supervisors for obtaining knowledge and information. Interdependence for planning had increased, however. Supervisor availability for both knowledge, information and planning had decreased (Dams, Van Houdt, & Eeckelaert, 2022).

Conclusion and reflection

A key aim of both innovation projects in the food and residential care sector was to increase the workability of jobs by organising work smarter and differently. The results from the first measurement showed clear workability problems in specific jobs, such as support functions, care and nursing workers in residential care centres, and production workers in food companies. At the start of the innovation projects, there were big differences between the organisations in starting point, conditions, type of interventions, etc.

In both projects, a longitudinal impact analysis in terms of workability was carried out, and this in 18 residential care centres and four food companies, respectively. Longitudinal research into the impact of organisational changes and workability is rare. In this respect, the workability survey WorkMeter not only provides insight into the work experience, but also into job content, organisational structure and work relations, and can therefore make the link between work organisation and work experience.

Such research also has some limitations. Organising work differently requires an integral approach, with changes on one of the eight building blocks of the organisational canvas (see Figure 2) also having an impact on the other building blocks. Moreover, the participating organisations implemented different interventions on different building blocks. It was therefore not possible to check the impact of one specific intervention. Other factors could also have an impact (see *infra*).

The results showed that there were large differences in job content between jobs. These differences also explain the difference in job perception. For instance, managers are more likely to have active jobs with high job demands, but have also many job controls and a good work experience. When

employees experience more job demands than controls, the job is not balanced. This was the case for care workers and nurses in residential care centres, among others. These jobs reported higher recovery needs and lower engagement.

Different job characteristics have different impacts on employees' work experience. Being able to learn new knowledge and skills while on the job increases engagement. If you want to increase employee engagement, check where in their current job there is still room for additional learning or redistribute tasks within the team. Give employees the opportunity and space to learn. Being able to cope with unexpected events by shifting tasks throughout the day reduces the need for recovery. Try to limit disturbances in daily planning, for example, by making appointments or giving employees more responsibilities so they can cope with these disturbances.

The results showed that implemented changes in work organisation have an impact on the workability of jobs and employees' work experience. The impact analysis in the two sectors resulted in both some similar and different insights. For instance, employee engagement in food companies increased and recovery needs decreased. In the residential care centres studied, there were large differences in the changes in work experience. These differences can partly be explained by the fact that some residential care centres had not yet implemented certain (planned) organisational changes or just before the second measurement. Moreover, other factors that had an impact on the change process, the workability of jobs and employees' perceptions of work, such as corona pandemic, staff shortages and substitutions, were also present.

At the team level, the results learned that interdependence with colleagues in terms of knowledge and information promoted individual knowledge and information autonomy. Planning interdependence hinders planning autonomy. This has implications for building multidisciplinary teams: bring together employees who need each other's knowledge and information in their own work, but avoid making employees dependent on each other's planning. Furthermore, the results also showed that employees who work well together, also support each other emotionally and vice versa. To improve emotional support in a team, it is best to look at how colleagues can support each other in terms of competence development.

A different way of working also requires a different way of leading. Results from the residential care project showed lower engagement and higher recovery needs of head nurses at the end of the project. Head nurses experienced a tension due to their own changing role and at the same time the expectation to support their team in the change. This tension field put head nurses in a stressful position (Marichal & Wouters, 2018). To assimilate their new role, the managers needed additional support, such as additional training, courses and/or structural intervention moments.

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