Chapter 11 - Alternative working

Answers to end of chapter questions

1. What are the various techniques of work redesign and how meaningful are they as ways of redesigning work?

Basic approaches to the redesign of work involve rotating the jobs that workers do and enlarging individual work tasks. This permits a greater variety for individuals and ensures that particularly unpleasant or monotonous jobs are shared. Also merging simplified tasks to form an extended range of work means that there is a limit placed on the extent to which jobs can be subdivided. However, some of these methods are thought to be inadequate as a basis for genuinely humanizing work. The methods often make only cosmetic changes and, at worst, may bring about an actual deterioration in working conditions.

2. What are the benefits of ‘group technology’ in redesigning work and in what ways can it be applied?

Group working has many potential advantages. There are manifest social and psychological gains in working co-operatively with others, rather than on isolated tasks; also many of the requirements of job enrichment can be built into the group context. Group tasks by their very nature tend to be based on complete operations and involve greater complexity and variety than fragmented tasks. Groups can be self-regulating, reducing the need for supervision and increasing members’ perception of control. Furthermore, it is relatively easy to allow for job rotation and the fair allocation of tasks within a group system of working—indeed it can be beneficial to allow group members to arrange this for themselves.

3. As strange as it sounds, some work redesign experiments have been abandoned because they were too successful. How could this happen?

It is possible that the effect of the newly created work roles do not fit with organizational values and objectives.

4. The benefits of human-centred work seem self-evident. Why then has it proved so difficult to apply in practice?

In addition to the immediate context of work groups, the economic demands for profitability in organizations and established technological practices impose powerful constraints on what may be done to improve work. Efforts at work humanization, it has been suggested, have often overlooked or underestimate these realities of organizations.

*Work design* - An important though often unacknowledged factor constraining work redesign is the process by which work is designed in the first place. Particularly with
complex production, the jobs that workers perform have to be seen not as discrete tasks but as the final link in a long chain, beginning in the original design phase and continuing through product and process development. In these early stages little or no consideration will have been given to the human needs of the workers who will eventually carry out production. As Child (1984, pp. 38–9) has pointed out: ‘heavily capitalized mass production plant . . . has generally imposed the greatest constraint upon work restructuring’. Inflexible production processes, where individual tasks are highly integrated, can prevent all but the most superficial of changes.

Furthermore, while we may assume that programmes of work redesign are based on human criteria, in reality the reverse is often the case: the rationale of job design may continue to constrain attempts to humanize work. Thus, in a survey of work design programmes in Europe, Lupton and Tanner (1980) found that production engineers initiated the majority of projects, and efficiency-related goals were uppermost. This was despite the fact that projects were mostly publicized in terms of the benefits for workers.

5. How have the pragmatic constraints of labour markets affected the nature of employee involvement?

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6. Consider the priorities of human-centred work and the socio-technical approach, and compare these with the priorities of employee involvement. What are the similarities and differences?

The socio-technical approach to work redesign is advanced by the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations. It is based on seeing work as a system of social relations between workers, as well as a technical system of formal design. Modern versions of employee involvement bear little resemblance to actual socio-technical principles, while EI itself is management initiated and not a product of labour-management interaction (Ackers et al., 1991; Ramsay, 1991; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992b; McArdle et al., 1995). Current forms of work design have ‘a much more direct relationship with organizational performance’ (Procter and Mueller, 2000) and are used to instill new cultures whereby employee motivation lines up with central goals. As Buchanan (1992) has argued, there has been a change in perceptions on the part of both managers and workers. When the idea of giving employees more scope at work was first put forward it was seen as inappropriate and risky by managers whose experience had been that of conventional organizations and the direct control of labour. But changed conditions have meant that adaptive organizations and employee initiative are essential for remaining competitive. In new design organizations,
Buchanan points out, realistic expectations widen the area of acceptability of employee discretion.