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Design Work to Prevent Burnout

A new model for improving work design supports change that increases employee engagement and reduces stress.

By Sharon K. Parker and Caroline Knight

MANAGERS ARE RESPONSIBLE for keeping employee morale and productivity high. Yet when they try to reduce burnout and improve worker well-being, many report not knowing where to start or what to do.

Absent clear solutions, they tend to focus on fixing the person, such as by offering the overworked employee productivity tips and encouragement to assert healthy boundaries, or providing stressed-out workers with training in mindfulness techniques or yoga classes at lunchtime. However, fix-the-worker strategies do little to resolve stress caused by long hours and unreasonable workloads.

The problem is not new but remains urgent and costly. HR leaders are painfully aware that disengagement and burnout are significant threats to productivity and talent retention. In the U.S., 67% of workers report feeling disengaged from their work, and 49% intend to leave their current job.[1] Meanwhile, burnout is rampant. In a 2023 survey of U.S. adults, the American Psychological Association found that younger workers, especially, are at risk: Fifty-eight percent of 18-to-34-year-olds said that their daily level of stress is overwhelming.[2] Disengaged, stressed-out employees do not perform at their best, and when one of them quits, it costs an estimated 30% to 200% of that employee's salary to recruit and train their replacement.[3]

A better approach is to create healthier and more sustainable jobs through good work design. Decades of research show that when jobs include positive characteristics such as autonomy, variety, and social support, employees are more satisfied, motivated, and committed to the organization, and they perform better.[4] Meanwhile, minimizing work characteristics that harm people, like excessive time pressure, is crucial to preventing burnout.

But herein lies the challenge: Really improving work design requires leaders to consider more than three dozen positive and negative work characteristics. This level of detail enables them to gain a nuanced understanding of work design, but deciding which characteristics are most important to address can be overwhelming. Furthermore, the two most common models for designing work are difficult to apply and are incomplete in crucial ways.

The Job Characteristics Model, first introduced by organizational psychologists Greg R. Oldham and J. Richard Hackman in 1976, identified five important characteristics for work motivation and well-being.[5] However, many more characteristics have since been identified, and the model does not cover job demands that drive burnout, such as workload. The 2001 Job Demands-Resources model captures job demands, but it defines job resources (which are similar to "work characteristics") broadly and expands the list to more than 30.[6]

In this article, we'll introduce readers to our SMART Work Design model. This model captures and synthesizes the most important characteristics for worker well-being and performance from both the Jobs Characteristics and Job Demands-Resources models into five dimensions: stimulating work, mastery, autonomy, relational work, and tolerable demands (thus the SMART acronym).[7] HR leaders,

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managers, and employees can use the model to identify aspects of work that lead to disengagement and burnout and then create a healthier work environment and improve performance. (See "A Model for Making Work Smarter," p. 32.)

The Key Elements of Good Work Design

Jobs that workers are more likely to find engaging and fulfilling have the following positive characteristics.

Stimulating work provides task variety, the chance to develop and use one's skills, and the opportunity to solve challenging and meaningful problems. Jobs that lack stimulation involve highly repetitive tasks that give individuals no chance to improve their skills or gain new ones. Because stimulating work makes employees feel challenged and allows them to grow, it fosters job satisfaction, engagement, and well-being.

Mastery occurs when people understand their roles and responsibilities, get feedback from peers or supervisors, and see how their work fits into the bigger picture. Most workers want to perform well, yet to do that, they need to know what they are trying to achieve and how well they are doing. A lack of mastery is stressful and undermines worker performance.

Autonomy ensures that workers have control and influence over when and how they work, including their schedules, opportunities to take initiative, and their daily decisions. Workers with high autonomy develop a sense of ownership, making them more creative and innovative and more likely to apply effort.

Relational work recognizes the human need to belong, which is vital to feeling engaged and performing well. It provides opportunities for connection with other people through social support, social contact, and teamwork. It also offers workers the sense that they are making a difference in the lives of others. When workers have support from their boss and peers, they cope better under pressure. Lack of connection and support at work can contribute to loneliness.[8]

Tolerable demands refers to the level of effort that workers consider manageable. Job demands can become intolerable when workers must routinely put in excessive overtime to meet them, suffer abuse from customers or colleagues, or are given conflicting priorities. These conditions create extreme pressure that can overwhelm people's ability to cope. Ensuring that demands are tolerable is one of the most powerful ways to prevent worker burnout.

These five categories are interrelated and should be considered together when making work design decisions. For example, high job autonomy is most appropriate for workers who have attained a certain degree of mastery — not for those who are still learning their roles. Heavy workloads can feel more tolerable if workers have autonomy over their tasks and the support of their colleagues.

The SMART Work Design model can provide insights and guidance to individuals and managers seeking to fix a problematic situation with job crafting (more on that later). But work design problems are often systemic in organizations, and the model can have greater impact when leaders use it to diagnose work design issues, align work design with corporate policies, manage change, and improve performance management.

Start With Data

The first step in improving work design is to assess its current state, using employee surveys, interviews, and observations. The most comprehensive assessment would incorporate all three.

Organizations may want to add questions about work design to the usual employee surveys about engagement or well-being. However, a stand-alone survey — such as one we developed — can provide deeper insight.

Following up through employee interviews or focus groups can help decision makers understand the context of the survey findings and get ideas for improvements. For example, if employees rated their

THE RESEARCH

- The authors conducted three studies to develop and validate the SMART Work Design model.
- First, to categorize a range of job characteristics, they surveyed 1,107 professionals globally who were participating in an online work design course. They then used higher-order factor analysis to determine the structure of the SMART model.
- To validate the model, the authors conducted a longitudinal study involving 709 workers recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk. In the first survey, they asked participants about their work characteristics and used higher-order factor analysis to confirm the model structure. In the second survey a week later, they asked participants how meaningful and challenging their work was and their sense of connection and belonging. In the third survey a week later, they again asked how satisfied respondents were with their jobs. Path analysis determined the connection between SMART work characteristics, meaningful and challenging work, and job satisfaction.
- Finally, the authors surveyed 108 professionals in an MBA program about the work design of their jobs and asked the students' managers to rate their performance. A regression analysis showed a correlation between the SMART categories and job performance.

Small, locally led work design changes can have a powerful effect on work quality.

jobs low for stimulating work, interviewers could ask about any aspects of their jobs they find repetitive and what would make them more interesting.

Leaders and managers can observe their employees to better understand the tasks that individuals perform, how they interact, and the demands they face. Seeing employees managing long lines of angry customers can reveal the source of low tolerable demand ratings. Observing that no one comes into the office provides insight into why relational work scores may be low.

Having diagnosed the key work design issues with data and observations, managers and employees will ideally work together on solutions. After implementing the solutions, the SMART dimensions can be assessed again to determine their effectiveness.

Five Ways to Use the SMART Work Design Model

Now let's look at how the model can be applied at the corporate and team levels. Using it in multiple ways, with an emphasis on collaboration between employees and their managers, may deliver the most benefits.

Redesign teams' work. When an organization identifies ways in which it can improve work design, it may decide to address them for the whole organization or focus on specific teams. Our research finds that small, locally led work design changes can have a powerful effect on work quality.

For example, Australia's health and social services sector was facing rising workers' compensation claims due to burnout when we were invited to conduct research with eight organizations. We surveyed 1,300 workers about their work, mental health, and well-being.[9] One in five reported experiencing burnout.

Intolerable demands were a common challenge. Workers also lacked control over their workloads and clarity about their responsibilities. Observations and interviews revealed that typically, a small staff was responsible for many physically and mentally draining tasks that could change daily — including washing and dressing clients, managing family members' emotional needs, completing compliance paperwork, and training new employees.

We identified a few teams facing significant work design challenges in each organization that were led by managers willing to try new ideas. We then facilitated workshops to train employees and managers about work design and generate suggestions for improving their jobs. Participation — that is, fully involving the people who were doing the work in coming up with ideas to redesign it — was a central goal.

One team of caregivers working in a residential elder care facility pinpointed a cause of their stress: the morning handover process. At the start of every shift, a nurse briefed the caregivers. If the nurse was held up, caregivers did not get this briefing. Consequently, they lacked information about residents' needs and what to do about them (reduced mastery). Their start time was delayed as they waited for briefings that did not happen, and they had to stop throughout the day to get needed information from the nurse. Time pressure increased, making job demands less tolerable and reducing caregivers' sense of control (less autonomy). Poor communication sometimes led to conflict among staff members (impaired relational dynamics).

Front-line staff members suggested a solution that addressed all four issues: installing whiteboards in staff common areas that listed the information nurses typically conveyed during the morning handover, such as changes in care needs, tasks for the day, and patient charts that needed updating. Caregivers could review the whiteboards when they arrived at work and add to them as needed. They could then start their shifts promptly with the critical information they required. In addition, being allowed to add to the boards themselves lent more variety to their day and offered opportunities to take on decision-making responsibility.

In follow-up interviews, workers reported that their demands had become more tolerable and that their autonomy, mastery, and relational dynamics had improved. "Instead of having to chase around after the RN ... we are responsible now," one worker said. "We just look at the board, and then we know what we are doing. It's good for work, good for residents, good for us."

Align people management systems. Work redesign often requires complementary changes to people management practices and policies. For example, companies that have successfully increased worker job autonomy consistently identify the need

A Model for Making Work Smarter

Grouping the specific tools of work design by the job characteristics that managers seek to improve can make it easier to identify the most effective tactic in a particular situation.

S	M	A	R	T
Stimulating work	**Mastery**	**Autonomy**	**Relational work**	**Tolerable demands**
Skill variety Task variety Problem-solving Information processing	Clear role and responsibilities Feedback from the work Feedback from supervisors and peers	Decision-making autonomy Autonomy over timing of work tasks Autonomy over work methods	Social support from supervisor and peers Sense of task significance Connection with beneficiaries	Manageable workload and time pressure Low work-home conflict Low role conflict

to make broader changes, including hiring people who thrive on taking initiative and giving them decision-making authority. In addition, they will often revamp how they judge performance to include criteria such as skill development.[10]

One example of successful system alignment comes from a large government agency that wanted to improve work quality. While leaders addressed the work design needs of specific teams, HR also used the SMART model to revamp agencywide policies and practices, including the performance management process.

In annual performance conversations, managers tended to assume that workers' attitudes, skills, and abilities were entirely what determined whether they met their goals. Consequently, managers favored "fix the worker" strategies, such as offering people training to improve their personal efficiency or encouraging them to engage in wellness activities to reduce stress. Neither the workers nor the managers were fully aware of how work design was influencing well-being and performance.

The agency started by training managers and employees to use the SMART model to guide performance reviews. It then encouraged them to explore whether any struggles with meeting performance goals were due to poor work design, such as a lack of autonomy in responding quickly to customers. HR also updated performance review templates to ensure that these conversations became a regular part of employee appraisals.

As awareness of work design as a factor in performance increased, managers took steps to improve their team members' jobs. One worker had an "aha" moment that led her manager to restructure how the team communicated. This worker was geographically remote from most of her colleagues and interacted with them online. She recognized that the sense of isolation she experienced was demotivating and impaired her work performance. The manager added more regular meetings and scheduled more face-to-face gatherings in response.

Build leader capability for SMART work design. Leaders and managers create employees' roles and have the power to modify their activities and responsibilities. If they understand SMART work design and can apply the model, they will be better equipped to address and, more importantly, prevent employee disengagement and burnout.

For example, managers participating in an executive education course were assigned to assess the level of SMART work design within their teams by surveying team members. They then held one-on-one meetings with their team members to gain insight into each person's survey responses. Together, the managers and employees identified specific problems and developed solutions, which they tested.

One manager gave an employee who needed more stimulating work the opportunity to explore new projects. Another put work design on the weekly team meeting agenda. Each week, team members discussed one dimension of the SMART model and

shared ideas for building up that element.

Training leaders in the SMART model, embedding responsibility for work design into managers' performance expectations (like the government agency above), and rewarding managers who create good work designs for their teams can all help to improve work quality across an organization.

Guide and evaluate operational change. When organizations introduce any change to their operations, it may affect workers' engagement and well-being. Evidence shows, for example, that considering and monitoring work design issues when deploying new technology is crucial to ensuring that its full benefits are realized and preventing harm to workers.[11]

Nevertheless, leaders often don't systematically consider how such changes affect work quality. Leaders can prevent unintended consequences by building the SMART model into the change management process.

A counterexample makes the point. We studied a mining company that introduced fully automated trains to make transporting minerals from mines to ports more efficient. Operators ran the new trains remotely from thousands of kilometers away. But the company retained more than 500 drivers in case the automation technology failed.

Such failures were rare, however, and the drivers primarily performed low-skill tasks like polishing the trains. When we surveyed them, we found that over half were dissatisfied with their jobs, more than one-third reported feeling bored at least half the time, and one-third intended to look for another employer within a year or two.

The drivers' jobs scored below our research benchmarks on three SMART dimensions: stimulating work, mastery, and autonomy. In interviews, drivers reported feeling they were forgetting how to drive because they had little chance to do it and felt less confident when they did need to recover broken-down trains. Opportunities to think on their feet or think creatively were also infrequent, making their jobs less challenging, while the remaining tasks lacked meaning. Although their knowledge had been vital to the automation process, many drivers felt they were now "on the scrap heap."

They also lacked clarity about their roles. The drivers were unsure which tasks they were allowed to do when they weren't driving trains. They felt uncertain about their future with the company, a situation compounded by an absence of regular feedback: Supervisors failed to deliver required performance reviews and tended to give feedback only when something went wrong.

Finally, the drivers lost the independence they had enjoyed when transporting cargo. Even minor tasks, like changing light bulbs, were closely supervised. They felt they had no input into key decisions that affected their environment, schedules, or work methods.

We shared all of this diagnostic information with the company's drivers, site managers, and HR staff, and they jointly developed action plans to address some of the issues. Drivers' roles were expanded to include more meaningful tasks — such as training recruits — and they were allowed to rotate to different ports to keep the work varied. Implementation of these changes, and others, is ongoing.

In the future, the company can consider the SMART dimensions before making any change by asking relevant questions and discussing them with employees. How might automation affect whether employees' work remains stimulating? To what extent will workers still complete whole tasks — an opportunity to demonstrate mastery? How could automation be implemented so that workers could retain some autonomy? Managers can conduct assessments before and after changes to ensure that work design issues are being successfully addressed.

Encourage and support employee job crafting. Job crafting is a bottom-up work design practice that offers quick wins for struggling teams and individuals without engaging in a bureaucratic process. Research suggests that job crafting can improve job satisfaction and reduce stress.[12]

Although job crafting relies on individual initiative, it differs from fix-the-worker solutions in that it focuses on changing the work, not the person. In cooperation with their managers, employees can shape their work tasks and responsibilities to align with their strengths, abilities, and career goals.

One participant in our online job crafting program for managers did just that. When she assessed the SMART dimensions of her job, she saw that she

Introducing any change to operations may affect workers' engagement and well-being.

was not learning new skills or receiving feedback from her colleagues and clients. And her workload left her feeling that the demands of the job were not tolerable.

This participant decided to craft her job — counseling unemployed people — by creating free events for clients and their friends and families to learn job success strategies. She was excited about the idea because it aligned with her community-building values.

When the first event was over, she collected verbal feedback from participants, which was very positive and made her feel highly engaged. She included her support officer, whom she supervised, in the next event to share the work and spread ownership. She also introduced an online process to gather feedback more efficiently.

Lastly, she tackled her workload. Her support officer was spending the equivalent of two days per week driving to the office and sitting in meetings. By changing to a single virtual meeting per month, she could reduce the time her support officer spent commuting and delegate more responsibility to them — an outcome that satisfied them both.

WORKERS SHOULDN'T BE LEFT TO COPE on their own with poorly designed jobs that cause burnout and dissatisfaction. The SMART Work Design model can help organizations understand how to change work to improve employee mental health and well-being, increase engagement and job performance, and promote creativity and innovation.[13]

The model can be used in multiple ways. Once leaders and managers have surveyed employees to identify the dimensions in need of change, they can develop appropriate strategies. These might be local or organizationwide work redesigns with complementary corporate policy and practice changes.

SMART work design can also be built into leadership competency frameworks and change management models so that managers and bosses learn how to lead people and manage change more effectively. Employees and managers can be trained in job crafting to improve work from the ground up. Whatever strategies organizations adopt, employees, managers, and other stakeholders should collaborate to develop new work designs.

In this time of widespread disengagement, healthy and productive work is urgently needed. The SMART Work Design model can help organizations achieve it. ■

Workers shouldn't be left to cope on their own with poorly designed jobs that cause burnout.

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13. Find free resources about the model at www.transformativeworkdesign.com/smart-work.

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