

Kathryn Miller

Professor Bruce Dearstyne

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Job Autonomy: Research and Analysis

Autonomy: An Introduction

Autonomy is an abstract concept that has been applied to many political, philosophical, and economical theories. Generally, autonomy is an “experience of volition,” (Pugno, 2011, p. 215) or the relationship between a choice and self-worth (Pugno, 2011; Koestner and Losier, 1996; Ryan and Deci, 2011). Therefore, autonomy can be understood in terms of a “perceived control,” as what constitutes a volitional experience varies from person to person. For example, one person might perceive control as having total freedom over their choices while someone else might feel more in control if they receive support or direction from others.

This perception of control is especially important in the workplace. Employees search for autonomy in their job design, methods, and terms of work and managers can provide opportunities for autonomy in these areas through individual work plans and overall organizational restructuring. Concentrated efforts to provide employees autonomy play a key role in their job satisfaction and organizational commitment. However, there is no global level of autonomy that will work for all employees or organizations. For example, as millennials are entering the workforce, they are accustomed to a work ethic different from that of their predecessors, one that includes impersonal communication over the internet, flexible work schedules, and control over work/life balance (Beutell and Wittig-Berman, 2008). Managers

need to offer opportunities for autonomy while keeping in mind the varied expectations of both employees and the organization as a whole.

In real life practice, organizations across the professional spectrum are constantly reworking how they offer autonomy to employees. Valve Corporation is a private video game development and distribution corporation which operates on a flat organizational structure, offering employees full autonomy in the form of self-directed work teams (SDWTs). On the opposite end of the spectrum, academic library employees are struggling to find autonomy in traditional, hierarchical internal structures. These examples will show how organizational structures can coincide and conflict with employee expectations of control over their job design, methods, and terms of work.

This paper aims to prove that autonomy is essential to employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment. However, managers need find a balance between perceptions of control and how much autonomy both employees and organizational structures can realistically handle.

Autonomy: Individual Performance

There are many questionnaires that have been developed to discover in what areas employees want the most autonomy, the two most influential being Hackman and Oldman's Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS) (1975) and Breugh's Work Autonomy Scales (1985). While Hackman and Oldman's JDS includes a section on job autonomy, Breugh's numerous validation studies (Breugh, 1985; 1987; 1989; 1999) on the Work Autonomy Scales have concluded that employees want autonomy in three areas of their jobs: (1) method/content; (2) terms of work; and (3) criteria. Combining Breugh's scales and theoretical literature surrounding autonomy (Pugno, 2011; Koestner and Losier, 2006; Ryan and Deci, 2001), this section will discuss the

importance of individual autonomy in job design, methods, and terms of work, and its effect on overall employee well-being. While criteria, or the degree to which employees have control over how they will be evaluated (Breugh, 1999, p. 360), has been proven of importance to employees, they need to be offered control over the content of their work and how they complete it before evaluation measures can be discussed.

Job Design

Autonomy in job design means the level of control employees have over the content of their work and the tasks they choose to complete. In order for employees to have control over the content of their work, managers need to welcome employee input and opportunities to “redesign” (Spector, 1986, p. 1006) their job duties. Allowing a change in scope of work to include tasks that are more interesting and meaningful can lead to higher job satisfaction, which in turns leads to organizational commitment (Spector, 1986; Gagné and Bhave, 2011). As Park and Searcy (2012) say, “job autonomy has stronger relationships with employees’ job satisfaction and performance when their tasks are more various and complex” (p. 313). Managers should work with employees to discover what aspects of their jobs they enjoy, if there are other areas of the business they are interested in, and if they are willing to learn new skills. These opportunities can allow employees to perceive that their employer trusts them with (1) complex and interesting tasks; and (2) control over how they learn new skills. This level of control and trust will ultimately, as the literature posits, create happier employees with strong commitments to their employers.

However, with increased complexity and the need to learn new skills can come increased stress and the inability to exercise this new level of control. While Spector’s 1986 analysis of 101 employees found that “employees who perceive comparatively high levels of control at work

are more satisfied, committed, involved, and motivated” (p. 1013), he also points out that “with increased control comes increased responsibility and often increased workload” (p. 1014). Spector’s study and many others on the same topic (Parks and Searcy, 2012; Hall and Savery, 1986) should not be taken as definite proof for giving all employees control over their job designs; sometimes increased control, more responsibilities, and the need to learn new skills create more problems than solutions.

Wielenga-Meijer and colleagues’ 2011 study on the costs and benefits of autonomy when learning a new skill finds that “having moderate levels of autonomy is better than full or no autonomy” (Wielenga-Meijer, Taris, Wigboldus, Kompier, 2011, p. 310). Wielenga-Meijer et al. (2011) admits that this finding is in contrast to much of the literature surrounding job autonomy (p. 310). As managers offer employees control over their job design, it is expected that employees will exercise an equal level of control over learning the skills that come with the opportunity. However, as Wielenga-Meijer et al. (2011) point out, managers may need to take back control over how new skills are learned to ensure that they are being learned efficiently and correctly. These conflicting ideas could create some tension between managers and employees, especially if an employee’s perception of control includes total freedom from management in this area.

While giving employees autonomy in their job design is essential to job satisfaction, it’s important to note the costs (both qualitative and quantitative) associated with *too much* autonomy, a personality-autonomy clash, or management taking back control over learning new skills. Managers need to monitor employees before, during, and after implementing autonomy in individual job design. Employees who need assistance in redesigning their job content will most likely welcome a moderate level of control over job redesign and learning new skills, as their

perception of control includes ongoing support from management. Those employees who want high levels of control in this area will expect to succeed with little support, but managers still need to monitor their progress and make sure support is given if needed. This will ensure that a strategy meant to make employees happier doesn't have the opposite effect and ultimately turn into a cost for the organization.

Methods and Terms of Work

With autonomy in job design comes the subsequent control over how employees get their work done both in the methods of completion and logistical terms. An employee cannot experience autonomy in the content of their work and then be subjected to disproportionate control over methods, decision-making, and scheduling. As Haas (2010) points out, control over methods and terms of work means trusting employees to make “critical task decisions without having to compromise to secure support from parties with their own agenda” (p. 990).

Trusting employees to decide how they want to complete tasks will give them a sense of responsibility and commitment to the organization. Brad Power of *Harvard Business Review* explains it perfectly saying,

At Exxon they have standard procedures for everything. As a manager, you're supposed to follow the standards, and if something doesn't work, you change the standards. At Shell we have standards, but they only go so far. We have far more discretion to do the right thing for customers. I'd rather own Exxon stock than Shell stock, but I could never work there. (Power, 2012)

The Shell model described above is the obvious choice for providing employees more control over methods of completing work and individual decision-making. As Power explains,

“the right person armed with the right means can use individual initiative to break the rules of standard procedures for the right reasons creating better results” (Power, 2012). Managers should allow employees to bypass regular procedures in order to solve the problem in the most efficient way; this sparks innovation and develops a culture of trust which allows employees to form a stronger bond with the organization. Sirota and colleagues agree, saying that employees get discouraged by obstacles and red tape when they are just trying to complete their responsibilities in the best possible way (Sirota, Mischkind, Meltzer, 2005, ch. 7). Employee freedom to “break the rules” in order to complete a task more efficiently imbues “the entire workforce with a sense of responsibility for the business” (Amar, Hentrich, Hlupic, 2009, p. 23).

Autonomy in terms of work goes hand-in-hand with control over methods for completing tasks, but is focused on logistics and scheduling rather than decision-making. Most of the literature on job autonomy argues that managers should give employees control over their work schedules (Sirota et al., 2005; Spector, 1986; Gagné and Bhave, 2011; Hall and Savery, 1986; Power, 2012; Parks and Searcy, 2012), though none give specific examples of how this can be implemented. Terms of work vary from organization to organization, as it depends on what kind of work the employees are expected to do. If employees need to answer client queries or attend meetings, then they need to be available during “normal” business hours. Hourly employees are subject to workplace policies when it comes to how many hours they work in a week (full-time vs. part-time). Managers can (and should) offer basic control over terms of work through involving employees in the scheduling process, understanding the importance of family commitments, and approving earned vacation days. If managers can offer, and employees want, higher levels of control over terms of work, teleworking is an option that is being offered more frequently as technology advances.

Though “very little research actually tests whether telecommuting increases job autonomy” (Gagné and Bhawe, 2011, p. 175), some recent, small studies show that teleworking can increase job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Shaemi, Kazemi, Valkili, 2011; Sardeshmukh, Sharma, Golden, 2012). Those employees who perceive control over their terms of work because they are able to telework note that it offers work continuity, saves money, creates a healthy work/life balance, presents the ability to complete work independently, and strengthens commitment to the organization (Illegems, 2003; Mahler, 2012; Shaemi et al., 2011; Sardeshmukh, et al. 2012). On the other hand, teleworking can also produce a perceived lack of control by encouraging “workaholism;” producing integration problems; causing job ambiguity; and creating a disconnect between managers and employees (Illegems, 2003; Mahler, 2012; Sardeshmukh, et al. 2012). While teleworking isn’t right for every organization, if implemented with a focus on management support and communication, managers can offer teleworking as an opportunity for employee autonomy in terms of work.

Although managers should give employees control over how and when they complete tasks, it’s important to keep in mind workplace policies and procedures which dictate how much control is allowed. To use Power’s (2012) Exxon/Shell model as an example, if there are “brilliant” (Power, 2012) and tested organizational procedures in place for completing and scheduling tasks, then managers need to ensure that employees know what they do and do not have control over (Haas, 2010). By acting on their own and not following procedures, employees can make decisions or bring a project in a direction that is in direct conflict with the organization’s strategic plan and public image (Haas, 2010). This is not to say that managers should draw a harsh line and refuse to offer employees any measure of control over methods and terms of work. If employees voice the need for procedural changes, managers should pass their

suggestions along to the “bosses” so improvements can be made. For some employees, this level of involvement will meet their perceptions of control over methods and terms of work. Managers can work with other employees who want higher levels of control, and are in danger of breaking “unbreakable” rules on-the-job, to funnel control into other areas, such as job design. While autonomy in methods of completing work and logistical terms of work is linked to job satisfaction, managers and employees need to work together to ensure individual autonomy doesn’t interfere with organizational direction and values.

Effect on Overall Well-being

This section has discussed how managers can offer employees individual autonomy in job design, methods, and terms of work, but it is important to note the benefit of these practices on employee health and well-being. Spector (1986) found that, “Employees who perceive comparatively high levels of control at work...experience fewer physical and emotional symptoms” (p. 1013). Hall and Savery (1986) surveyed 532 managers in Australia to discover the correlation between the level of autonomy and stress-related illnesses. They, too, found that there was a “clear relationship between absence of autonomy and work stress” (p. 161). Hall and Savery also concluded that employees who reported high levels of control at work participated in work-focused leisure activities, such as co-worker sports teams and social events (p. 164). While job satisfaction and organizational commitment is important in managerial theory and practice, committed, satisfied employees need to be healthy humans. These studies have proven that employees who report perceived control over their job design, methods, and terms of work are healthier and want to participate in leisure activities with co-workers—which shows a commitment to the organization. Managers need to monitor signs of employee dissatisfaction and dissonance to see if there are possible correlations with ongoing conditions (e.g., heart

disease, stomach problems, and weight gain). While autonomy can't solve all of these problems, if managers notice a link between poor behavior and decreased well-being, they should try offering higher levels of control over job design, methods, and terms of work.

In the same vein, managers need to monitor employees as they are given higher levels of control, especially as they are promoted. Johnston and Lee (2013) wanted to discuss this further, and followed employees through the first three years of a new promotion. In the first year or two, employees felt secure and perceived control over all areas of their work. However, after three years, the authors found that employees were more stressed, had increased health problems, worked longer hours, and were dissatisfied with their level of autonomy (Johnston and Lee, 2013). As discussed previously, and strengthened by Johnston and Lee's study, some employees struggle with new responsibilities and time management. While this has a negative effect on the overall organization, it can also lead to stress-related illnesses.

Autonomy can have positive and negative effects on employee health and well-being. It is up to managers to communicate with employees and discover how much autonomy they *want* and to analyze their work patterns and signs of decreased well-being to discover how much autonomy they can realistically *handle*.

Autonomy: Organizational Structures

Managers can also integrate autonomy in organizational structures. This can be done in two ways—participatory management and autonomous SDWTs.

Participatory Management

Participatory management is an empowerment technique that gives employees consistent autonomy in their job design, methods, and terms of work. In a participatory management

structure, employee input is frequently required in decision-making processes—decisions which can have a direct affect on employee job design, methods, and terms of work. This idea was first demonstrated in Coch and French's 1948 study of how organizations can overcome employee resistance to change. Their study's recommendation is the foundation of participatory management—in order to curb employee dissatisfaction with changes to job design, methods, and terms of work, managers should hold group meetings which “stimulate group participation in planning the changes” (Coch and French, 1948, p. 531).

At the group, department, or organization-wide level, managers put their trust in employees and ask for their input on decisions. This allows employees to feel more engaged, less strained, and may even lead to a stronger work ethic (Gagné and Bhave, 2011). This style of management can go one of two ways: (1) the organization can keep their traditional “top-down” management style (Sirota et al., 2005, p. 176) where the decision-making authority is clear, and employees are merely called upon to offer their opinions on important decisions; or (2) the organization can require employees to participate in decisions on every issue, working until there is a consensus (Evans and Ward, 2007, p. 352).

These two ways of applying a participatory management structure represent differing perceptions of employee control. If an organization claims they practice participatory management, but really keep traditional management structures and decision-making authority, then they are offering a perceived control that might not be in line with employee expectations. For some employees, the opportunity to offer their opinion, whether or not it correlates with the ultimate decision, is enough to keep them satisfied and well-motivated. They feel in control of their careers and their importance to the organization, with little need to actually see that control

in practice. As stated previously, the perception of autonomy differs from person to person, so it is up to the management team to figure out if this strategy works for the entire organization.

On the other hand, a true participatory management structure requires constant employee input for every decision. The traditional lines of organizational hierarchy and decision-making authority can become blurred and ambiguous. Employees have the opportunity to wield power when it comes to decisions that directly affect them and their job design, methods, and terms of work. Such involvement in decisions definitely reinforces organizational commitment and a culture of trust. However, this level of control requires a lot of employee time and effort, and can take away from work that needs to be done elsewhere (Evans and Ward, 2007, p. 352). Some employees might not appreciate such a high level of control, as they may want to focus on completing their tasks and leave the decisions to upper-level management.

While participatory management is a way to restructure traditional organizational hierarchies in order to give employees consistent opportunities for autonomy, managers need to find an application method that works for employees and the organization as a whole. A suggestion of participatory management vs. required employee participation will manifest differently across all organizations and in all individuals.

Self-Directed Work Teams (SDWTs)

Instead of inviting employees to participate in decision-making processes, organizations can offer autonomy through a SDWT organizational structure. SDWTs are autonomous teams of workers and managers who are very skilled in their work content and have high levels of control over methods and terms of work. This structure promotes “control, cognitive demands, production responsibility, and social interaction” (Gagné and Bhave, 2011). By allowing

employees and managers to be almost solely responsible for the work they produce, SDWTs can offer control over the completion of complex work tasks with few bureaucratic obstacles.

With SDWTs, the structure of the organization is flattened, decision-making is decentralized, and managers can spend less time getting involved in day-to-day operations (Sirota et al., 2005, p. 186). SDWTs work towards a collective work product (Katzenbach and Smith, 1993) and can make decisions without external input. This can foster a workplace culture of “mutualism” (Amar et al., 2009, p. 24) where workers are focused on qualitative values such as trust and innovation rather than on dollars and cents. Employees who want high levels of control over their job design, methods, and terms of work will thrive in this structure, as a SDWT organization displays ongoing trust in employees to make decisions and complete work in their own ways. However, in order for an organization to function properly, a SDWT structure requires supervisors and upper-level management. Fisher (2000) posits that a SDWT structure means “a change in the role of management, not the elimination of supervisors and managers...all teams operate within appropriate boundary conditions” (p. 19). A SDWT management structure should include three groups: 1) operations team leaders, leading teams of individual contributors; 2) management team leaders, leading team leaders; and 3) culture team leaders, who have ultimate responsibility for the organization (Fisher, 2000, p. 9). With this management structure, those closest to the issues and most qualified to make decisions have complete control.

Though SDWTs sound like the perfect solution for offering consistent autonomy throughout the organization, the structure can be very isolating. Without the need for external input when making decisions, SDWTs can make the *wrong* decision for the organization, or spend time and money working on a problem that has already been solved elsewhere (Haas,

2010). While one of the advantages of a SDWT structure is decreased bureaucracy—thus creating horizontal and vertical autonomy (Sirota et al., 2005)—this can quickly become a disadvantage. SDWT members and managers need to be on the same page with regard to overall organizational values in order for the structure to work. Fisher (2000) adds to this argument, saying that some organizations can focus *too* much on the logistics of a SDWT structure and forget to focus on how it can give employees control over their job design, methods, and terms of work (p. 19). Similar to the downfalls of participatory management, if organizations don't understand how SDWTs can solve problems and produce better results, then the structure will overpower employees. Without a unified organizational direction, proper implementation plan, and constant communication between SDWTs, employees can either become stressed from too much control, or exercise high levels of control to make decisions that are in direct conflict with organizational values.

Autonomy Case Study: Valve Corporation

As discussed above, organizations can completely restructure in order to give employees consistent autonomy in their job design, methods, and terms of work. However, restructuring just to offer more autonomy can cause more problems than solutions. Therefore, most of the literature on job autonomy argues that organizations cannot operate on a structure that offers total employee autonomy; an upper-level management structure needs to be in place.

Surprisingly, there is a private corporation that has accomplished this impossible feat for more than 15 years and is reported to be worth over \$3 billion (Ewalt, 2012). Valve Corporation, a video game development and distribution company, operates on a completely flat organizational structure with total employee autonomy. Employees describe Valve's structure as having autonomous and collaborative SDWTs; elected SDWT coordinators—with no authority other

than coordination—on a product-by-product basis; no bosses or upper-level management; total organizational transparency; no job titles or promotions; salary raises and recognition based on employee consensus; and employee autonomy in job design, methods, and terms of work (Abrash, 2012; Suddath, 2012; Varoufakis, 2012).

Employees have written extensively on how this structure works, even though all management literature suggests it should have failed years ago. Employees come up with product ideas; start a SDWT system, as the products require a variety of skillsets; and employees join SDWTs at their own discretion. This focus on complete autonomy in job design is a driving force in the organization. Michael Abrash, a Valve employee, confesses that the founder, Gabe Newell, has wanted to create certain products for years, but employees have chosen not to work on them (Abrash, 2012). Employees are also responsible for the discipline, rewards, and hiring (Abrash, 2012; Suddath, 2012) of co-workers, usually done through a democratic voting system. Employees argue that this autonomous structure keeps innovation alive and is ideal for creative individuals (Abrash, 2012; Suddath, 2012). Video game programmers are accustomed to a perception of control based on total freedom to explore ideas and create products as needs arise. The video game industry is constantly changing and employees need to contribute different skills, and different skill levels, on a product-by-product basis. Valve admits that while there is a learning curve with this kind of structure, their careful screening process and focus on innovation allows them to recruit employees who not only want such a high level of control but can realistically wield said control (Varoufakis, 2012; Valve Corporation, 2012).

This structure will not work for every organization, as this paper has argued that autonomy in job design, methods, and terms of work needs to be offered carefully and with regard to employee perception and organizational direction. Valve recruits self-motivated,

creative employees with specialized skillsets and work ethics, which is why their structure of SDWTs is successful. Valve is proof that with a careful screening process and specialized work products, complete autonomy in job design, methods, and terms of work can be successful in creative companies where employee ideas and innovation are valuable assets.

Autonomy Case Study: Academic Libraries

While this paper has argued that managers have many venues through which they can offer employees autonomy in their job design, methods, and terms of work, it is important to consider programs that struggle to meet employee perceptions and expectations of control. This is especially true for academic librarians, as they are employed by higher learning institutions, but are confined in hierarchical internal structures.

When it comes to autonomy in job design and terms of work, academic librarians seem to have more control than their counterparts in public libraries. To discover this, the Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science (WILIS) program researched educational, workplace, career, and retention issues through extensive surveys of North Carolina LIS graduates (UNC, 2013). The data was analyzed in terms of job autonomy in a paper by Patillo and colleagues (2009), who found that academic librarians perceive more control over their terms of work, mainly because higher learning institutions operate on fluid schedules with built-in vacations and breaks (Patillo, Morgan, Morgan, 2009). Patillo et al. (2009) also found that academic librarians perceive more control over opportunities for specialized work content, including access, collection development, and collaborative work with academic departments (Patillo et al., 2009). This specialized work is more complex than the work done by many public librarians (e.g., reference interviews, patron behavior problems, book returns, etc.) (Patillo et al., 2009; Lynch and Verdin, 1983). Patillo et al. (2009) and the data from WILIS noted high levels of perceived

control in these areas because academic librarians are able to tailor their work content to their professional strengths, performing complex tasks and intellectually stimulating collaborations. They are also able to form healthy work/life balances, as higher learning institutions offer employees the flexibility of an academic schedule. However, this research does not take into account the internal structure of academic libraries, which causes lower levels of autonomy when it comes to methods of completing work.

Most academic librarians want to work in an academic library because of the “expertise-based” (Honea, 1997, p. 185) culture fostered by higher learning institutions. In this culture, academic faculty and students are not only expected to have high levels of control over job design, methods, and terms of work, they are given the resources to ensure their success (Honea, 1997, p. 185). Since academic librarians have control over their job design and terms of work, they expect the same mutual trust and confidence from the higher learning institution when it comes to *how* they complete that work (Marchant, 1995). However, this does not usually happen. Academic librarians are expected to operate under traditional hierarchical structures with upper-level management and low-level employees. This traditional structure increases the need for constant supervision, management involvement in all decisions, and formal, strict procedures for task completion (Honea, 1997; Jurkowski, 1997). Academic librarians are reminded daily of their separation from faculty and students, as the latter requests resources that need to go through complicated procedures for dissemination (e.g., due dates, copyright issues, inter-library loan fees, etc.). Faculty members and students are not accustomed to working with such strict procedures; they are used to high levels of control over task completion and flexible timeframes (Honea, 1997). This causes some tension between librarians and academics, faculty members in particular, when in reality their similar educational backgrounds and experience should result in

collaboration, not conflict. Honea (1997) reports that this causes many academic librarians to become dissatisfied with their jobs and positions within the higher learning institution, “as increased levels of education and expertise have become necessary for library staff, their predisposition against the prevailing type of formal organization increases” (p. 185).

However inflexible this structure might seem to academic librarians, especially in comparison to faculty members and corporations like Valve, the reality is that academic libraries are reliant on the operations budget of their parent institution. Under the current economic climate, higher learning institutions have to make tough decisions on how to allocate constantly shrinking resources. This reliance on the parent institution accounts for the need of a traditional hierarchical structure within the library (Patillo et al., 2009, p. 288). Alternative organizational structures such as participatory management and SDWTs would not work in an academic library because of the need for accountability and proof of return-on-investment for almost every decision and program implementation (Evans and Ward, 2007). Budget cuts and a perceived lack of relevance means that academic libraries, and other information programs, need to fight for other things; employee autonomy in methods of completing work is low on the list. At this point, libraries and information programs should continue to offer opportunities for individual employee autonomy through increased chances to redesign job duties and working schedules, but, for the time being, many librarians are going to experience low perceived control over how they complete tasks. This is an unpleasant reality, but for academic libraries this structure may be the best way to provide proof that they are using the higher learning institution’s resources in the prescribed way.

Conclusions

Human beings strive for autonomy in all areas of their lives. We seek control over our destinies, but one person’s perception of control over their life cannot be used as a standard for

everyone. In terms of management theory and practice, each employee strives for their own perception of control over what they are working on, how they complete it, and scheduling a work/life balance. Managers need to recognize these expectations and communicate with their employees to develop a career path that allows for autonomy, while also keeping in line with the parent organization's directions and values. Whether this is achieved through individual work plans or a total restructuring of the organization, managers should understand that perceived control differs from person to person, organization to organization—there is no global solution. Some employees respond well to increased control, while others operate better with close supervision. Concurrently, some organizations need to rely on strict procedures and hierarchies, while others thrive on decentralized decision-making and innovation. The purpose is to understand what autonomy is, why employees seek it, how managers can offer it, and the negative effects of ill-advised implementation.

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