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**The Importance of Work and Job Autonomy and Independence
to Professional Staff employed in Local Government
at Different Career Stages**

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Abstract

An employed professional draws much of his or her job satisfaction from work characteristics, which provide feelings of control over work and independence of decision-making. A group of senior professional staff with management experience were approached to give their view on what degree of autonomy and independence they perceived they had, and therefore, what degree of satisfaction. The local government managers were grouped in terms of their age and organisational tenure to determine whether their experience of job autonomy and independence was different at stages in their career.

Those younger staff with less than five years tenure experienced far lower levels of satisfaction than their older colleagues with longer service. Older staff, those over forty years of age, experienced higher satisfaction than those colleagues younger than forty. Those staff intending to leave their current jobs reported experiencing greatly lower levels of satisfaction with their autonomy and independence than those reporting their intention to stay in their current employment.

Introduction - Moving from Hierarchical to Participatory Management

Professional workers experience of independence and autonomy are key characteristics in providing job satisfaction. Improving autonomy and independence in the workplace can cause a transformation of the work experience leading to better performance and, as such, feature in the literature on organisational development produced as guidance for local government bodies (Allington and Morgan, 2002a). Creating autonomy and independence involves not just removing layers of management, but also involves fundamentally changing how essential layers of management operate (Boyne, 1999). Not only should lower-level employees be given decision-making power, but they also need the training that will provide them with the ability to make good decisions (Boyne, Poole and Jenkins, 1999).

Many practices have been used in recent years in both the private and public (Boyne, Poole and Jenkins, 1999) sectors to transform the workplace and improve performance. These include: increasing worker autonomy through flattening hierarchies; decentralizing authority; instituting quality programs; upgrading workers' skills through training; increasing flexibility in deployment of labour and establishing self managing work teams (Geary, 2002). Local government can adapt and adopt many of these same strategies to help improve service delivery and overall government functioning through programmes that will help bring about positive change in the workplace and in council's performance (Allington and Morgan, 2002b). Schemes seeking to empower staff and reduce management hierarchies can improve the productivity and job satisfaction of employed professionals.

If these schemes are implemented properly with a balance between reduced line management involvement, and increased autonomy supported by training they might prove frustrating to the very people the organization is seeking to empower (Reed, 2002).

Autonomy and Independence as Important Work Characteristics for Employed Professionals

The key to increasing autonomy and independence, and as such empowering staff, has been ensuring staff are properly trained and developed to take on higher responsibility and raising staff levels of technical ability, discretion and autonomy (Gallie et al., 1998). This recognition has been reflected in the rising investment in qualifications and training by professional staff in the last few years (Green and Felstead, 1994). According to Guest's (1999: p.14) survey, 84 per cent of employees feel that their employer provided them with 'sufficient opportunities for training and development' to improve their skills and, through such development their opportunities to exercise discretion and autonomy in the workplace. Over half of the respondents to the study said that their employers made a 'serious attempt to make jobs ... as interesting and varied as possible' through providing skills training and development opportunities for using discretion and autonomy, which provided them with high levels of job satisfaction and motivation (Ashton et al., 1999: p.63, 65). In the same study the respondents reported autonomy as being quite high.

In producing opportunities for autonomy and discretion, employers need to be sure what autonomy means. While the definition of professional work might mean not being under the direct control of a manager, this may not mean the individual is truly autonomous in any real sense, in terms of the level of decision-making freedom they have. It remains important to recognize that the meaning of autonomy has to be considered in context, which means that for significant parts of the work force empowerment is not yet a reality (Ashton et al., 1999).

Ackroyd and Proctor (1998) concluded that those not fully qualified or socialized in their work role and organisation performing specific tasks are only subject to indirect control from their managers but could not be thought to be autonomous in their work roles.

Human Resource Practices that Support the Development of Autonomy and Independence

Freeman and Rogers (1999) reported in their study that employees felt that they had too little say over a range of workplace issues and that the gap between the expected amount of say and the reality was too great and caused dissatisfaction. The introduction of an employee involvement programme, aimed at increasing autonomy through greater participation in decision-making, reduced but did not eliminate the gap. Such considerations are important in examining the efforts being made to increase the autonomy of professional staff. Keep and Rainbird (2000) reported that a third of large organisations were making a concerted effort to give people a greater degree of autonomy and independence and discretion over their work.

Of concern, in comparison, are the findings of other studies which found that staff perceptions of their skills caused them only to have 'a generally low level of autonomy' and that most employers simply didn't want to invest more in creating autonomy and independence and would rather people to get on with their jobs (Dench et al. 1998: p.58, p.61; Freeman and Rogers, 1999: p.112).

It appears that there is insufficient attention given to skills development to increase staff ability to become more autonomous and independent, especially if the cost is high. There is little evidence that such investment in staff is embedded in a framework in which they are explicitly involved in developing learning objectives to develop the skills required to be more autonomous (Senge 1990).

Staff in local government certainly report that they receive sporadic training related to becoming more autonomous, and in a sense this is training that they think they need, but this training is not linked to a wider view of its purpose or an integrated approach to job roles, structure and a management support framework created to support greater autonomy.

Methodology Used in the Study

The survey group consisted of 500 senior professional staff at third tier level in English local government. The sample was chosen to be representative of different types of council and sought to represent the population of the whole group of such staff by age, gender and race.

Composition of the Chief Officer/Senior Professional Respondents (Total 261)					
Total Men	207	(79.3 per cent)	Total Women	54	(20.7 per cent)
Those Staying with the Organisation			Those Leaving the Organisation		
Men	170	(65.13 per cent)	Men	37	(14.17 per cent)
Women	47	(18 per cent)	Women	7	(2.7 per cent)
Total	217	(83.14 per cent)	Total	44	(16.86 per cent)

A four point likert scale was used to determine the respondents need for each job characteristic with another four point scale used to determine their perceived level of satisfaction of that need being met, to determine co-relation and congruence between the two scales.

The work/job characteristic measures were taken from work by Hackman and Oldham (1976) on professional staff job satisfaction which showed the strong positive relationship between autonomy and independence with job satisfaction. Those employed professionals indicating an intention to leave their jobs and those indicating their intention to stay were identified to see if there was any difference in their reporting of job satisfaction in relation to their reported experience of autonomy and independence.

Results of Survey on Professional Autonomy and Independence

Four measures were used to examine the professional's perception of their work environment autonomy and independence: independence from others; organise own work; independence respected; control over your work. Obviously should the professional identify that she or he has independence and workplace autonomy gained through a strong congruence with his work environment he may well perceive that his discretion to shape his job and workplace is quite strong.

(N= L18 S97)			
Work Feature	Age/ Tenure	Leavers	Stayers
Work independently of others	(>40yrs >5yrs)	0.08	0.52*
Freedom to organise your own work.	(>40yrs >5yrs)	0.25	0.66*
Other senior staff respect independence	(>40yrs >5yrs)	0.59*2	0.59*
Control Over Your Work	(>40yrs >5yrs)	0.61	0.47

For the over 40 years of age over 5 years tenure group the expectation may be that their's is a relatively autonomous work role. This groups perception of their experience of control over these four measures is generally satisfactory which suggests that as a group they are relatively content with their autonomy in terms of their independence, acknowledgement of that independence by their peer managers and that they are able to organise their own work. Control over their work is limited for both those intending to stay and those intending to leave, which reflects that these professionals see control over their work as limited by the context in which they work.

(N= L6 S40)			
Work Feature	Age/ Tenure	Leavers	Stayers
Work independently of others	(>40yrs <5yrs)	0.77	0.62*
Freedom to organise your own work.	(>40yrs <5yrs)	0.62	0.39**
Other senior staff respect independence	(>40yrs <5yrs)	0.61	0.51*
Control Over Your Work	(>40yrs <5yrs)	0.66	0.47

The over 40 years of age less than 5 years tenure group show varying degrees of congruence, relatively strong in autonomy over organising their workload, but

stronger on independence from others and respect of their independence by others. The suggestion here is that control over work as identified in the group discussed above is limited by the needs of the organisation and those policy matters passed to the senior legal officer by the elected members who set the political agenda and so the work through put agenda. Again while the leavers fair badly on congruence compared to the stayers the scores they have achieved are still high which suggests that this is an area of high importance and low experience but the discrepancy is not a wide one.

(N= L8 S29)			
Work Feature	Age/ Tenure	Leavers	Stayers
Work independently of others	(<40yrs >5yrs)	0.63	0.91*
Freedom to organise your own work.	(<40yrs >5yrs)	0.79*2	0.90*
Other senior staff respect independence	(<40yrs >5yrs)	0.51	0.87*
Control Over Your Work	(<40yrs >5yrs)	0.83*2	0.70*

For this younger long tenure group the high correlation of the stayers reveals their satisfaction with the degree of freedom that they experience in their work environment. It appears this high degree of congruence is directly related to the groups long tenure in the organisation and perhaps a reflection of their acceptance of the authorities policy agenda. As such this may well indicate that the facilitating professionalism is a feature of this younger group who are more congruent than some of their senior colleagues.

(N= L12 S50)			
Work Feature	Age/ Tenure	Leavers	Stayers
Work independently of others	(<40yrs <5yrs)	0.66*3	0.72*
Freedom to organise your own work.	(<40yrs <5yrs)	0.42	0.31
Other senior staff respect independence	(<40yrs <5yrs)	0.28	0.64*
Control Over Your Work	(<40yrs <5yrs)	0.33	0.43

From these results perhaps unsurprisingly autonomy is not shown as congruent across all measures, in fact a low-high relationship between importance and experience is recorded. Perhaps this finding shows that those with low tenure are dissatisfied with too much autonomy as it interferes with their organisational socialisation process. Operational level discretion is recognised across the results although seemingly restricted for the shorter tenure groups as might be expected since they are still establishing their organisational roles.

Discussion

Age and Tenure as Factors in Developing Autonomy and Independence

It seems from the results that organizational tenure certainly plays a part in the development of the skills required to assume greater autonomy and independence. Often, as the results show the absence of fulfillment of the need for autonomy and independence is a factor in the decision to leave the organization. Tenure clearly plays a part in the individual assuming greater autonomy, often through progression within their organization, assuming the image of being a learning individual, someone with the ability to make career choices and develop the necessary skills. The results also suggest that sometimes, while individual skill levels have risen, this has gone along with new work demands, and the degree of empowerment, which is implied may not be fulfilled. So we can imply from this that while tenure plays a part in the development of skills to support greater autonomy and independence these are probably a mixture of professional and managerial skills. The managerial, local organizational knowledge and skills based on that knowledge are most important. These skills have been developed over time and are based on organisational experience and knowledge of local systems, processes and procedures which provide the individual with a knowledge base over which senior managers have no control. Age guarantees no such skill development, as the results and interviews suggest, since it is knowledge of the organization over time which forms the true base of this autonomy and independence.

The Importance of Autonomy and Independence to Employed Professionals

It is clear that local government employers have invested in the technical ability of their staff in support of increasing their ability to exercise independence and autonomy over decision-making in the workplace. A number of surveys have used multiple measures of skill such as the training time entailed in jobs and reported job autonomy to determine the pattern of skill development used to support and produce greater workplace autonomy.

In the words of Gallie et al., reporting the 1992 Employment in Britain Survey, there has been a 'very extensive upskilling of the workforce' combined with a 'significant devolution of responsibilities for more immediate decisions about the work task' (1998: p.55).

This was accompanied by a rise in work effort supported by the introduction of new technology, which was associated with greater task discretion. The 1997 Skills Survey similarly reports a rise in skill levels with an associated increase in autonomy and independence (Ashton et al., 1999).

According to Guest's (1999: p.14) survey, 84 per cent of employees feel that their employer provided them with 'sufficient opportunities for training and development'. Over half of respondents said that their firms made a 'serious attempt to make jobs of people like you as interesting and varied as possible', while approaching half reported the presence of a programme designed to increase autonomy and independence with the objective of producing a high level of job satisfaction and motivation and performance.

The interview respondents showed a wide variety of difference in what they mean when they say that they need autonomy.

Some professionals identified their need for autonomy as being choice and the absence of supervision; indeed the definition of work autonomy is not being under the direct control of management. It remains important to recognize that the meaning of autonomy has to be considered in an organisational context.

Local government professionals are used to being expected to take more responsibility for dealing with budgets, human resource, service management and customer relations but are also used to being more closely monitored on their performance. As the interviewees stress, responsibility for the particular task tends to go along with a clear definition of the nature of the task and monitoring of its performance.

As such, autonomy and discretion for performing specific tasks and management responsibility is subject to indirect control based on senior managers monitoring of costs and achievement in terms of set objectives and/or service standards.

There is evidence that the HRM practices identified by Guest, though important to employees, may leave an expectations gap. Freeman and Rogers (1999) asked how much say employees felt that they had over a range of workplace issues and how much influence they wanted. They report that this gap is large, and that the size of the gap is similar across different categories of worker. The lack of evidence that there was enough training to support the increase of skills required to increase autonomy was a factor recognized by the interviewees who thought that sustained change was inhibited by organizational restraints, such as the absence of integrated employee programmes designed to increase autonomy.

The interviewed professionals were concerned that they did not receive training and development to help them with technical change and major shifts in the structure of employment arising from delayering, which created increased autonomy and independence. The majority of the group thought it odd that their employers did not try to train them in the skills and abilities that they needed to make this change process work. Such a view as held by these staff conflicts with the standard benchmark provided by their organisations, suggesting that they were trying to be learning organisations, defined by one of the leading exponents of this idea to be one where '...people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire . . . and where people are continually learning to learn together' (Senge 1990: p.4).

This view also is reflected in the attitude of interviewees who are members of organizations who have attained Investors in People status, although authors such as Keep and Rainbird (2000) suggest there have been some positive trends in such places. Despite their findings, the majority of those interviewed for this study perceive that their employers are not interested in providing them with the skills to support increased autonomy and independence, a finding that reflects that of a study of employers' perceptions of skills carried out by Dench (1998) which found 'a generally low level of autonomy' and that 'most employers simply want people to get on with their jobs' (Dench et al. 1998: p.58, p.61).

Local government does tend to fit within the description of organisations defined by Keep and Rainbird (2000) who identified two sets of constraints on the development of a learning organisation. First, managerial practices within firms that stress narrow job duties and performance monitoring are unlikely to sustain a learning culture. These negative practices are underpinned by cost pressures on the organization,

which form a barrier to the development of a learning culture. Second, the institutional context in English local government does not lead to the embedding of learning and in part this is due to the antagonism found in local government, on occasions, between unions and management. This has shown itself in an absence of shared or joint approaches to learning between management and trade unions or of a sharing of power with employees.

Training and development have certainly improved in recent times in local government, but the model of the learning organisation is still a long way away, and so must be the planned approach to supporting the development of skills to enhance autonomy and independence amongst staff. This is the important part of the message, that while there can be considerable attention to skills, there is not time given to the development of an embedded framework in which employees are explicitly involved in developing learning objectives.

Taking the Age and Tenure Factors into Consideration

Clearly, from the results, rank, status and organisational experience through tenure are all factors, which support the development of autonomy and independence. Age and transportable professional knowledge are less likely to be a factor in possessing the skills which support autonomy and independence than knowledge of the organisation, which is discrete and individual to that organisation, its culture and way of doing things, its hierarchy and management structure. As such, even if senior managers are unable to stop themselves micro-managing operational issues, the organisational knowledge of those staff with long tenure will defeat them as their knowledge of how things work and operational processes and procedures would be superior. Often the interviewees commented that this was the reason behind organisational change exercises as senior managers new to the organisation seek to wrest control of operational processes from incumbent staff and impose new systems familiar to them. Age seems to be of little importance in the acquisition of the skills required for autonomy and independence the survey group and interviewees saying that professional expertise, even from senior staff, in terms of professional seniority, does not guarantee autonomy. In fact, professional expertise can, it appears, attract greater degrees of operational control from managers reluctant to allow operational freedom in matters they themselves do not understand or in areas in which they themselves have no professional qualification.

Conclusion

It is clear from the results of the survey set out above and the interviews that autonomy and independence are not just key job satisfaction characteristics for staff but also improve organizations cost-efficiency. Local government organizations should be leading on developing technical and organisational and management skills to support programmes which improve levels of autonomy and independence for staff. As such, councils should be investing in programmes of training and development, which increase autonomy and independence, ensuring staff are properly trained and developed to take on higher responsibility and raising staff levels of technical ability, discretion and autonomy (Gallie et al., 1998). While, to some extent, this recognition has been reflected in the rising investment in qualifications and training by professional staff in the last few years (Green and Felstead, 1994) the investment has been poorly used because of poor planning and a failure to develop integrated and targeted programmes of development. While Guest's (1999: p.14) survey, found 84 per cent of employees feel that their employer provided them with 'sufficient opportunities for training and development' to improve opportunities to exercise discretion and autonomy in the workplace, a far lesser number might say that such support had brought about the autonomy required.

With half of the respondents to the study saying that their employers provided opportunities for using discretion and autonomy this suspicion seems to be confirmed (Ashton et al., 1999: p.63, 65).

The area where such programmes or training clearly fails is the absence of companion training for senior managers, training them to accept that staff can have greater autonomy and independence, without it being either a threat to their authority or to their job security. In this respect, an integrated programme across the entire management and staff structure emphasizing roles, responsibilities and inter-relationships would prove its worth.

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