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WORKING PAPER SERIES

Paper No. 12-04

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Work Design Practices: Do Trade Unions Make a Difference?



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Article presented at International Conference IS 2012 - Innovation for Sustainability, Porto, Portugal,

September 2012

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Abstract

Work design and implementation of various work design practices can be constrained or fostered by various factors, among which trade unions should be considered as an important one. Research conducted among large-sized Croatian companies shows that it is possible to recognize significant differences among union- and non-union organizations regarding the use of innovative work design practices. Independent samples t-test revealed that non-union organizations use flexible working arrangements more extensively than their unionized counterparts. Additionally, traditional job design strategies and teamwork practices are also more represented within non-unionized work setting. Research findings clearly indicate how trade unions have a significant impact on the implementation of different work design practices. In other words, their influence on work design practice should not be neglected.

Key words

work design, trade unions, human resource management, Croatia

JEL classification

J51, M12

1. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge economy is characterized by ever-increasing complexity and uncertainty. Global business environment induces a tough competitive race forcing managers and organizations to find new ways of working that can increase organizational flexibility and create internally-aligned organizations. It has been recognized that optimal results and adaptability can be obtained with flexible workforce and by introducing modern work design practices. Understanding this relative importance and impact of the nature of work on organizations has led managers and academics to examine and develop various work design practices that can contribute not only to enhanced work performance and job satisfaction, but also to organizational competitiveness.

Work design and working practices have a special role in today's human resource management. Their role is important not only for the reason of increasingly changing nature of work, but even more because of the significant impact they have both on employee satisfaction and work performance. Well-designed jobs have the potential to do more than simply to motivate employees. According to Sonnentag (2002), effective work design can facilitate development of more proactive motivational mind-sets and behaviours that are likely to be important in today's dynamic and flexible organizations. As work design is tightly woven into the structure and function of organizations (Torraco, 2005), flatter and more flexible organizational structures, together with dynamic business processes and other organization design solutions, necessarily lead to continuous change of work design practices (Hernaus, 2011).

Teamwork, flexible working arrangements, and different work design strategies are only some of emerging, innovative working practices that strongly shape existing workplaces and motivate knowledge workers for an extra effort and organizational contribution. However, although modern working practices have been recognized as important determinants of organizational effectiveness, some organizations apply such practices less than others. Even though reasons for such diversity can be numerous (e.g., leadership, organizational structure, corporate culture, available resources etc.), one of the potentially important ones could be the presence and role of trade unions.

Although trade unions have been losing power, which resulted in a decreased impact on the modern economy (e.g., Croucher and Brewster, 1998), they still play a relevant role in labour relations. Trade unions can potentially constrain or boost the inflow of innovative workplace practices within organizations. Their presence can make organizations more or less likely to strive to enhance flexibility in everyday working activities of their employees.

In order to understand the role of trade unions, and due to a lack of existing research, the aim of this paper was to analyze the relative importance of trade unions for dissemination of innovative work design practices. In particular, we wanted to examine whether significant differences exist between union- and non-union organizations related to their work design practices. The paper consists of six parts. After introduction, theoretical framework focused on work design practices is presented. The role of trade unions is explained in the third part, followed by research methodology describing the sample and survey instrument. Research findings are thoroughly presented in the fifth part of the paper. Finally, discussion and conclusion are provided together with research limitations and future research activities.

2. WORK DESIGN PRACTICES

Job design has been widely researched, particularly during 1960s and 1970s. Primarily focused around Job Characteristics Theory (Hackman and Oldham, 1976), it was one of the most studied concepts in the organizational behaviour field (Griffin and McMahan, 1993). Recently, the interest has been revived through broader work design concept. Nowadays work design can be seen as a part of a larger package of employment practices that consequently has a significant influence on employees' work outcomes and different benefits related with the workplace (Osterman, 2010). It symbolizes a new approach towards organization of work that promotes teamwork and flexibility, responds to complexity and variability of work assignments, and enhances employee's motivation and skill development.

Organizations are increasingly under pressure to find new ways to improve productivity and expand the traditional range of working practices to include aspects congruent with modern business requirements. The most successful organizations have responded by reorganizing work processes and introducing flexible working arrangements. Competitive pressures placed upon quality, service, speed, costs, and innovation have in particular led to restructuring of work based upon broader perspective of work design. Traditional job design strategies such as job enlargement, job enrichment, and job rotation have to be supplemented with teamwork opportunities and flexible working arrangements, aimed at increasing organizational and work flexibility. While the former are trying to increase job satisfaction and motivation of individual workers, the latter promote team interdependence and culture of collaboration. In order to create an effective work system, both individually-driven and team-driven approaches should coexist and complement each other.

Traditional job design approach is dominantly focused on an individual and his/her work tasks. Whereas job enlargement means horizontal expansion of a job by providing employees with additional, equally demanding and usually similar tasks, job enrichment is much more motivational in nature resulting with a vertical expansion of work. Employees not only become empowered and obtain more autonomy, but they also receive broader responsibilities to handle challenging tasks. The third option is job rotation, which allows an employee to change tasks and work positions within an organization. It does not only reduce boredom, but also increases workforce flexibility.

Flexibility at the work level can be also attained by introducing alternative ways of working or flexible working arrangements. They can be defined as policies and practices, formal or informal, which permit people to vary when and where work is carried out, allow organizations to attract and retain talented employees, reduce stress and burnout, improve productivity and morale, and especially help employees to balance work-life responsibilities (Garg and Rastogi, 2005; Giannikis and Mihail, 2011). These flexible working arrangements usually include weekend work, shift work, overtime, part-time work, job sharing, flexi-time, temporary/casual work, fixed-term contracts, home-based work, teleworking, compressed working week etc.

Finally, we should also address teamwork and team-based arrangements. They are widely accepted organizing practices which improve flexibility, quality, productivity, and the experience of work for their employees. In spite of various kinds of teams present in contemporary organizations, most of them are cross-functional in nature. From the standpoint of work design practice, it is particularly interesting to determine whether employees have an opportunity to work in teams, and what is the intensity of such collaborative efforts.

3. THE ROLE AND INFLUENCE OF TRADE UNIONS

In most organizations, managers and HRM departments have a primary responsibility for the implementation of aforementioned work design practices. However, although they ultimately decide how work should be designed, numerous factors exist which potentially affect their decisions (e.g., organizational culture, organizational structure, management systems and leadership style, etc.). Additionally, some researchers have recognized that existence of trade unions could also be an important factor that can shape the choice and implementation of various work design practices (e.g., Campion and Stevens, 1991; Mullins, 2005).

While trade unions have been seen as an important instrument of social change, their core influence and activity still remains in the workplace (Mishel and Walters, 2003). Their main concern is to maintain and improve working conditions, assure increased leisure, bargain for higher salaries and benefits, create challenging opportunities for career development and obtain job security for each employee.

Trade unions have historically had a strong impact and negotiation power in organizations. Numerous research findings show how unions raise wages and benefits of unionized workers by almost 20%. Unionized workers are also more likely than their non-unionized counterparts to receive paid leave, to have health insurance provided by employer, or to be included in employer-provided pension plans. Additionally, results show that unionized workers receive more generous health benefits, have better pension plans and obtain more vacation time (Mishel and Walters, 2003).

Although it has been widely confirmed that trade unions have a positive effect on various individual and organizational outcomes, their role in the implementation of different work design practices remains undefined. It is unclear whether the presence of a trade union will enable or make organizations more or less likely to strive to enhance flexibility in workplace settings, in order to achieve flexibility in producing goods or providing services (Gittleman et al., 1998).

Traditionally, trade unions have advocated standardized work rules and procedures that limit the variability in job characteristics between individuals within particular job categories (Grant et al., 2010). However, the role of trade unions has been weakening with the emergence of HRM policies and the new paradigm in which organizations are taking care for employees through high-performance work practices (Pološki Vokić, 2012). As a result, employers have autonomy to reorganize work in ways that trade unions would earlier oppose. According to Croucher and Brewster (1998), a symbiotic relationship has been recognized in which the diminishment of trade unions and the increase in flexible working have reinforced each other.

Some of the research undertaken (e.g., Eaton and Voos, 1992; Lawler III et al., 1992; Houseman, 2001) confirmed that strong influence of trade unions constrain the usage of flexible working arrangements and team employment within organizations. This means that organizations that are highly influenced by trade unions can potentially have problems with implementation of flexible working arrangements.

While in some instances unions were likely to antagonize use of certain types of flexible working arrangements, considering them to be constraints of employee's rights, there were also situations in which trade unions have been cooperative and helpful throughout the process (Cappelli and Sherer, 1989). As Gittleman et al. (1998) pointed out, collective bargaining sometimes resulted with fairly rigid work rules. Trade unions have opposed certain new kinds of working practices fearing that they could result in a loss of protection provided by the existing rules, and that management could use changes in working practices to undermine them and their influence. At other times, however, trade unions have facilitated the process by participating in significant employee involvement programs (Eaton and Voos, 1992; Lawler III et al., 1992). Obviously, the link is not straightforward but it depends on the existing relationship among management, HRM practices and trade unions. Furthermore, the degree to which trade unions perceive changes to be in the interest of their members, together with the ability of trade unions to mobilize support for workplace reorganization, have also been recognized as important issues.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to determine whether the presence and influence of trade unions makes a difference in existing work design practices, we conducted a field research. The CRANET (Cranfield Network on International Human Resource Management) highly-structured questionnaire has been modified for the purpose of research (see Brewster et al., 2004 for the complete CRANET methodology). Several questions regarding work design practices have been added to the original questionnaire. A field research was conducted throughout March and April 2012. The study has been carried out at the organizational level. Questionnaires were sent by e-mail personally to HRM managers within large-sized Croatian organizations (with more than 500 employees), together with a brief covering letter explaining the purpose and importance of the research. We managed to receive 41 responses resulting in an acceptable 23.7% response rate.

The survey was cross-sectional in nature. Organizations which participated in the survey are heterogeneous by their industry, size, and ownership. However, manufacturing companies are mostly represented in the sample (45.0%), as well as organizations with less than 1000 employees (48.8%) and privately-owned ones (70.7%). Main characteristics of surveyed organizations and population are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of sampled organizations

		Sample	Population
Industry	manufacturing	45.0%	35.7%
	wholesale and retail	12.5%	17.6%
	transport, distribution and storage	10.0%	9.9%
	agriculture and food industry	5.0%	3.9%
	construction	5.0%	7.1%
	art, entertainment and recreation	2.5%	2.7%
	communications	2.5%	2.2%
	mining	2.5%	1.1%
	water supply	2.5%	1.1%
	other services	12.5%	18.7%
Size (number of employees)	500-999	48.8%	62.1%
	1000-1999	19.5%	23.6%
	2000+	31.7%	14.3%
Ownership	private	70.7%	-
	public	19.5%	-
	mixed	9.8%	-

The overview of main characteristics of surveyed organizations shows an adequate representation of population and implies no response bias. In addition, our response rate was above the reported CRANET average of 22% (e.g., Stavrou, 2005), which means that collected data represent a good source of information for further analysis.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH RESULTS

Using data gathered through self-administered questionnaire analysis of variance method was used in order to find the answer to our research question. However, before conducting t-test for equality of means, we have applied a sub-sampling strategy. Total sample of organizations was divided into two subsamples. In order to be able to distinguish between union- and non-union organizations, we have adopted the modality of union-HRM relationship framework recently developed by Pološki Vokić (2012). Cluster of 24 union organizations was characterized with Union dominance or Union-HRM dualism modes, while on the other side there were 17 non-union organizations which have dominantly applied either Union-HRM synergy or Total HRM strategy. Such criterion was chosen instead of a more widely accepted proportion of the unionized employees within an organization because we strongly believe that nowadays higher percentage of unionized workforce does not exclusively mean that trade unions are influential. Additionally, although trade unions are numerous and widely represented within sampled large-sized Croatian organizations (50.7% of employees are unionized; on average there are 2.3 unions per organization), not all of them are influential. In other words, trade union's influence cannot be solely related and correlated with their presence and trade union membership, but it should be evaluated through observing their position in respect to HRM departments and continuous involvement in various organizational HRM activities.

In order to determine existing work design practices, respondents were firstly inquired about the use of flexible working arrangements within their organizations over a period of three years. We observed the approximate proportion of employees employed in the flexible working arrangements (1 – 5% or less; 2 – 6-10%, 3 – 11-20%; 21-50%; 5 – >50%). The results showed that large-sized Croatian organizations widely use fixed-term contracts, shift work, overtime and weekend work practices, while flexi-time, part-time work and temporary/causal work were moderately used. Other work design practices, such as job sharing, teleworking and compressed working week were used very rarely, while practice of home-based work was not registered at all. Detailed results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Flexible working arrangements

Flexible working arrangements	% of the sample covered	Union organizations (N=24)		Non-union organizations (N=17)		TOTAL SAMPLE	
		Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mean	Std. Dev.
<i>Fixed-term contracts</i>	100.00%	1.71	.86	2.18	.88	1.90	.89
<i>Shift work</i>	97.56%	3.54	1.22	3.47	1.33	3.51	1.25
<i>Overtime</i>	92.68%	2.00	1.44	1.71	1.31	1.88	1.38
<i>Weekend work</i>	87.50%	2.33	1.74	2.63	1.67	2.45	1.69
<i>Flexi-time</i>	52.50%	1.17	1.79	2.38	1.82	1.65	1.87
<i>Part-time work</i>	48.78%	.50	.66	.71	.77	.59	.71
<i>Temporary/causal work</i>	35.00%	.30	.70	.71	.77	.48	.75
<i>Job sharing</i>	15.00%	.21	.59	.25	.58	.23	.58
<i>Teleworking</i>	15.00%	.13	.34	.19	.40	.15	.36
<i>Compressed working week</i>	7.31%	.08	.28	.06	.24	.07	.26
<i>Home-based work</i>	0.00%	-	-	-	-	-	-

Obviously, large-sized Croatian organizations use some flexible working arrangements more extensively than others. Moreover, in comparison to the CRANET International Executive Report 2011 findings, it seems that observed Croatian organizations are on the very top regarding the usage of weekend work, shift work and fixed-term contracts in Europe. They have also been using overtime work more than the European average. On the other side, some of the more beneficial working arrangements are less common and significantly below the EU and non-EU average (e.g., home-based work, job sharing, flexi-time, and teleworking). Because several work design practices are rare within Croatian context, the focus of further analysis was put on the more frequent ones, which are present at least within one-third of studied organizations.

Secondly, we examined how often large-sized organizations use traditional job design strategies such as job rotation, job enlargement, and job enrichment. Although almost 90% of organizations from the sample reported that they used aforementioned work design practices, the usage applies only to a moderate extent of their employees and jobs (0 – not at all ... 4 – to a very great extent). Job enlargement and job enrichment were much more common on average than job rotation, as it is shown in Table 3. In addition, research findings showed that non-union organizations used such practices more often.

Table 3: Job design strategies

Job design strategies	% of the sample covered	Union organizations (N=24)	Non-union organizations (N=17)	TOTAL SAMPLE
<i>Job rotation</i>	87.50%	1.57	2.18	1.83
<i>Job enlargement</i>	91.89%	1.91	2.59	2.20
<i>Job enrichment</i>	91.89%	1.96	2.35	2.13

Finally, as teams and teamwork are extremely popular and welcomed working practices today (Hernaus, 2012), we examined whether such trend is also present within large-sized Croatian organizations. Surveyed HRM managers reported how often their employees are involved in handling cross-functional tasks, do they have the opportunity to work in teams and how intensive are teamwork activities within their organizations. Collected data clearly showed that team design was widely disseminated within examined organizations. Such practices were even more represented within non-union organizations in particular, as clearly shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Teamwork practices

Teamwork	% of the sample covered	Union organizations	Non-union organizations	TOTAL SAMPLE
<i>Involvement in cross-functional tasks</i>	95.12%	2.86	3.77	3.26
<i>Participation in teamwork</i>	100.00%	3.78	4.41	4.05
<i>Intensity of teamwork</i>	100.00%	3.42	4.13	3.70

Although preliminary analysis of descriptive statistics revealed differences in work design practices between union- and non-union organizations, we further conducted the independent samples t-test, in order to determine whether those differences were statistically significant. The results of t-test at the confidence level of 90% are presented in Table 5. The bolded items are those with statistically significant mean differences. The difference is most obvious for flexi-time ($t(38)=2.080$, $p<.044$) which means that non-unionized organizations offer significantly more opportunities for working hours' adjustments than their unionized counterparts.

Table 5: Comparison of working practices (union vs. non-union organizations)

Item	Equal variances assumed	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean difference
<i>Weekend work</i>	yes	.090	.766	.529	38	.600	.29167
<i>Shift work</i>	yes	.003	.955	-.178	39	.860	-.07108
<i>Overtime</i>	yes	.288	.595	-.667	39	.509	-.29412
<i>Part-time work</i>	yes	.000	.987	.918	39	.364	.20588
<i>Flexi-time</i>	yes	.042	.838	2.080	38	.044	1.20833
<i>Temporary/causal work</i>	yes	1.710	.199	1.713	38	.095	.40153
<i>Fixed-term contracts</i>	yes	.260	.613	1.700	39	.097	.46814
<i>Cross-functional tasks</i>	yes	.033	.857	2.766	37	.009	.90107
<i>Participation in teamwork</i>	yes	.352	.556	2.474	38	.018	.62916
<i>Intensity of teamwork</i>	yes	2.955	.094	2.407	38	.021	.70833
<i>Job rotation</i>	yes	3.818	.058	1.960	38	.057	.61125
<i>Job enlargement</i>	no	7.879	.008	2.366	34.988	.024	.67519
<i>Job enrichment</i>	no	4.682	.037	1.378	34.393	.177	.39642

Legend: Items in bold are statistically significant ($p<.10$)

Significantly large differences are also noted in the case of involvement in cross-functional tasks ($t(37)=2.766$, $p<.009$) and intensity of teamwork ($t(38)=2.407$, $p<.021$), while other statistically significant differences were reported for temporary/causal work, fixed-term contracts and participation in teamwork. In addition, the practice of job rotation and job enlargement also differed across the subsamples. On the other side, it seems that union- and non-union organizations similarly approach to several other work design practices such as weekend work, shift work, overtime, part-time work, and job enrichment. However, although statistically significant differences were not reported, slightly mean differences still existed between clusters of organizations. In most cases, non-union organizations applied flexible working arrangements to a larger extent than unionized organizations, except for overtime and shift work.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Throughout the history trade unions played various, important roles in business environment. Even though their influence has been decreasing during the last decades, they still determine and configure not only economic, social and governmental, but also managerial and workplace practices. Due to changing workplace trends and ever-increasing importance of HRM activities, the main goal of

our research was to determine whether the influence of trade unions makes a difference in the nature of work design practices applied within Croatian business context. Using data from 41 large-sized Croatian organizations with more than 500 employees we examined current work design practices in general, while special emphasis was put on flexible working arrangements, traditional job design strategies and teamwork.

Research findings indicate that non-union organizations use flexible working arrangements more often than union organizations. Although trade unions should force or persuade management to adopt more efficient practices (e.g., Verma, 2005), it seems that Croatian trade unions are too rigid and traditional on one side, and not flexible enough and introverted on the other side, to be able to recognize and promote new workplace trends.

Job design strategies such as job enlargement, job enrichment and job rotation are also more extensively used in non-unionized settings. Such results mean that HRM and line managers within non-union organizations try to create motivating jobs by regularly conducting work adjustments of employees' tasks. Moreover, empirical data reveal that cross-functional and teamwork activities are widespread in such establishments. Obviously, more advanced and flexible working practices are represented on a larger scale within organizations characterized by stronger HRM departments and weaker or no union influence.

To conclude, our research indicates that trade unions really make a difference when observing work design practices of large-sized Croatian organizations. Independent samples t-test showed the existence of statistically significant mean differences in 8 out of 13 compared practices. It is also clear that non-union organizations are much more sensitive to changeable business environment than their union counterparts and sensible to create a flexible workforce.

Finally, we need to address several research limitations and desirable future steps. First, the most important problem is the unit of analysis issue. We took an organizational level of analysis, although in the future we should focus more at the individual level or maybe apply multilevel lenses in order to register variances both within and between organizations. Such research design would be appropriate for studying work design issues across organizations. Second, we have adopted self-reporting questionnaire and collected data only from a single source. Such practice imposes constraints regarding the information given and common-source bias. Last, although we managed to receive 41 responses with an acceptable response rate, collected data still represents a small sample which means that we need to be cautious not to over generalize our findings.

Some possible implications for future research arise from several aforementioned limitations of the research. In order to gain a deeper understanding of trade union's role in today's economy, future research would have to consider not only work design practices but should also include various organizational design activities. It would also be challenging to find out whether and how influence of trade unions differs among various industries, occupations and job categories, as well as to determine how trade unions should collaborate with HRM departments in order to provide optimal work design for each employee.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is an integral part of the scientific project entitled "The holistic analysis of the role of trade unions in the contemporary society" which is financed by the University of Zagreb, Croatia.