The changing psychological contract at work

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Revisiting the job demands-control model

The old adage that "change is here to stay" epitomises the workplace over the past three decades. And yet research in the field of occupational stress has been rooted in simple two or three dimensional models such as the job demands-control model. The article by de Croon and colleagues¹ in this issue is important, even with some of its methodological shortcomings (self report, cross sectional design) and the increasing movement towards more complex stress-strain models,² by generating and highlighting more occupation specific stressors in the process. This was started by Sparks and Cooper,³ in a range of occupational groups where it was shown that job demand and job control were only two among a range of factors that predicted job related strain outcomes. This is a significant development, because if we are to intervene effectively to minimise or eliminate "organisational sources" of stress, we must have a comprehensive and accurate assessment of the range of stressors that predict ill health.

Worklife in the developed world has moved on dramatically since the 1970s, when the job demands-control model was first posited. The 1970s was a period of industrial strife, conflict, and retrenchment. The workplace became the battleground between employers and workers, between the middle and working classes, and between liberal and conservative thinking. This was an era about power and control in many developed countries. Out of the turmoil of the 1970s came the "enterprise culture" of the 1980s, a decade of privatisations, legislation constraining industrial relations disputes, mergers, strategic alliances, and globalisation, transforming economies into hot-house, free market environments. By the end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the sustained recession, the privatising mentality of the public sector, and new technology, laid the groundwork for one of the most profound changes in the workplaces of the developed world since the industrial revolution, the "short term contract"

culture. Just as organisations were re-engineering themselves to be more flexible and adaptive by outsourcing many of their functions and creating "the flexible workforce", employees were expected to be open to continual change, adaptable, and aware that jobs were no longer for life. The psychological contract between employer and employee in terms of "reasonably permanent employment for work well done" was truly being undermined, as more and more employees no longer regarded their employment as secure and began to realise that their careers and futures were in their own hands and not in the human resource departments of the large corporates. Indeed, in an ISR[4]3 survey of 400 companies in 17 countries employing over 8 million workers throughout Europe, the employment security of workers significantly declined between 1985 and 1995: UK, from 70% in 1985 to 48% in 1995; Germany, from 83% to 55%; France, from 64% to 50%; the Netherlands, from 73% to 61%; Belgium, from 60% to 54%; and Italy from 62% to 57%.

"Most organisations will have only a small core of full time, permanent employees"

The movement towards the "short term contract" culture has also meant a "longer hours" culture in many companies,⁴ greater mobility between employers, and more portfolio careers. Indeed, in predicting the nature of future corporate life, many experts argue that most organisations will have only a small core of full time, permanent employees, working from a conventional office.⁶ They will buy most of the skills they need on a contract basis, either from individuals working at home and linked to the company by computers and modems, or by hiring people on short term contracts to do specific jobs or to carry out specific projects. In this way, companies will be able to maintain the flexibility they need to cope with a rapidly changing world.

This movement will actually give employees more control of their working life, but with substantially less security. Sparrow and Cooper⁷ identified four areas that are affected by changing employment relationships at work: (1) what we want out of work and how we maintain individuality in a world where we face a choice between more intense employment or no employment at all; (2) our relationships with other individuals in a work process that can be altered in terms of social interactions, time patterns, and geographical locations; (3) the cooperative and competitive links between different internal and external constituents of the organisation in their new more flexible form; and (4) the relationships between key stakeholders and institutions such as governments, unions, and managers.

The job demands-control model, which is based on organisational environments and structures of the past, is already beginning to break down as we enter the era of flexible and contingency working. Job security may be going but control by the individual over their own destiny is increasing. This will have profound effects on society, but also in the research that should be carried out in the future in the field of occupational and organisational stress and health.

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