

# On-the-Job Satisfaction

by Robert J. Trotter

It was at the Old Hungerford Stairs, in a dark and dingy warehouse, that Charles suffered his most dismal days. He was hardly more than ten years old when he was forced to earn his living by tying and labeling pots of blacking. The work conditions were vile. The young boy worked all day every day and was given only enough food to keep him alive and to keep him working. When he was finally released from servitude, Charles Dickens was a changed person. And the bitterness he stored up while working in the blacking factory helped him in his fight to change things for all working people.

It has been more than 100 years since the social tracts and satire of Dickens aided in bringing about reforms in the working conditions of Victorian England. But reforms such as child-labor laws and the 40-hour week affected only the worst oppressions of the industrial revolution. Post-industrial societies are still faced with the problems of job dissatisfaction, disruptive work stoppages and poor quality work.

Because work cannot be done away with, many people are looking for ways to increase productivity and human fulfillment by changing existing forms of work. One of the most obvious attempts to change work conditions in recent years has been the introduction of the four-day work week. It was estimated in 1973, for instance, that companies were converting to rearranged work weeks at the rate of five per day. The typical new work week consists of the same number of working hours (35 to 40) in only four days.

The four-day week has been greeted with "nearly rampant popularity" say James G. Goodale and A. K. Aagaard of York University in Toronto. But relatively few studies, they say, have examined the effect of the four-day week on employees' lives. To get such information, Goodale and Aagaard studied the reactions of 474 white-collar workers after one year of the four-day system and found some negative reactions.

In the company studied, employees were on a rotating day-off schedule with a different day off every week. Because of this, nearly half of the employees reported difficulties in work-related interpersonal contact. Because of scheduling, for instance, some employees only worked together three days a week.

When asked about the effects of the longer day, 62 percent stated that they found their work more tiring. Employees complained of fatigue and reported a slowdown at the end of the day. Most employees had not adopted an earlier bedtime to compensate for the earlier starting time.

On the positive side, changes regarding knowledge of other peoples' jobs, job independence and increased responsibility were reported. With 20 percent of the employees (including supervisors) absent every day, people had to learn and cover other jobs and work under reduced supervision.

Total weekly leisure hours were not changed, but most people felt that the four-day week gave them more leisure time and that they were better able to make use of such time. Many people believed the four-day week was beneficial to their marriages and to their social life in general. This was especially true for younger employees. Older employees, with perhaps less energy and less tolerance for change, were more negative.

Of the supervisors surveyed, more than half felt that the four-day week had a detrimental effect. Most supervisors, for instance, were not able to take their day off regularly. They had positive reactions about staff motivation, lower rates of absenteeism, efficiency and job familiarity. They were unfavorable about what they saw as decreased work quality and productivity (there were no significant changes in productivity), service to others, work coordination and work organization.

Goodale and Aagaard say that their conclusions are tentative, but they do suggest some situations in which the usefulness of a four-day week might be questionable. Such as schedule, they say, probably should not be instituted in a setting where employees must meet and work in groups, where customer service is provided five days a week, where supervisors feel they need to be available during all working hours and where a majority of the employees are relatively old.

Obviously the four-day work week is not the final answer to the workers' prayers. There are, however, a good many other strategies that can be employed to improve productivity and the quality of work life. T. G. Cummings of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland has reviewed approximately 550 studies published since

1959 on job satisfaction, industrial organization and productivity. He has identified nine factors or "action levers" that have had positive effects on productivity and job satisfaction. He lists them with an example of each:

- Pay and reward systems. Introduce a group bonus.
- Job autonomy and discretion. Allow workers to determine their own work methods.
- Support services. Provide service on demand from technical support groups.
- Training. Train all operators for all tasks in the department.
- Organization structure. Reduce the number of hierarchical levels.
- Technical and physical. Break long assembly lines into smaller units.
- Task variety. Include preparatory and finishing tasks.
- Information and feedback. Provide direct feedback from user departments.
- Interpersonal and group process. Increase the amount and kind of group interaction.

By employing one or more of these levers, positive results have been obtained in five areas. Costs went down while productivity and quality went up. Employee turnover and absenteeism were decreased while job satisfaction was increased.

Not all of the action levers are applicable in all job situations. And not all have the desired effect in every work setting. Cummings suggests an evolutionary approach. Strategy for a program of change, he says, might begin at the individual job level where minimal amounts of organizational disruptions are likely to occur. If individual job restructuring experiments are successful, both workers and management should be ready for additional organizational changes.

By applying various action levers on the job, it is possible to determine which ones will work best. "The strategy," says Cummings, "involves a gradual process of building up confidence and learning from experience." This evolutionary process, he suggests, may lead to long-term improvements and is preferable to sudden radical upheavals.

Work conditions have improved greatly since Dickens described his own experiences in *David Copperfield*. With continued investigations of the causes of job dissatisfaction and the application of workable strategies, work may eventually become a more satisfying experience for everyone. □