

The Development of “Job Crafting” & Its Implications in the Workplace in Japan



Author
Nobutaka Ishiyama

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Introduction

In Japan today we can observe what we call population onus, in which the working age population is decreasing due to a low birth rate and the aging of society. Against this backdrop, capacity building and training of workers is increasingly vital to raising labor productivity, since raising labor productivity will be one of the major prescriptions for addressing the decline in the working age population. One of the Japanese government's principal economic policies today is to change an individual's work-life balance to promote their welfare as well as to raise labor productivity. Developing an individual worker's skills and capacities is one of the major aspects of this policy. But putting too much emphasis on it could result in a failure to promote the worker's own welfare, and thus the motivation for working. This initiative will need to address an essential question for both companies and their employees, namely what values should be recognized by both sides. On this crucial question, “job crafting” is an idea to achieve high motivation for each worker and thus eventually better business performance on the company side. It means a redefinition of the work to be achieved by employees on their own, and they themselves can thus recreate their jobs by this redefinition.

Job crafting is now attracting growing attention. This article will highlight what it is and why it has been receiving attention in Japan, as well as giving examples of it and looking at its possible future in Japan.

Definition of Job Crafting

For an individual, self-fulfillment in one's job, which is an important goal in life, is not necessarily compatible with improving productivity as a goal of labor policy. Job crafting has been becoming popular because it reminds us of the essential question of the meaning of work in an individual's life. This was the idea developed in 2001 by Amy Wrzesniewski, a professor at the Yale School of Management, and Jane E. Dutton, a professor at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. It can be contrasted to “job design”, an earlier idea, as shown in *Chart 1*.

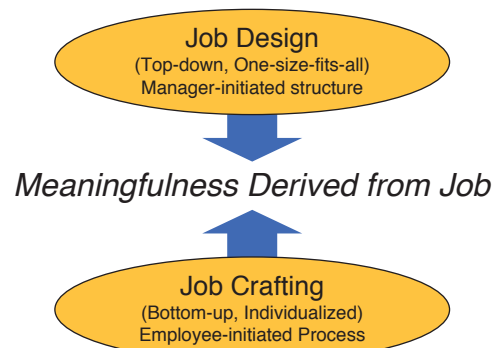
Job design is a given job assignment provided by the top management of an organization or a worker's superiors in the hierarchy of the organization, and as such it tends to be of a one-size-fits-all nature. Of course, in terms of organizational

management, it is definitely necessary. But there may be some individual workers who are not happy with this passive kind of working style and who seek greater satisfaction in their workplace. Job crafting could transform this situation even under the existing job design culture, as it could enable workers to play a positive role in redefining their assignments. This would be by a bottom-up and employee-initiated process in which workers craft a job in accordance with their preferences, transforming their assignment as defined by the top-down process of job design into one which they can do with greater motivation on their own behalf, while remaining cognizant of the needs of the organization. With this personal transformation of a job assignment into an individually valuable one, workers could achieve a greater sense of fulfillment.

The core of this transformation process must be redefining job assignments. As in *Chart 2*, Wrzesniewski and Dutton assumed that workers basically desire to have greater control over their jobs by redefining them. Their view of work would then depend on whether they saw their job as in some way separate from the overall work of their organization or whether they regarded it from a more holistic perspective in the context of the organization's mission. In the former case, the job might be seen merely as a means to earn a salary, but in the latter it might be seen as having valuable implications for society as a whole and therefore be more meaningful for the individual worker. If employees reassessed the value of their

CHART 1

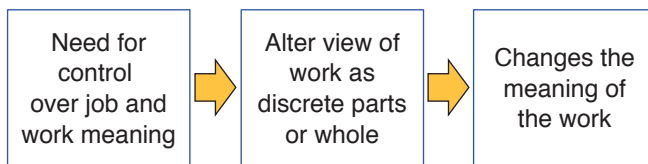
The interaction between job design & job crafting



Source: Berg, J. M., Dutton, J. E., & Wrzesniewski, A., “Job crafting and meaningful work” in *Purpose and Meaning in the Workplace*, Washington: American Psychological Association, 2013

CHART 2

The meaning of the work



Source: Wrzesniewski, A. & Dutton, J. E., "Crafting a job: revisioning employees as active crafters of their work" in *Academy of Management Review*, Vol.26, No.2 (2001)

work in this way, they would actively try to enrich the contents of their jobs, while still observing the minimum requirements of the assignment as devised by job design.

According to Prof. Yuta Morinaga at Musashi University, a good example of this redefinition of a job is that of the so-called "custodial" worker at Tokyo Disneyland. This job of cleaning all day long had been considered one of the most painful and laborious at the park, and was one of the most hated jobs among employees there, who were often deeply disappointed with this inflexible assignment. But then their superiors began to insist that the work of "custodials" is not limited to cleaning but contains a wide range of duties such as clean management of the whole park and protecting customers. The implications of the job have now successfully changed from simply cleaning the park to contributing to the creation of a customer-friendly environment in the park, which is a job definition based on a more holistic context. The custodial workers at Tokyo Disneyland now add their own creative services to their routine job, such as drawing faces of Disney characters on the ground using colored leaves or blooms. As a result, being a custodial has become a very popular job among the workers there.

Implications of Job Crafting in Japan

Despite attracting increasing attention, there are some who say that Japan does not need job crafting. The reasons may lie in the Japanese personnel management system. *Charts 3 & 4* show the salary system in Japan – the percentage of wages by post and job responsibility, wages based on job skills, and wages related to age and seniority to the total wages in Japan. Wages by post and job responsibility are determined by a clear definition of a job written in a document, like a job description statement. In this case, job design

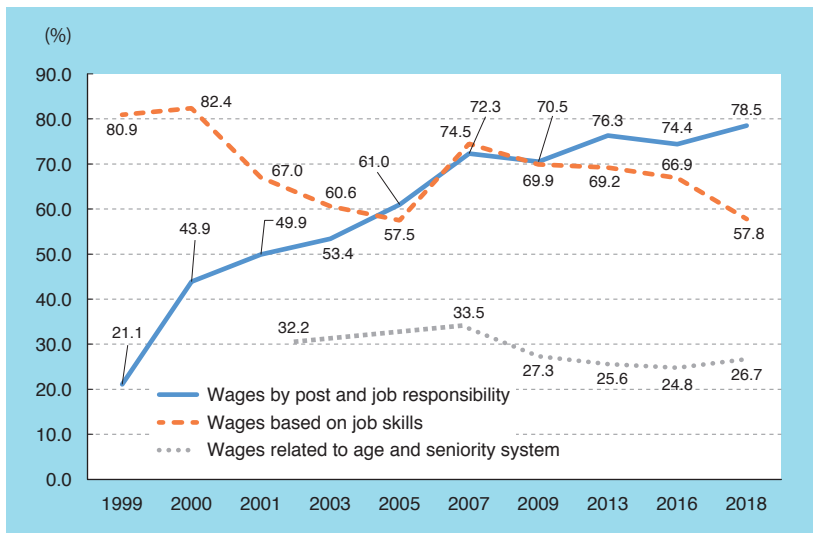
as seen in *Chart 1* clearly exists and is fixed by a top-down process originated by the top management of an organization as well as section chiefs. Meanwhile, wages based on job skills do not presume any clear definition of job assignments and are determined by an employee's capacity. In this case, there should not be necessarily a clear definition of an assignment by job design and thus the scope of the assignment can be interpreted and performed with flexibility. Wages related to age and seniority are determined by the age of an employee and the number of years he or she has worked for an organization. In this case as well, it does not presume any clear job design and the scope of job assignments can be rather arbitrary.

The charts show that in Japan the proportion of wages based on job skills exceed 50% even among managerial posts, though the proportion of wages by post and job responsibility is on a rising trend and among non-managerial posts the proportion of wages based on job skills is higher than that of wages by post and job responsibility. This means that in Japanese working places there is not necessarily a clear job design and individual workers could interpret the scope of their job assignments in a more flexible manner. In other words, without the top-down process of job design on behalf of the top management or senior officials, an individual worker can do job crafting spontaneously in their routine work in Japan.

Related to this, Japanese workers are mostly multi-skilled. In short, as job design does not divide the working process in detail, each employee would be responsive to plural working requirements and this results in creating many multi-skilled workers and increasing their individual skills. In fact, *kaizen*, a well-known business practice born in Japan for improving production efficiency or safety through discussions among a small group of production site workers, does not target any individual production process but plural processes, and tries to achieve improvement of those processes systematically. A production worker's experience as a multi-skilled worker in doing a specific job but always bearing other processes in mind would enable them to redefine their job assignments in a broader and more systematic context. Thus, in Japan it may be true that job crafting has already become a de facto routine in the workplace. If so, Japanese may not necessarily have to learn from the theory of job crafting created by American business school professors.

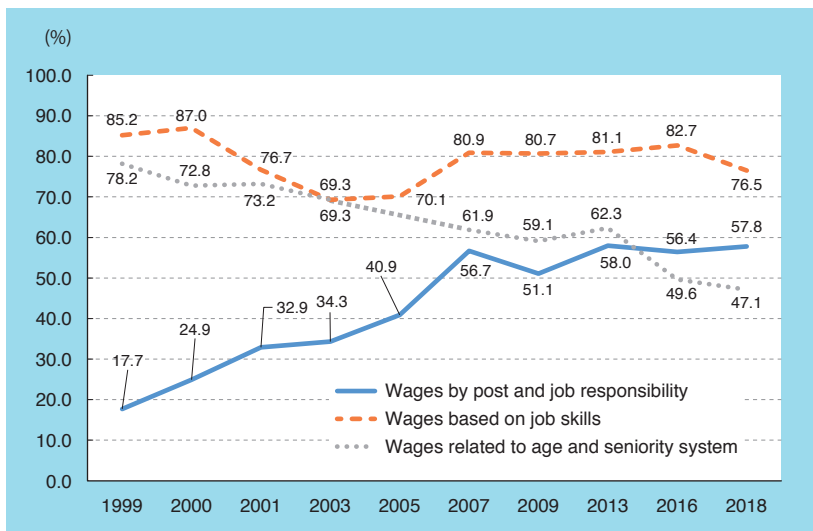
However, I believe that the story of *kaizen* does not necessarily show a precise picture of the reality of Japanese business

CHART 3
Trends in wage system introduced among managerial post employees



Source: Japan Productivity Center, 2019

CHART 4
Trends in wage system introduced among non-managerial post employees



Source: Japan Productivity Center, 2019

management. There must be cases where the top management of an organization would be the only people who could define each job assignment in detail by a top-down decision making process, even though the definition might leave room for flexible interpretation on the part of employees. In other words, if an organizational culture is hierarchical and decision making is done by a top-down process, the employees would have to continue to do only what has been instructed by management or their section chiefs, while their job assignment remains ambiguous. In fact, according to a *Nikkei Journal* article on May 26, 2017 about a Gallup poll on employees' engagement with their jobs among countries worldwide, the Japanese employees' score is much lower than the global average and ranked 132nd among the 139 participating countries. In this article, Jim Clifton, CEO of Gallup Corporation, mentioned that the reason why Japanese employees' engagement score was so low is their organizations' command and control, ensuring that employees perform their job without any contesting remarks on their obligation to the management. This remark seems to suggest that a top-down approach in business decision making is dominant in Japanese organizations. Under such circumstances, job crafting would rarely be achieved.

There is another academic concept called "work engagement" implying an employee's willingness to work. In terms of this concept as well, it is known that Japanese employees rank low in international comparisons. But it is true that job crafting would have an effect in raising work engagement, so I believe there is a great need for Japanese workplaces to develop work engagement by promoting job crafting, since Japanese workplaces are not necessarily concerned about their employees' real happiness.

Examples of Job Crafting in Japan

I would like to introduce Japan Railway (JR) East TESSEI Co. Ltd. as one of the success cases of job crafting in Japan. A former senior executive of TESSEI, Teruo Yabe, wrote about how he was successful in encouraging employees to redefine their jobs to raise their motivation in his book *A Miraculous Company* (2013). TESSEI is one of the affiliated companies of JR East and its main business is to clean up the cars of Shinkansen bullet trains between their arrivals at and departures from terminal stations. This was introduced by CNN in a news video in 2012 as “Tokyo’s seven minute miracle”. Before redefinition of the work initiated by his leadership, the employees had thought their job should be just cleaning the train cars exactly as instructed by their boss. Yabe, having been transferred to a senior executive post in TESSEI from JR East, questioned this, and he began to redefine the work of the whole company to raise employees’ motivation. He made a clear change by proposing to redefine the work as “providing hospitality for the customers by their total service” without limiting it to only cleaning up the train cars. He tried to transform the workplace into an “exciting theater” which was considered a symbol of the redefined job.

His concept led to a redefinition of each individual worker’s job. The employees, having previously been passive in their work routines, started to propose numerous new ideas for their jobs. For example, to elaborate on the idea of “exciting theater” they adopted seasonal clothing, such as aloha shirts or a *yukata*, a casual kimono, in the summer, and they created resting areas for babies next to restrooms at stations and decorated them with colorful origami paper.

Another good example of job crafting in Japan is the work done by Haruko Niitsu, a leader of airport cleaning staff at Japan Airport Techno Co. Ltd., whose work was introduced by an NHK TV program series “Professional Working Style”. The distinguished cleaning skills and technology of her and her staff have been instrumental in Haneda Airport winning first prize a number of times in the airport ratings for cleanliness made by the British air industry service research company Skytrax Co. Ltd. She and her staff make the right choice of cleaning tool and detergent for a specific spot among innumerable choices. Niitsu also redefines her job as one that delivers hospitality to a wide range of customers visiting Haneda, Tokyo’s main international airport, as her staff work to ensure a pleasant trip for all customers on international as well as domestic

flights.

These examples of job crafting in Japan all happen to be cleaning jobs, in which the results of redefinition of the work can be easily seen. But job crafting could be expanded to a wider scope of jobs. I believe there would be a strong need for it in areas of knowledge intensive jobs. You may think that knowledge intensive jobs would be subject to a high degree of discretion and as such job crafting might seem unsuitable. But as I pointed out, Japanese organizations seem to be more subject to top-down decision making which obliges employees to follow the managers’ orders without questioning them, and so there must be a concern that knowledge intensive jobs cannot take advantage of their discretionary nature in Japan. In this light, I believe we should do more to promote job crafting in knowledge intensive jobs in Japan.

A Footnote on Job Crafting

We need to take note of the challenges in introducing job crafting as well as its implications in Japan. Job crafting is an exercise by employees’ to recreate their jobs by redefining them in the hope that they will deliver greater self-fulfillment. Such redefined jobs would not necessarily be in line with the expectations of their organizations or colleagues, and might even be a nuisance for them. In these cases, workers who had redefined their jobs might be regarded simply as self-centered.

In order to avoid this, they must be aware that job crafting is a collaborative exercise with their colleagues. A well balanced approach that takes account of an individual’s own initiative in redefining his or her job without simply following a superior’s command and also of collaboration with colleagues will be essential in promoting job crafting in Japan. **JS**

Dr. Nobutaka Ishiyama is a professor at Hosei Graduate School of Regional Policy Design. He received the JAHRD Award from the Japanese Academy of Human Resource Development in 2018.