

A Comparative Analysis of the Desirability of Work Characteristics:

Chile versus the U.S.

William J. Corney

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Clinton H. Richards

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Work content is extremely important. Differences in the desirability of autonomy, achievement, salary and other work-related characteristics can impact workers, employers, customers and society. The current study assesses the desirability of eleven work characteristics across student-subjects in two countries, Chile and the United States. Information on the perceived importance of these work characteristics may lead to a better understanding of how to structure jobs so as to better match desires of workers with the reality of the actual workplace. Fortunately, there is a substantial body of research on work-based characteristics in a multinational framework that provide a foundation for this research.

Literature Review

Elements of a job, sometimes called work characteristics or work goals, include intrinsic, extrinsic and context factors. In an early study, Herzberg, et. al (1957) developed a theory which partitioned job characteristics into extrinsic and intrinsic factors, with the later having motivational power. Bass & Eldrige (1973) found managers

in Denmark expressed stronger societal concerns and a weaker profit motive than their counterparts in Britain, Germany and the U.S.A., while Kannungo and Wright (1983) found British managers valued achievement and autonomy more than French managers. Dowling and Nagel (1986) found American business students valued intrinsic factors less than Australian business majors, and Corney and Richards (2001) found students from the former Soviet Republic of Moldova valued pay and security more, and variety and autonomy less than American students. Hofstede (1980) found differences by nationality and by occupational group, while Harpaz (1990) and England & Harpaz (1990) found differences in work goals by gender, nationality, age and organizational level. This paper examines the desirability of work elements among undergraduate university students in Chile, and compares their preferences to those of university students in the United States. The Chilean subjects were students in the College of Business at Andres Bello university in Santiago. American students were in the College of Business at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. At the time the surveys were conducted in 2000, the Chilean economy was in a recession while the U.S. economy was enjoying a long expansionary period. It is the objective of this paper to investigate the desirability of work characteristics of these students, compare them to U.S. student responses and discuss implications for job design in a multicultural framework.

Methodology and Hypotheses

Junior and senior-level university students in the U.S. and Chile were asked to rate the importance of eleven work characteristics on a ten-point scale. The average age of the Chilean students was 20.2 years and for the American students, 20.9 years. The work characteristics that were assessed by the students are shown in table 1. They are

identical to those first examined by Harpaz (1990) and have been used in numerous other studies. Mean importance ratings were calculated and compared among characteristics, by subject's country, gender, age and with results from previous research. F-tests were made to determine if differences observed were significant in a statistical sense. Three ratings were solicited involving economic and job outlook. This was accomplished by asking the following questions; 1) How would you rate your optimism or pessimism concerning the future of your country's economy?, from 1 (most optimistic) to 10 (most pessimistic), 2) How would you rate your optimism or pessimism concerning future job prospects in your country?, and 3) How would you rate your optimism or pessimism concerning your own personal job prospects following graduation? It was hypothesized that the major economic and social differences between the two student populations would be reflected in major differences in the desirability of certain work characteristics. As the Chilean subjects are students in a country with reduced prospects for employment, it is expected that work elements that are extrinsic (pay, security, working conditions, working hours, match with abilities and experience) would be more important to them than those elements that are intrinsic to the job (autonomy, interesting work, variety, opportunity for learning, and opportunity for promotion). It was also thought that the perceived importance of extrinsic work goals would increase in importance as subject's economic outlook was more pessimistic.

table 1 about here

Results

An analysis of variance was used to examine the effects of age, gender, economic outlook, and differences in work goal importance. Considering age, no significant differences were found among U.S. students, Chilean students, or the combined group of all students. With regard to gender, Table 2 presents means for the 11 work characteristics from Chilean students, categorized as totals and separated by sex of respondent. Table 3 presents the same data for American students.

table 2 about here

Among students in Chile, none of the gender-based differences observed were statistically significant at the .05 level or better. In contrast, American students displayed significant differences based on gender in working conditions and matching skills, with females scoring higher in each of these goal scores. Gender-based differences are consistent with results from other studies (Centers & Bugental, 1966; Harpaz, 1990; Corney & Richards, 1999).

table 3 about here

Comparing Chilean students to American students in terms of all 11 work characteristics taken together, a multivariate test indicated a significant difference at greater than a .001 level. A further investigation of the desirability of individual work characteristics found numerous statistically significant differences, summarized in table 4.

table 4 about here

For the Chilean students, all work characteristics were more highly rated than for American students except for Interesting Work, Convenience and Working Conditions. For U.S. Students the top rated work characteristics were; Good Opportunity for Promotion, Interesting work, and Pay (all rated above 9.0). Chilean students rated four characteristics above 9.0, the same three so designated by U.S. students, plus Security. In terms of statistically significant differences, four were found: Pay and Variety (more important to Chilean students); and convenience and working conditions (more important to American students).

table 5 about here

Table 5 presents work goal scores for all females as compared to all males. None of the combined male scores for any of the eleven work characteristics were higher than the female scores. However, only the Working Conditions and Convenience characteristics were different on a statistical basis.

With regard to economic outlook, no statistically significant differences were found for any of the three economic measures.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results indicate that for both Chilean and U.S. students, the characteristics of a preferred job will have three major elements: interesting work, good pay and an opportunity for promotion. Of these, Pay was found to be significantly more important

for the Chilean students than for the American students. While important, American students may believe a job with a decent rate of pay is a basic assumption. Under these circumstances, the focus of concern is more on the intrinsic rewards the job may offer, and Pay is taken for granted. The Chilean students, being part of a developing economy having a high unemployment rate, are more concerned with getting and holding non-menial employment, hence their higher valuation on pay and job security. These findings are consistent with the classic needs-based theorists (e.g., Herzberg , 1957). They are also consistent with a previous study (Corney & Richards, 2001) which studied Moldovan students. The Moldovans rated Security as their top choice, followed closely by pay. The results suggest that companies looking to fill positions stress the attractiveness of the available jobs on a contingency basis, with economic conditions being a contingent factor.

Gender differences across the work characteristics were found for Working Conditions and Convenience, with female subjects favoring both when compared to male subjects. The finding is consistent with the Moldova study as well. These differences can perhaps be attributed to family concerns by the female subjects. With children in the household, a traditional family relationship tends to put more pressure on the woman as a personal care provider for the entire family. This makes convenient working hours to be more important for the female vs. the male. Moreover, from a cultural point of view, women in many societies have learned from early age to have greater concern for cleanliness and neatness in the workplace than men. For example, it is more acceptable for men to work in coal mines, on construction sites, in machine shops, etc. In Latin-based societies such as Chile and Moldova, these feelings are likely to be more

pronounced. It is interesting that the work element Variety, was also found to be more important to the Chilean students than to the American students. This was also true among the Moldovan students. If further research also shows this to be true, job content should be structured accordingly.

The economic outlook measures did not provide any statistically significant differences in job content characteristics. The most likely explanation is that these economic factors are viewed as temporary in nature; economies go through business cycles which tend to last for a few years. Subjects may feel this relatively short duration as compared to the time span of an entire career, does not affect the more enduring effect of work characteristics.

There are weaknesses with the current research. Since the study used only students as subjects, results cannot be directly compared with previous research that made use of currently employed subjects. Working individuals have experience that provide them with actual objective knowledge of the importance of work characteristics while students are responding more to subjective feelings or experiences from low paid part-time work. Moreover, students tend to be younger than the average subject in the working population, which may also affect their attitudes toward work. Previous research (Richards & Corney, 2000) show that even among this population, junior and senior students have differing views of what is important in the workplace than freshmen and sophomores.

More work needs to be done in an effort to clarify differences found. There may be fundamental reasons for why Chilean students score work characteristics differently that prevent the findings from being generalized to other populations. For such an

investigation, more information needs to be gathered on individual subjects in an effort to isolate the effect of individual and culture-based variables

References

Bass, B. & Eldrige (1973). Accelerated managers' objectives in twelve countries.

Industrial Relations, 12: 158 - 171.

Centers, R. & Bugental, P. (1966). Intrinsic and extrinsic job motivations among different segments of the working population. **Journal of Applied Psychology**, 50: 193 - 197.

Corney, W. & Richards, C. (2001). Work goal differences: post communist versus capitalist economies. **International Journal of Management**, 4.

Dowling, P. & Nagel, T. (1986). Nationality and work attitudes: A study of Australian and American business majors. **Journal of Management**, 12: 121 - 28.

England, G.W. & Harpaz, I. (1990). How working is defined. National contexts and demographic and organizational role influences. **Journal of Organizational Behavior**, 11: 253 - 266.

Harpaz, I. (1990). The importance of work goals: an international perspective. **Journal of International Business Studies**, 990: 73 - 93.

Herzberg, F., Mausner, R., Peterson, & Capwell, D. (1957). **Job Attitudes: Review of Research and Opinion**. Pittsburgh: Psychological Service of Pittsburgh.

Hofstede, G. (1980). **Culture's consequence: International differences in work related values**. Beverly Hills, Sage

Kannungo, R. & Wright (1983). A cross-cultural comparative study of managerial job attitudes. **Journal of International Business Studies**, 14: 115 - 29.

MOW international research team (1987). **The Meaning of Working**. London: Academic Press.

Pearson, C.A.L. & Chatterjee, J.R. (1999). Changing work values of senior Indian managers: an empirical study. **International Journal of Management**, 16 (1): 139 - 146.

Ralston, D.A., Gustafson, D.J., Cheung, F.M. & Terpstra, R.H. (1993). Differences in managerial values: A study of U.S., Hong Kong and PRC managers. **Journal of International Business Studies**, 10 (1): 249 - 275.

Ralston, D.A., Holt, D.H., Terpstra, R.H. & Yu, K.C. (1997). The impact of national culture and economic ideology on managerial work values. A study of the United States, Russia, Japan and China. **Journal of International Business Studies**, 28 (1): 177 - 207.

Table 1. Work Goals

- A - A lot of opportunity to learn new things
 - B - Good interpersonal relations (supervisors, co-workers)
 - C - Good opportunity for upgrading or promotion
 - D - Convenient work hours
 - E - A lot of variety
 - F - Interesting work (work that you really like)
 - G - Good job security
 - H - A good match between your job requirements, your abilities, and your experience
 - I - Good pay
 - J - Good physical working conditions (such as light, temperature, cleanliness, low noise level)
 - K - A lot of autonomy (you decide how to do your work)
-

Table 2. Work Goal Importance, Chilean Students (N =42)

Work Goals	Male mean	Female mean
Security	9.09	9.70
Pay	9.97	9.99
Interesting Work	9.09	9.27
Promotion	9.44	8.85
Learning	8.01	8.99
Interpersonal Rel.	8.65	8.28
Matching Skills	8.15	8.70
Convenience	7.07	8.29
Autonomy	8.11	8.57
Variety	8.64	9.29
Working Cond.	6.58	7.70

Table 3. Work Goal Importance, American Students (N = 239)

Work Goals	Male mean	Female mean
Interesting Work	9.22	9.31
Promotion	9.17	9.39
Security *	8.88	9.03
Pay	9.02	9.16
Interpersonal Rel.	8.71	8.89
Convenience *	8.47	8.81
Working Cond. **	8.24	8.79
Learning	8.54	8.53
Variety	8.02	8.31
Matching Skills *	7.95	8.37
Autonomy	8.02	8.06

* significant at .05 level, ** significant at .01 level

Table 4. Work Goal Scores, Chile versus U.S.

Work Goals	Chile mean (N = 42)	U.S. mean (N = 239)
Security	9.38	8.97
Pay **	9.97	9.11
Interesting Work	9.18	9.27
Promotion	9.64	9.28
Learning	8.52	8.52
Interpersonal Rel.	8.99	8.79
Matching Skills	8.44	8.16
Convenience *	8.68	8.64
Autonomy	8.36	8.03
Variety *	8.96	8.17
Work Conditions **	7.15	8.50

* significant at .05 level, ** significant at .01 level

Table 5. Combined Work Group Scores, Male versus Female

Work Goals	Male mean	Female mean
Promotion	9.30	9.62
Pay	9.49	9.51
Interesting Work	9.15	9.30
Security	8.98	9.37
Interpersonal Relations	8.68	9.09
Convenience *	7.77	8.55
Learning	8.27	8.76
Working Cond. *	7.41	8.25
Matching Skills	8.05	8.55
Variety	8.33	8.80
Autonomy	8.07	8.32

Significant at .05 level
