

Work Design - flexibility and the contemporary workplace

Case duration (Min): **45-60**
Principles of Management (PoM)
Organizational Behaviour (OB)
Managing human resources
Organization structure and design

Worldwide

Case summary:

Explores alternative work arrangements.
Considers technology and work organization.

Learning objectives:

Differentiate between traditional and contemporary ways of working.
Explain what is meant by flexible working arrangements.
Identify different ways of controlling employee work behaviour.

Case problem:

How can organizations use work arrangements to retain staff and increase productivity?

Retail (electronics)

Company

Best Buy

www.bestbuy.com/

Founded in 1966 in the USA, Best Buy is a retail company (the largest speciality retailer of consumer electronics in the United States) that generates revenues US\$ 45.015 billion (2008) through a workforce of approximately 155,000 (2009). Best Buy sells consumer electronics as well as a wide variety of related merchandise, in a non-commissioned sales environment. Best Buy is a large organization with associated management challenges. "We try to fight BUREAUCRACY every day. Some days we lose the battle, but we think we're winning the war – and it's really important that we do, because we believe that the greatest growth will come if we create an environment where everyone contributes. We believe that the size of Best Buy, far from being an obstacle, can and should work to the advantage of our employees in finding growth, by equipping them and enabling them with innovative, global assets that allow them to solve problems for customers." (http://www.bestbuyinc.com/about/employee_growth.htm accessed July 2009)

First, if you are taking a taught management course then consult with your tutor and ensure that the case has not been scheduled into a teaching class or tutorial. If it has not:

1. Play/ read the media associated with the case. You may need to access the Internet and enter a URL to locate any video clips.
2. Attempt the Case study questions.

Consider attempting the case study as a group exercise; you could form a study group with fellow students.

3. Check the suggested answers - remember these are suggestions only and there are often many possible answers.

Discuss questions and answers with other students.

4. If you feel your answer(s) were weak then consider reading the relevant suggested readings again (also see the case study suggested references).

Title/
Media type

URL/ Media description

Clockless Office.

http://feedroom.businessweek.com/?fr_story=963bf870b75e6e7d33a0496f3f5aa10b203fb8c5&rf=bm

Film

Shows how one company, Best Buy, introduced alternative work arrangements/ flexible/ home working. They shifted their control focus from supervisors policing how work was done to a results orientation. This led to greater employee satisfaction and productivity gains.

NOTES:

Case study questions...

Action	Pre/During/After class
1 ENABLING THE FLEXIBLE WORKING APPROACH. Drawing on the video clip, identify factors which may be seen as enabling the flexible working approach at Best Buy.	During
1 BUREAUCRATIC (TRADITIONAL) MANAGEMENT. Summarise the key ideas of traditional/ BUREAUCRATIC MANAGEMENT – how is the work (job) of employees specified and controlled?	During
2 FLEXIBLE FIRM. Discuss what is meant by a FLEXIBLE FIRM – briefly discuss why contemporary organizations often seek out ways of being more flexible.	During
3 FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS. With reference to the case film and your studies, discuss the purpose, benefits and possible problems of flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting (Telecommuting, telework, working from home (WFH), or working at home (WAH) is a work arrangement in which employees enjoy flexibility in working location and hours. In other words, the daily commute to a central place of work is replaced by telecommunication links) – do you think such work arrangements improve the quality of working life?	During
4 TECHNOLOGY AND WORK ORGANIZATION. Discuss how technology has impacted upon ways of working.	During
5 BUREAUCRACY. Best Buy is a large organization with associated management challenges. They claim to try to fight BUREAUCRACY every day. Discuss how Best Buy used job design and their approach to work (teleworking) to increase productivity and control. Discuss how employees are controlled under the bureaucratic model and contrast this with control at Best Buy. You may draw on the work of Hofstede (organizational culture dimension – process and results orientation) to further your discussion.	During

Answers...

FLEXIBLE WORKING ARRANGEMENTS

Flexibility on patterns of work organisation and the workforce, including part-time work, annual hours contracts and flexitime.

EMPOWERMENT

A climate whereby employees are allowed greater freedom, autonomy and self-control over their work, and the responsibility for decision-making

BUREAUCRACY

Formal organization with a clear-cut division of labour, abstract rules, and procedures, and impartial decision making that uses technical qualifications and professionalism as a basis for promoting employees.

BUREAUCRATIC CONTROL

An approach to control which is based on the specification of how members should behave and carry out their work in an effort to predict the behaviour through formal procedures and job descriptions.

CONTROL

the process of monitoring operations activity and coping with any deviations from the plan; usually involves elements of replanning.

OUTPUT CONTROL

A form of control that is based on the measurement of outputs and the results achieved. This form of control serves the needs of the organisation as a whole and is used when there is a need for quantifiable and simple measures of organisational performance.

JOB

Essentially a collection of tasks brought together as a practical 'chunk' of activity, created and adapted by people, for a particular purpose within an organization.

Question/ Answer

1 Enabling the flexible working approach.

Drawing on the video clip, identify factors which may be seen as enabling the flexible working approach at Best Buy.

Trust.
Results orientation.
Technology.

1 BUREAUCRATIC (TRADITIONAL) MANAGEMENT.

Summarise the key ideas of traditional/ BUREAUCRATIC MANAGEMENT – how is the work (job) of employees specified and controlled?

Bureaucracy - Formal organization with a clear-cut division of labour, abstract rules, and procedures, and impartial decision making, using technical qualifications and professionalism as a basis for promoting employees.

Bureaucratic control - An approach to control based upon the specification of how members should behave and carry out their work in an effort to predict the behaviour through formal procedures and job descriptions (a form of process control i.e. standardise the way work is carried out/ formal job descriptions)

2 FLEXIBLE FIRM.

Discuss what is meant by a FLEXIBLE FIRM – briefly discuss why contemporary organizations often seek out ways of being more flexible.

Flexibility - the degree to which an operation's process can change what it does, how it is doing it, or when it is doing it.

There are a number of forms that flexibility can take : job, location, temporal, numerical and financial. It also relates to a specific organizational model, including core and various forms of peripheral employees.

Flexibility is required to deal with the uncertainties and changes in the external environment and support the needs of employees within.

3 FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS.

With reference to the case film and your studies, discuss the purpose, benefits and possible problems of flexible work arrangements such as telecommuting (Telecommuting, telework, working from home (WFH), or working at home (WAH) is a work arrangement in which employees enjoy flexibility in working location and hours. In other words, the daily commute to a central place of work is replaced by telecommunication links) – do you think such work arrangements improve the quality of working life?

PURPOSE: designed to achieve better fit between the needs of the individual employee and the organization.

BENEFITS: improved satisfaction/ motivation leading to performance and productivity gains; lower costs associated with employee work space; attracts talented employees; benefits society by enabling parents etc?

PROBLEMS: increased stress, less managerial (process) control; less feedback; lack of social connection/ identity, less learning/ knowledge sharing and technostress, work interruption; employees may end up working more hours.

Quality of working life - An approach to management that seeks to enhance the dignity of workers, improve an organization's culture, and improve the physical and emotional well-being of employees

4 TECHNOLOGY AND WORK ORGANIZATION.

Discuss how technology has impacted upon ways of working.

Students may discuss communications technology in particular but may also consider equipment required by the work itself.

FLEXIBLE FIRM

There are a number of forms that flexibility can take, job, location, temporal, numerical and financial. It also relates to a specific organizational model which includes core and various forms of peripheral employee.

PRODUCTIVITY

Efficiency, when the input is labour. The fewer labour hours needed to perform a job, the greater the productivity.

STRESS

A source of tension and frustration which tends to arise when an individual feels that a certain situation should not exist.

ORGANISATIONAL CLIMATE

the prevailing atmosphere surrounding the organisation - the level of morale and strength of feelings or belonging, care and goodwill among members -Organisational climate is based on the perceptions of members towards the organisation

ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE

The collection of traditional values, policies, beliefs and attitudes that constitute a pervasive context for everything we do and think in an organisation.

FLEXIBILITY

the degree to which an operation's process can change what it does, how it is doing it, or when it is doing it.

ALIENATION

The detachment of the individual from the work that they do and/or the organization for which they work. Sometimes described as feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation or self-estrangement in which the person no longer feels part of, or involved with, the work that they do.

5 BUREAUCRACY.

Best Buy is a large organization with associated management challenges. They claim to try to fight BUREAUCRACY every day. Discuss how Best Buy used job design and their approach to work (teleworking) to increase productivity and control. Discuss how employees are controlled under the bureaucratic model and contrast this with control at Best Buy. You may draw on the work of Hofstede (organizational culture dimension – process and results orientation) to further your discussion.

One approach to work (traditional) is to specify how work is done (what Hofstede, G. (1997:189) refers to as a concern with means – process oriented. This should then ensure a best method is applied to improve quality and productivity. However, this demotivates employees and is seen as not flexible enough for turbulent environments. In such cases there is a powerful argument to empower employees to choose how they do the work but use results to control productivity and performance i.e. a concern with goals – results oriented. In such cases people are more likely to put maximum effort into their work.

QUALITY OF WORKING LIFE

An approach to management that seeks to enhance the dignity of workers, improve an organization's culture, and improve the physical and emotional well-being of employees.

Case study references

Cole, G A. and Kelly, P P. (2011) 'Management Theory and Practice', Ed. 7. Cengage EMEA.

Hofstede, G. (1997) 'Cultures and Organizations', McGraw -Hill.

Martin, J. (2005) 'Organizational Behaviour and Management', Ed. 3. Thomson Learning.

Nelson, D L. and Quick, J C. (2009) 'ORGB', Ed. 1. South Western.