

## Inclusive Job Design

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# 7

## Inclusive Job Design

Thomas Bredgaard

**Abstract** In the modern labor market, we often unconsciously adhere to ‘ableist’ notions of what constitutes an ‘ideal worker,’ a ‘normal job,’ and ‘ordinary work.’ These ingrained norms create a divide between what is considered normal and abnormal, able and disabled, ideal and deficient. Such ableist perspectives can inadvertently exclude people with disabilities from the labor market. This chapter explores the concept and theory of inclusive job design as a transformative approach to inclusivity. Job design champions the idea of tailoring jobs to fit individuals, rather than forcing individuals to conform to rigid job descriptions. By embracing this approach, we can open doors to a more diverse and inclusive workforce, where everyone has the opportunity to contribute their unique talents and abilities.

### Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- Grasp the importance of inclusive job design: Understand why designing jobs and work environments to accommodate diverse capacities and abilities is crucial for fostering an inclusive workplace.

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- Explore inclusive workplaces: Reflect on how reimagining job and work design can unlock the potential for more inclusive and supportive workplaces, benefiting everyone.

### **Case Study: To Hire or Not to Hire Karen?**

Peter, the personnel manager at Danish Biscuits, a company with 80 employees, faces a new challenge. Danish Biscuits, known for its delicious butter cookies enjoyed both in Denmark and internationally, operates its main production facility in the small town of Grindsted, home to 10,000 residents in southern Jutland.

Recently, Peter received a call from the local job center with a proposal: hiring a new employee under the flexjob program. This program is designed for individuals with reduced work capacity, where employers only pay for the 'effective' work hours. Peter, having no prior experience with flexjobs, is curious but cautious.

The job center employee suggests hiring Karen for 10 hours a week as a secretary. Karen, a former production line worker at Danish Biscuits, had to leave her job two years ago after a severe back injury. Peter remembers Karen fondly as a diligent worker and a great colleague. After a year of recovery, Karen was unfortunately let go due to her prolonged absence.

Now, the job center suggests that Karen could assist in the reception area. Although she has no prior experience in this role, she would be provided with a height-adjustable table and allowed extra breaks throughout the day. The job center estimates Karen's work efficiency at 75% of a typical employee, meaning Peter would only need to pay for 7.5 hours of work per week, despite Karen being employed for 10 hours.

Peter acknowledges the need for extra help in the reception but worries about the potential reluctance of his current reception staff to invest time in training and supervising Karen.

### **Discussion Questions**

- Consider the pros and cons of hiring Karen
- Consider how to address the concerns of the colleagues in the reception

## 7.1 Overcoming Reluctance in Hiring Jobseekers with Disabilities

Managers often hesitate to hire jobseekers with disabilities due to various perceptions: they might be seen as less productive, difficult to dismiss, or requiring too many special accommodations (Nagtegaal et al., 2023). While some of these concerns may hold true in certain cases, they largely stem from stereotypes and a lack of accurate information about individuals with disabilities.

Research on ‘ableism’ in the labor market reveals that managers often hold subtle norms and standards about ‘ideal workers’ and ‘normal jobs’ that inadvertently discriminate against people with disabilities (Campbell, 2009). Jobseekers with disabilities frequently do not align with these conventional assumptions of ‘ideal workers,’ leading to their exclusion during the recruitment process. Even when they secure employment, they are often compared to ‘ordinary employees’ and may feel compelled to overcompensate—by working longer hours or concealing their disabilities—to meet the elusive standard of the ‘ideal worker.’ Additionally, employees with disabilities are more likely to be found in lower-quality jobs compared to their non-disabled counterparts. This mismatch between labor supply and demand is a direct consequence of ableist ideas about jobs and employees (Bredgaard et al., 2024).

One effective strategy to combat ableism is through thoughtful job and work design. The job design literature has been pivotal in exploring how jobs and work can be tailored to fit individuals, thereby enhancing internal motivation and productivity (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). By customizing jobs to suit individual employees, we can better accommodate the functional limitations of workers with disabilities, fostering a more inclusive and productive workplace.

## 7.2 Job Design Theory and the Job Characteristics Model

The concept of job design has evolved significantly since its inception. Initially, it was a method to boost industrial productivity, championed by Frederick Taylor in the early twentieth century. Taylor’s scientific management movement emphasized the design of entire work systems with standardization and job simplification, imposed from the top-down to maximize

efficiency. However, this rigid approach often stifled job motivation and engagement.

In response, management and organization scholars sought alternative methods. Among the pioneers were Hackman and Oldham (1976, 1980), who proposed a pivotal idea: instead of simplifying jobs, they should be enriched to enhance internal motivation and job performance. They developed the Job Characteristics Model, which identifies five core job characteristics that drive high motivation and productivity:

1. **Skill Variety:** The degree to which a job requires a variety of different activities and skills.
2. **Task Identity:** The extent to which a job involves completing a whole, identifiable piece of work.
3. **Task Significance:** The impact a job has on the lives or work of other people.
4. **Autonomy:** The level of independence and discretion in scheduling work and determining procedures.
5. **Feedback:** The amount of direct and clear information about job performance.

By focusing on these characteristics, jobs can be designed to be more engaging and fulfilling, leading to higher motivation and productivity among employees (see Fig. 7.1).

The Job Characteristics Model has a rich history, initially tested and validated through a study involving employees across various roles in seven American business organizations. Since its inception, it has become one of the most debated and extensively tested models in organizational science (for

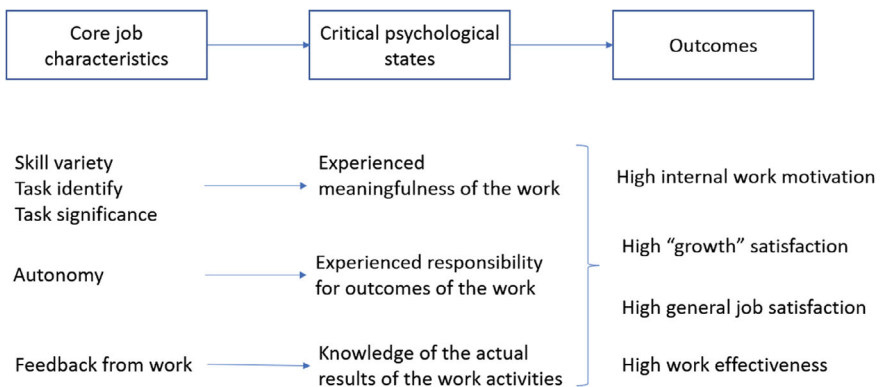


Fig. 7.1 The Job characteristics model

a review, see Oldham & Fried, 2016). This model serves as a powerful tool for analyzing existing jobs to identify opportunities for redesign, aiming to boost employee motivation and productivity. It also helps evaluate the impact of job changes on employees.

However, the job design theory has faced criticism for being overly managerial and top-down, often overlooking the crucial role of employees in shaping their own work experiences (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). To address this, it is essential to recognize how employees can customize their work to align with their needs, values, skills, and abilities. Involving employees in the design process can lead to more meaningful and satisfying job experiences.

This concept, known as job crafting, involves changes initiated by employees from the bottom-up to make their jobs more engaging and fulfilling (Demerouti, 2014). By empowering employees to take an active role in shaping their work, organizations can foster a more motivated and productive workforce.

### 7.3 Supported Employment and Job Design

Designing jobs to accommodate the functional limitations of employees with disabilities is a well-established concept in the field of disability and employment. This approach is prominently featured in the literature on supported employment, individual placement and support, and customized employment (see also Chapter 5).

Supported Employment (SE) emerged in the USA and Canada during the 1970s and 1980s, aiming to help individuals with developmental disabilities secure competitive employment rather than being confined to sheltered workshops (Wehman, 2012). A key component of SE is job design and adaptation, ensuring that jobs are suitable for people with disabilities.

Individual Placement and Support (IPS) is a variant of SE that also incorporates job design principles to help people with disabilities find competitive employment. Numerous studies have shown that IPS is effective in promoting employment for individuals with psychiatric diagnoses (Bond et al., 2023), and it has also been applied to other types of disabilities. The IPS approach emphasizes 'place then train' rather than 'train then place,' offering rapid job assistance, integration of rehabilitation and mental health services, job development, job coaching, and individualized follow-up services (Marshall et al., 2014).

Customized Employment (CE), challenges the notion of fitting individuals with disabilities into existing stereotypical jobs. Instead, it focuses on creating job matches by identifying and customizing specific job duties to fit individual capacities and abilities through negotiations with employers (Griffin et al., 2008).

Each of these SE approaches utilizes job design to analyze work duties and identify tasks that can be assigned to employees with disabilities. In the following section, we will explore a specific case of successful job design.

## 7.4 The Danish Flexjob Program: A Model of Inclusive Job Design

To illustrate how jobs can be tailored to accommodate the functional capacities and limitations of employees with disabilities, let us explore a concrete example: the Danish flexjob program. This program shares core values and principles with Supported Employment (SE) and Individual Placement and Support (IPS).

1. **Presumption of Employment:** Everyone, regardless of their level or type of disability, has the capacity and right to a job.
2. **Objective of Competitive Employment:** Jobs should exist in the local labor market within regular workplaces.
3. **Principle of Commensurate Wages and Benefits:** People with disabilities should earn wages and benefits equal to those of coworkers performing the same or similar jobs.
4. **Focus on Capacity and Capabilities:** Emphasize the abilities, strengths, and interests of people with disabilities rather than their limitations.
5. **Commitment to Long-Term Support:** Provide ongoing support services to help employees with disabilities achieve sustainable employment (Wehman, 2012).

The flexjob program is a Danish employment scheme designed to integrate individuals with significant work limitations into the labor market by adapting their work hours and job functions. Currently, four percent of the Danish workforce, amounting to 100,000 people, are employed in flexjobs. This makes it the largest active employment program in Denmark and the most crucial for integrating people with disabilities into the workforce.

Introduced in 1998, the flexjob program aimed to prevent in disability pensions by offering flexible employment opportunities to individuals with

**Table 7.1** Regulation and design of flexjobs

Target group	Individuals with <i>permanent and major reductions in their work ability</i> who cannot obtain or retain competitive employment on 'normal' conditions in the labor market
Criteria for access	When all other <i>relevant active measures</i> have been exhausted or the individual has been employed following the <i>social chapters</i> of the collective agreement for at least 12 months. The municipal jobcenters are responsible for assessing eligibility and administering the flexjob program
Determination of wages	The employer only pays for 'effective' work hours. The work efficiency of the individual in the job is evaluated by comparing to the work efficiency of a (fictive) 'normal' worker in an identical job
Income	The flexjob employee is paid for 'effective' work hours by the employer and receives a wage subsidy from the municipality for the remaining work hours. The subsidy is reduced with increasing wages
Duration	Temporary (reassessment of eligibility every fifth year)

major and permanent reductions in work ability, such as those with work injuries or disabilities.

The flexjob program exemplifies job design in action (see Table 7.1). It targets individuals with reduced work capacity who cannot secure or retain jobs under 'ordinary' competitive terms. This means that jobs must be tailored to accommodate the functional impairments of each individual through negotiations between the employer and the public employment service. Employers pay only for the effective work hours, with the public employment service compensating for the remaining hours.

Employees in flexjobs perform 'ordinary' work. In contrast to other employment programs, flexjobs are of longer duration (up to 5 years with the possibility of extension for people under 40 years and for making it permanent for people over 40 years). This means that employees in flexjobs are formally included in the workplaces and treated like other employees.

## 7.5 Results from Testing the Job Design Model

We tested the job design model using the Danish flexjob program as a case study (Bredgaard & Krogh, forthcoming). Our survey compared the job design experiences of employees in flexjobs with those in 'ordinary' jobs. The results revealed that employees in flexjobs often experience lower levels of skill variety, task identity, task significance, and autonomy. They also face fewer opportunities for promotion, professional development, and learning. These



findings highlight the need to enhance growth opportunities within flexjobs to ensure equality in job opportunities compared to ordinary employees.

Despite these challenges, employees in flexjobs report the same high levels of meaningfulness and responsibility as their counterparts in ordinary jobs. Their job satisfaction and motivation are equally high. This could be attributed to the profound sense of purpose they derive from simply having a job, especially after being out of the labor market for several years. For many, the opportunity to work in a flexjob is a significant and valued achievement (Bredgaard & Krogh, forthcoming).

In practice, employees in flexjobs often occupy ‘support jobs,’ performing tasks that are not central to the core functions of the workplace and require fewer skills and qualifications (Bredgaard & Holt, forthcoming). This distinction between recruitment and workplace inclusion is further illustrated in the following case study from the beginning of the chapter.

**Case Study: To Be Recruited and To Be Included!**

Peter decided to hire Karen for a flexjob in the reception, working 10 hours a week. Karen was thrilled to have a job and to return to her former workplace. However, the new role was challenging. Karen had no prior experience working in a reception, and while her colleagues did their best to train and supervise her, they were often very busy.

Over time, Karen noticed that she was frequently assigned the simplest and most mundane tasks, such as sending invoices. Working only two days a week, she also missed out on the workplace’s social activities, like parties and anniversaries, and did not participate in vocational training. Although Karen was happy to have a job, she longed for more variety in her tasks and more significant assignments. Her job motivation began to wane, and she shared her concerns with Peter during a personal meeting.

**Discussion Question**

- Consider how you would address the concerns that Karen raised

Karen’s case highlights the crucial difference between recruitment and inclusion. While recruitment can be driven by mandates and legislation, such as anti-discrimination laws and quota schemes, true workplace inclusion is rooted in voluntary actions and inclusive work practices (Shore et al., 2018).

This case demonstrates that designing inclusive jobs for individuals with disabilities is not only possible but also essential. Some workplaces have the resources and capabilities to create these roles independently, while others

may require external assistance and potentially economic subsidies from rehabilitation and employment service providers (see Chapter 10).

## 7.6 Summary

Inclusive jobs can be tailored to accommodate an increasingly diverse workforce, including people with disabilities, by challenging and reflecting upon implicit notions of ‘ideal workers’ and ‘normal jobs.’ There is a wealth of literature on job design, job carving, and supported employment that offers valuable insights and inspiration.

Concrete examples, such as the Danish flexjob program, demonstrate how jobs can be effectively designed by adjusting work hours, work intensity, and wages for employees with significant reductions in their work ability. These adjustments not only make the workplace more inclusive but also ensure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

### Group Task: Lessons from the Danish Flexjob Program

Discuss how the Danish flexjob program could serve as a model for promoting the recruitment and workplace inclusion of people with disabilities in your context. Consider the following questions:

- **Feasibility:** Could the flexjob approach be effectively implemented in your organization or country? What adjustments might be necessary to fit your specific context?
- **Institutional and Legislative Contexts:** Are there existing laws or workplace policies in your country that would support or hinder the adoption of a flexjob program? How do these compare to the Danish framework?
- **Potential Barriers and Solutions:** Identify any potential obstacles to implementing a similar program and brainstorm possible solutions. What resources or support would be needed to overcome these challenges?

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