

Devolution, Job Enrichment and Workplace Performance in Sri Lanka's Garment Industry

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Abstract

The article examines the impact, in one Sri Lankan garment industry, of a management initiative devolving to line employees the responsibility for decision-making about workplace performance. At the time of the study, garment manufacturers in Sri Lanka faced increased pressure from international buyers to improve product quality and to meet stringent production delivery schedules, along with growing concerns from Western consumers regarding factory conditions and labour standards. One outcome of these pressures was increased experimentation with a range of quality management techniques to elicit workforce commitment to improved efficiency levels and higher quality standards. This study documents one experiment whereby production line operators rotated the role of production supervisor amongst themselves and accepted responsibility for minimising production bottlenecks, and for communicating data on workplace efficiency, product reject rates and absenteeism levels to other line operators. We found that workplace productivity and product quality increased over the 18-month period of the study, while levels of labour turnover and absenteeism declined. Nevertheless, the study also found that the increased role in workplace decision-making provided to employees also came with increased expectations that line employees would achieve higher production targets, improve quality and monitor workplace attendance.

Introduction

What happens to workplace performance when line employees take on the role of production supervisors and are required to monitor performance, product quality and worker attendance? The article seeks to address this question by examining an experiment to alter the traditional hierarchical structure evident on the factory floor level of one Sri Lankan garment factory between 2001 and 2003. The factory, LM Collections, decided to devolve responsibility for line performance and supervision to employees on three production lines. Prior

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to this experiment in job enrichment, all production instructions had flowed downwards from the production manager to production supervisors (who each managed two production lines) and on to line operators. Under the new structure, employees rotated the role of production supervisor, or process controller, among themselves every two months. They also accepted responsibility for minimising bottlenecks in the production process. In this way, production line operators gained on-the-job training and experience in communicating information regarding efficiency levels, product reject rates and absenteeism levels, and co-ordinating annual leave requests.

This workplace initiative is arguably comparable to the 'high performance' paradigm that emphasises the potential benefits of human resource practices aimed at encouraging increased employee participation in workplace decision-making (Lawler, Mohrman and Ledford 1995; Pfeffer 1998). Such practices are believed to deliver substantial improvements in organisational performance and enhanced employee commitment (Appelbaum et al. 1994; Boxall and Purcell 2003). A major study of High Performance Work Practices (HPWPs) in North America by Appelbaum et al. (2000) found that new forms of work design and work organisation provided production line employees with the opportunity to contribute increased discretionary effort and to participate in workplace problem-solving. These researchers provided empirical evidence that conscious efforts by employers to increase employee discretion and job autonomy resulted in improved job satisfaction for employees and higher levels of organisational performance (Appelbaum et al. 2000). Other quantitative studies into high performance work practices have also found support for claims that employee work performance may be improved through the introduction of quality circles, self-managing work teams, high-level investment in skills training, information sharing and greater flexibility with the allocation of work tasks. Such practices may also reduce labour turnover and absenteeism and increase the firm's financial performance (Guthrie 2001; Inchniowski et al. 1996).

Workforce involvement in decision-making may also be consistent with job enrichment practices (Spence Laschinger et al. 2004). Job enrichment involves providing increased levels of responsibility to lower level employees, including the delegation of work tasks previously undertaken by supervisors, and the provision of increasingly skilled tasks to line employees. The theoretical basis for enrichment efforts is Hackman and Oldham's (1975) 'job characteristics' model, which explores how a combination of specific job characteristics such as skill variety and task significance affect the individual's experience of meaningful work and their sense of responsibility for work outcomes. These characteristics have, in turn, been linked to improvements in work motivation, job satisfaction and work quality, reduced absenteeism and lower labour turnover (Ford 1969; Hackman et al. 1975).

While the relationship between job enrichment and firm performance requires further research and exploration, Patterson, West and Wall (2004) found that firms providing lower level employees with job enrichment and skill enhancement experienced a significant boost in productivity and profitability. A

Sri Lankan study of the impact of introducing self managed teams in a large textile mill reported increased productivity, higher product quality, lower reject rates and higher employee satisfaction. The process of delegating increased decision-making responsibility to workplace teams changed the organisation's structures, decision making processes and job design at workplace level, with increased levels of empowerment and training being provided to team members (Jayawardana and Fonseka 1996). Nevertheless, the potential for improved performance outcomes to follow the provision of increased employee input into workplace decision-making relies on employee acceptance of the relevance of these practices and on the existence of a climate of involvement. One means of creating this climate is to appoint work group leaders who will model the behaviours valued by the organisation, and who are also able to motivate employees to mirror these behaviours (Richards and Vandenberg 2005).

On the other hand, the introduction of HPWPs into contemporary work organisations has encountered a range of criticisms. For example, Barker (1993) found that the introduction of autonomous teams in US manufacturing heightened the level of work pressure experienced by employees, a process he labelled 'concertive' control. A range of studies have highlighted the potential for team working to result in increased work monitoring by colleagues and that such heightened peer pressure can give rise to work intensification (Allan and Lovell 2003; Godard 2004). In addition, Godard (2004) concluded that HPWS practices were fragile and often enjoyed a limited life span, because workers become disenchanted over time as their workloads expanded. Reviewing quantitative evidence from employees in British workplaces, Harley (2001: 735–37) found little support for concerns that team working had intensified employee workloads, though he also found little support for claims that working in teams increased employees' discretion. Overall, he noted that team-working may involve such minor changes to existing hierarchical structures as to have little impact: 'Teamwork, like other allegedly "empowering" forms of work organisation, is unlikely to present any challenge to existing hierarchical structures in which power and influence are exercised by virtue of one's position' (2001: 738). Danford (2003: 573) concluded that despite the progressive claims made for HPWPs, there was little evidence that they represented a break from 'Taylorist' work practices or 'that the dominance of maximizing profits and shareholder value in Western firms is about to give way to anything more favourable to worker interests'.

Questions have also been raised about the strength of the claims that HPWPs improve organisational performance. The promotion of HPWPs has been criticised for overstating the mutuality of interests between employers and employees and for underplaying conflict in work relations (Godard and Delaney 2000). In addition, organisations need to carefully manage the significant shifts in power relations between line managers and team members resulting from HPWPs. For Hales (2000: 516), empowerment practices may signal senior management intentions to reorganise the roles and responsibilities of more junior line managers and to potentially reduce their numbers. Those line managers that remain on the shop floor are likely to find that their roles involve less

emphasis on direct control (Edwards 1979) and more on ensuring that line employees have adequate resources and opportunities to learn and develop, and are provided with constructive feedback on their performance (Douglas and Gardner 2004).

The article considers the impact of delegating responsibility for workplace performance to line employees. This study of three production lines at LM Collections considers three main questions. Did employees believe that they experienced higher levels of discretion and job autonomy? Alternatively, to what extent did they feel pressured to internalise customer expectations and accept increased responsibility for monitoring production output, product quality and worker attendance? How did production supervisors respond to this potential weakening of their workplace prerogatives? The article makes extensive use of company performance data and employee responses in line with Boxall and Purcell's contention that studies examining HPWPs 'should include data on costs and benefits for both companies and workers because worker motivation and broader legitimacy are unlikely to improve if only management gains' (2003: 20).

Methods

A case study method was adopted that combined qualitative observations at workplace level along with more quantitative evidence of workplace performance. Case studies 'are of value for refining theory and suggesting complexities for further investigation, as well as helping to establish the limits of generalisability' (Stake 2000: 440). The unit of analysis (Yin 2003) involved the responses of line employees to the devolution of responsibility for production supervision to process controllers. Focus groups, 24 in total, were conducted on a regular basis between September 2001 and March 2003. This approach to research gathering encourages interaction among participants, promoting reflection and disclosure and 'presents a more natural environment than that of an individual interview because participants are influencing and influenced by others — just as they are in real life' (Krueger 1994: 19). In addition, 16 interviews were conducted with a range of managerial employees on their views of the impact of process controllers on workplace performance and employee morale.

A quantitative analysis was also conducted of the garment factory's production output, efficiency levels, product reject rates, and absenteeism and labour turnover levels. Events were recorded chronologically and patterns were observed over time. The performance of the production lines overseen by process controllers, and the responses of line employees, was measured at three time intervals: September to December 2001 (before the implementation of changes in supervisory arrangements); September to December 2002 (when the firm introduced the process controllers on three production lines); and January to March 2003 (providing an opportunity to assess employee views and performance data following the introduction of process controllers).

Increased Competitive Pressures on Sri Lanka's Manufacturing Sector

Sri Lanka's economy has undergone considerable structural transformation since independence, particularly from the late 1970s. In 1977, Sri Lanka reduced its former reliance on protectionism and encouraged the expansion of export-oriented industries, often located in free trade zones. This policy of economic liberalisation also extended to freeing up currency exchange controls and the privatisation of state-owned utilities. One outcome of economic liberalisation was economic growth averaging five per cent per annum from 1989–1999 and rising per capita incomes. Income levels per capita increased to US \$899 in 2000, higher than India, Pakistan, Nepal or Bangladesh. Per capita income declined to US \$837 in 2001, however, with the onset of recession, a prolonged drought, and a bomb attack on Sri Lanka's international airport in the capital, Colombo, that caused in a substantial decline in tourist numbers (Board of Investment 2001; Central Bank 2001).

The increased exposure to export markets also brought with it increased pressure from buyers to improve delivery schedules and to address growing concerns among Western consumers regarding factory conditions and worker rights. These concerns in turn placed growing pressure on Sri Lankan manufacturers to adhere to international labour standards, utilise new technology and improve their ability to meet stringent delivery deadlines (Kelegama and Epparachchi 2002). These pressures gave rise to increased interest by manufacturers in Japanese quality management techniques to achieve higher levels of productivity and efficiency. The Sri Lankan government also launched a National Quality Policy (2000) and a National Productivity Policy (2003) and actively promoted nationwide awards for Quality and Productivity. In addition, many buyers of Sri Lankan garments expected manufacturers to conform to quality standards such as ISO 9000 certification. The increased presence of multi-national companies in the manufacturing sector with advanced production technology and production management expertise also facilitated the focus on increased product quality utilising the latest production technology.

The garment industry represented the largest component of Sri Lanka's manufacturing sector in terms of its contribution to gross domestic product, exports, foreign exchange earnings and employment. In 2002, some 39 per cent of Sri Lanka's exports came from this industry (Central Bank 2002). The industry had grown significantly from 1977, when there were only five garment manufacturing companies, to 891 factories and export earnings of US \$2,710 million by 2000. This rapid growth was facilitated by the granting of concessions for machinery imports and the introduction of a quota system for exports (Akuratiyagamage 2005; Central Bank 2001). The Multi-Fibre Agreement regulated the textile and clothing trade in Sri Lanka from 1974 to 2005. This agreement established quotas that limited Sri Lanka's ability to export into developed countries with domestic manufacturing industries. Nevertheless, it also provided Sri Lanka with an agreed export quota into European and North American markets (Kanes 2002).

The Sri Lankan garment industry employed over 300,000 workers in 2000, the majority of whom were women (82 per cent). A large percentage of this workforce (41.5 per cent) was in the 25–29 years age group, with the majority remaining in the industry for a period of six to seven years. As a result, an average labour turnover rate of 7.4 per cent was recorded in the industry in 1999, though in some workplaces it could rise to higher than 12 per cent (Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission 1999). Labour productivity was also affected by the shortage of skilled labour. Many companies were seeking ways to reduce absenteeism and labour turnover by offering financial incentives, re-designing work practices and by introducing quality improvement techniques. The majority of private sector employees were not unionised, including those employed in the Free Trade Zones. Instead, many companies formed labour-management councils. The Board of Investment (BOI) and Free Trade Zones required that each organisation coming under BOI regulation establish a workers' council or Joint Consultative Committee and discouraged the formation of trade unions within free trade zone workplaces (Rosa 1994; Fair Labour Association 2004).

Demands by international buyers for improvements in corporate social responsibility have led to increased scrutiny of compliance with existing labour laws, and stricter monitoring of working hours prior to manufacturing contracts being awarded. The presence of buyer representatives from the United Kingdom and the USA in factory premises in the garment industry, their access to labour records and their ability to verify labour standards had encouraged a significant change in management's attitude (Institute of Policy Studies 1998). The garment industry has also been the subject of continuous customer audits, conducted by buyers' representatives, who have demanded more progressive human resource policies and increased monitoring of health and safety practices. Nevertheless, company audits tended to be limited to larger companies with substantial foreign investment or under foreign control (BOI 2002).

Workplace Performance and New Supervisory Arrangements

LM Collections manufactured lingerie, sleepwear and blouses utilising 450 sewing machines and a workforce of 1,100 employees as at December 2000. The company recorded a sales turnover of US \$12 million in 2002, a 4 per cent increase from 2001, and produced some two million garments per annum. In the garment industry, the key measures of performance comprised: standard line efficiency; end line rejects; cycle time (measured by on-time delivery); and labour performance (measured by labour turnover and absenteeism). Standard line efficiency refers to the ratio of standard hours to the total hours available, less lost hours due to faults in the production process, such as breakdowns and lack of materials, that are outside the line operator's control. LM Collection's targets for 2001–02 comprised on-standard efficiency of 60 per cent, end line rejects of 2 per cent, labour turnover of 2.5 per cent and labour absenteeism of 4.5 per cent. Table 1 highlights that LM Collection's performance for on-standard efficiency in 2001 was 42.4 per cent, with rejects running at 7.3 per cent, labour turnover at 7.2 per

cent and absenteeism at 9 per cent. These performance outcomes were the catalyst for introducing the process controller position and for providing production line employees with increased discretion over workplace decision-making.

Table 1: Performance Indicators of the Company: November–December 2001

Efficiency	End Line Rejects	On Time Delivery	Labour Turnover	Absenteeism
42.4%	7.3%	41%	7.2%	9%

Source: Company records, December 2001.

The delegation of increased responsibility for production to process controllers involved three distinct phases. These included: the identification of production lines for the pilot project (September to December 2001); the provision of training to employees in the co-ordination of production tasks and customer expectations (January to April 2002); and the implementation of the process controller position (May to August 2002).

There was no change in base pay or incentive rewards for workers on production lines supervised by process controllers compared to other production lines. All production lines received production bonuses based on the standard efficiency rates that they achieved. Process controllers, however, were paid the average of the incentive payments achieved by workers in their production lines. In addition, the three production lines with process controllers met regularly during work hours to review performance data and had the opportunity to make presentations to senior management at the end of each quarter.

From September to December 2001, the company identified the three production lines that exhibited highest levels of labour turnover and end-of-line rejects. Table 2 contains performance data for the three teams perceived by management as underperforming during the period September to December 2001. The level of end-line rejects indicated the number of units that did not pass the end-of-line inspection. In general, the company aimed to keep the reject rate below 2 per cent. The on-standard efficiency figure highlighted the average efficiency levels for each operator in each team. Table 2 demonstrates that each of the selected production lines had end-line reject percentages significantly higher than the firm's target figure of 2 per cent and substantially lower standard efficiency levels than LM Collection's target of 60 per cent.

Table 2: Team Performance: September–December 2001

Team No.	Absenteeism	Turnover	End-Line Rejects	On-Std. Efficiency
1	10.5%	6.5%	9.05%	38.5%
2	10.1%	11.5%	8.2%	45.8%
3	8.0%	8.25%	14.5%	38.3%

Source: Company records; calculated from production line records, September 2001–December 2001

While the plant manager believed that the team's poor performance was caused by low skill levels and a lack of motivation, team members had a different perspective on their performance and the factory's work environment. They

expressed considerable frustration with the way the workplace was organised, and with management's unwillingness to listen to their suggestions. As one focus group noted:

We do what they say. Go from machine to machine, even operation-to-operation. Even if we say what the mistake is, the supervisor will not listen. Sometimes the supervisor scolds us without reason. There are times I wanted to leave this job (Focus group 1, December 2001).

Commenting on work performance, another focus group pointed to the poor communication of performance data by production managers to line employees:

We are not aware of the end-line rejects. Nobody tells us that. We perform the operation. If the operation is not correct, it comes back to the operator for re-working. That is only after the day's production (Focus group 5, December 2001).

Efficiency losses also occurred because of mistakes made by management. As one production line employee explained:

On-standard efficiency gets reduced when we are transferred from operation to operation. In line balancing skills, the operator is not given the right operations. Many times, material does not come on time, sometimes we run out of the required colour thread. Frequent delays upset our rhythm and we cannot reach the required efficiency (Focus group 10, March 2002).

Production line employees believed that they did not get sufficient feedback on their performance. They were also often unaware of what tasks other workers were undertaking and believed they were often expected to undertake production tasks they had limited knowledge of:

There are occasions when we have to re-work many times. Rejects happen when we do not know the operation well. We have to do the operation the supervisor asks us to do. Even if we do not know the operation well, we try to do our best but rejects occur (Field note, December 2001).

We didn't care what other members do, we didn't help each other. Therefore, our line efficiency was very low and re-work level was very high before self-managed teams were introduced. But after the self-managed team concept was introduced, team work improved and we started to help each other, communication was improved and as a result now we perform well (Focus group 21, March 2003).

During the introduction of process controllers into the three production lines from January to April 2002, line employees underwent a series of training programs. The training focused on the company's customers and products, the production process and techniques related to increasing quality and prob-

lem-solving. The sessions were conducted by the plant manager, the quality assurance manager and the work study manager. Each session was followed by a discussion with production line members. The training programs lasted for two hours after work, with all line employees paid for their participation. At production meetings, held once a week, line employees were given feedback on their performance, in particular in relation to line efficiency and end-line rejects.

During the initial training, production line employees were given a briefing on market conditions in the industry and customer requirements. They were also provided with an opportunity to study their line's performance for the previous three months in relation to on-time delivery, total rejects and customer returns. The training provided encouraged employees to take responsibility for performance outcomes such as product reject rates and on-standard efficiency levels. The training manager provided feedback to line employees where the performance of one production line lagged that of the organisation as a whole. The training also addressed skill development, the organisation of work and the use of computer-aided information systems and quality control systems. Each machine was equipped with a computer terminal, which gave details of efficiency standards, losses, stoppages and earnings based on incentive payments.

There appeared to be an acceptance by production managers that improvements in production line performance resulted where process controllers and the training manager dealt with issues related to employee productivity:

I feel a lot easier now. The process controller works with the team and brings any problems to me. If she had a problem with the low efficiency of an operator in the line, she consults the training supervisor (Field note, July 2002).

Performance Outcomes Following the Introduction of Process Controllers

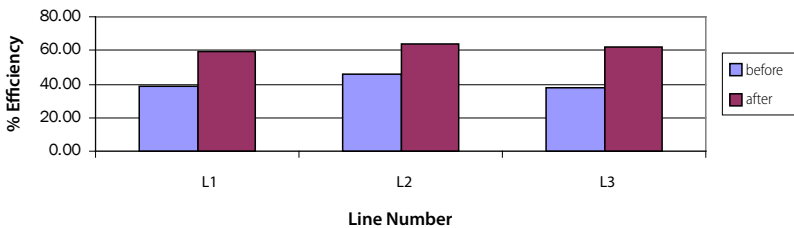
Following the introduction of process controllers, there were substantial changes in on-standard efficiency, product rejects, absenteeism and labour turnover in the period September–December 2002 compared to September–December 2001 (Table 3). Examination of the further time period of January–March 2003 highlights that improvements documented in September 2002 were largely maintained into 2003. These results demonstrate that there was a significant improvement in a range of productivity measures following the introduction of process controllers. The average on-standard efficiency of the three lines in September–December 2001 stood at 41 per cent and after the introduction of the process controller position it improved to 61.5 from September–December 2002. During the period January–March 2003, the aggregate on-standard efficiency of the lines stood at 61.2 per cent, demonstrating that the increase in efficiency was sustained into 2003.

Table 3: Comparison of Employee Behaviour and Performance in Three Time Intervals

Item/Line	t1: Sep 2001–Dec 2001			t2: Sep 2002–Dec 2002			t3: Jan 2003–Mar 2003		
	L1	L2	L3	L1	L2	L3	L1	L2	L3
On-Std	39.00	46.00	38.00	59.03	64.00	61.75	62.3	58.0	63.00
Rejects	9.10	8.20	14.00	1.78	0.95	1.60	2.6	2.3	1.76
Absence	11.00	10.00	8.00	1.80	2.73	2.29	1.63	2.7	2.96
Turnover	6.50	12.00	8.30	3.00	2.33	2.25	2.75	3.10	2.25

Source: Extracted from company monthly production records

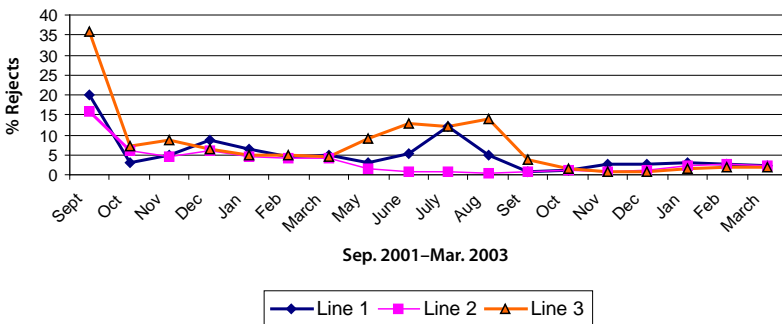
Figure 1: Comparison of On-Standard Efficiency Before and After SMT Process (between two time intervals September–December 2001 and September–December 2002)



Source: Company production records 2001–2002

Figure 2 points to lower production line rejects from September 2002 to March 2003, when compared with September 2001 to January 2002 (with the exception of the May 2002 to August 2002 period). The rejects rate dropped from an average of 10 per cent in September to December 2001 to an average of 2.1 per cent in January to March 2003, while absenteeism fell from 9.6 per cent in September to December 2001 to 2.4 per cent in January to March 2003. In addition, labour turnover declined from 8.9 per cent to 2.5 per cent during the same period. In short, all performance indicators improved for production lines with process controllers. These results were sustained through the September to December 2002 and January to March 2003 time periods.

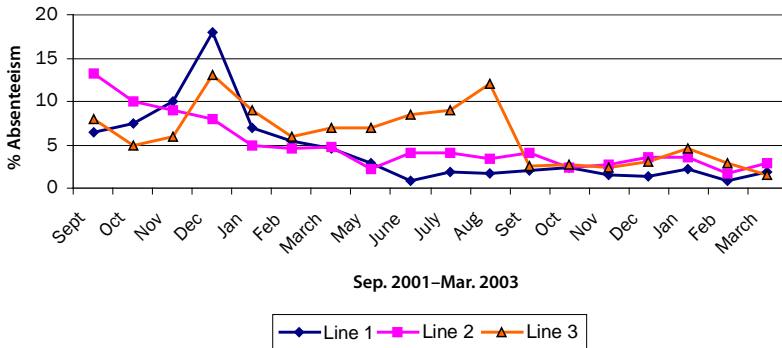
Figure 2: Line Rejects Comparison: September 2001–March 2003



Source: Company production records 2001–2003

Figure 3 demonstrates the marked reduction in absenteeism levels from September 2002 to March 2003 in all three lines when compared to September 2001.

Figure 3: Comparison of Absenteeism by Line: September 2001–March 2003



Source: Company records

Employee Responses to the Introduction of Process Controllers

Line employees pointed to the emergence of a climate of trust between production line employees and process controllers, and a gradual willingness on the part of line employees to improve productivity levels:

Earlier, our line efficiency was very low and re-work levels were very high. We believe that this is because we didn't have trust among our line members. But after introducing the SMT concept, trust was built up and we were able to show the results of it in terms of efficiency and low re-work[ing] (Focus group interview 18, December 2002).

Sewing machine operators were also more willing to work on other production lines. As one focus group interview noted:

If supervisors ask us to work for another line to cover the absenteeism of that line we are ready to work in that line even though we lose the incentive [pay] on that day due to our job change (Focus group interview 19, December 2002).

In addition, employees on the same production line were willing to go to the aid of a fellow employee to voluntarily help her to repair a defective garment:

When we don't have enough work in progress to stitch, we are able to claim off-standard time and earn incentives for idle time. But we don't, and when we are idle, we help other members of the line to increase line efficiency (Field diary, November 2002).

Production line employees believed that the presence of the process controller provided them with increased involvement in workplace decision-making. It also increased their product knowledge and awareness of customer requirements:

We ourselves appoint the process controller, we trust her, we can communicate any thing with her, we do not have any hesitation to propose any changes; not like earlier (Focus group 22, March 2003).

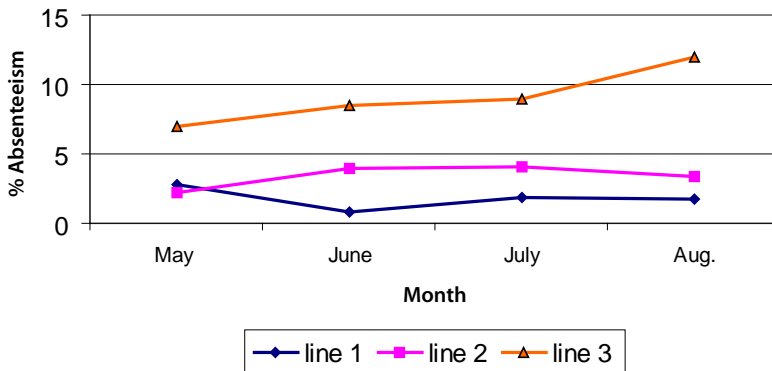
We are being well educated on the quality points, the outcome of the product, and our customer requirements before starting a new style. Also proper training is given to us to stitch the garments following the Right First Time concept (Focus group 20, December 2002).

Nevertheless, production line number three continued to operate in an authoritarian manner, despite the appointment of a process controller, and this led to considerable frustration for employees. Line rejects increased to 14 per cent while absenteeism climbed to 12 per cent, and employees resisted the extra responsibilities that were expected of them. The process controller ultimately resigned her position and went back to the line:

No one was concerned. When rejects were made, I had to work on them. So I was doing all repair work. I got fed up. I went back to my machine (Field note, July 2002).

Figure 4 documents the higher levels of absenteeism in team three (12 per cent) compared to that of teams one and two for the period of July–August 2002.

Figure 4: Comparison of Absenteeism Across the Three Production Lines May–August 2002



Source: Company records

The position of line employees was explained in one focus group:

We are prepared to do what we said, to achieve higher efficiency. But we cannot do that when the executive and supervisor shout at us. If they know better, then they can do the job. We work as best as we can (Field note, July 2002).

The performance of line three was attributed to a lack of co-operation between the production supervisor and line employees, a lack of co-operation among employees and a strong focus by the manager of the line on achieving targets and a lack of willingness to consult with employees. Line operators believed

that they were excluded from decision-making over the allocation of work tasks or the granting of annual leave. As one line employee explained:

... We agree that production line 1 and 2 are doing better. We all started together (lines 1, 2, 3). They have a good supervisor and an executive; they listened to the team and give an opportunity for team members to work as the process controller. Our supervisor and executive work as they want and they do not want us to plan our line, our leave or to listen to us. They only want the targets (Focus group, July 2002).

After the intervention of the production manager, a resolution was reached that addressed employee concerns over the unwillingness of production supervisors to involve line employees in workplace decision-making. Such discussions improved the willingness of employees to meet production targets. Line three achieved lower product rejects and absence rates consistent with that of the other two lines for the September–December 2002 quarter (Table 3).

Conclusion

The article explored the impact of a job enrichment initiative to devolve increased responsibility for monitoring workplace productivity, product quality and workforce attendance to line employees. The study examined the performance of the three production lines over an 18-month period from 2001 to 2003. We found that the introduction of process controllers generated substantial improvements in LM Collection's performance over this period. Efficiency levels rose from 41 per cent to 61 per cent and product rejects declined from 10 per cent to 2 per cent, while absenteeism levels declined from almost 10 per cent to 2.4 per cent by March 2003. On the whole, productivity levels improved, product quality increased and workforce absence and turnover episodes declined over the period of this study.

Nevertheless, the study demonstrated that 'soft' human resource management practices emphasising job enrichment went hand in hand with an overt focus on minimising labour costs and other costs of production, and maximising the work effort of production line employees. This was evident in the key messages conveyed to employees during training and development programs. These programs aimed to instil a commitment among line employees to meeting customer expectations of timely delivery and high quality standards, and an acceptance of the increasingly competitive environment faced by the firm. Employee training also focused on familiarising employees with the computer information systems attached to sewing machines that captured performance data alongside an emphasis on skill development.

What is also evident from the study was that, on the whole, process controllers succeeded in establishing a climate of trust and involvement (Konovsky and Pugh 1994; Richards and Vandenberg 2005). Production line employees expended extra discretionary efforts in response to the day-to-day support that they received from process controllers. Employees were also willing to move to other lines to cover for absent workers and to assist workers who encountered a defective garment or experienced bottlenecks on their production lines, even

when this would negatively impact on their own individual incentive payments. Moreover, line employees believed that process controllers would be more willing to respond to their grievances and were more likely to allocate annual leave fairly. There were also instances, however, where junior production managers were reluctant to relinquish their workplace prerogatives, to the considerable frustration of line employees. Such responses point to empowerment practices that aim to reorganise the work of middle managers being resisted by these managers (Hales 2000).

The article therefore found support for the concerns expressed by critics of high performance work practices, that devolving workplace decision-making responsibilities to line employees can generate increased work pressures along with evidence of increased employee satisfaction with this job enrichment practice (Appelbaum et al. 2000; Godard 2004). However, this workplace experiment occurred in a non-union environment and did not involve any substantive renegotiation of base rates of pay or incentive payments. Further research is needed to explore the potential for such job enrichment initiatives to be sustained where employees seek to collectively renegotiate their wage/effort bargain and demand increased compensation for the extra productivity they are expected to deliver.

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