

Work SMART: Innovative Work Design To Overcome Employee Burnout & Shortage



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Problem of Practice:

Future of work is undergoing rapid transformation due to global disruptions such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the aging workforce and the impact of climate change. There is an urgent need to address resulting challenges such as employee burnout and talent shortages. A recent [article](#) by Sharon Parker and Caroline Knight talks about the SMART model of work design as a potential solution. The SMART model aims to optimize different aspects of job design to enhance employee well-being and performance. We examine the principles of the SMART work design and compare it to traditional models to understand how to balance meaningful work with productive performance in the digital age. This essay proposes a structured approach to SMART work design that can help business leaders, particularly CHROs, while taking key design-related organizational decisions

¹The article 'The SMART model of work design: A higher-order structure to help see the wood from the trees' by Sharon K. Parker and Caroline Knight featured in Volume 63, Issue 2 of *Human Resource Management* talks about a SMART work design model that provides a unique integrating and multidimensional theory of work design that extends beyond existing models

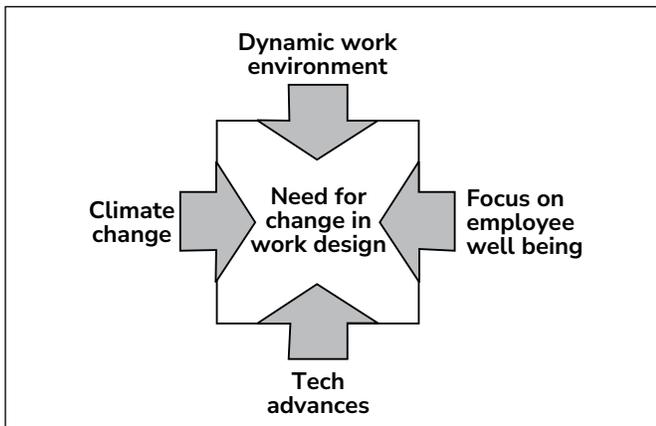
Need for a better work design

A recent [study](#) of 10,000 knowledge workers across seven countries found that nearly 70% of the people surveyed experienced burnout.² The study showed that burnout is associated with lower morale (36%), lower engagement (30%), more mistakes (27%) and miscommunication (25%). Additionally, these employees are 25% more likely to leave the organization. So, what can help? The answer is better work design.

Work design can be defined as organization of tasks, responsibilities and workflows within a job or organization for optimal employee satisfaction and performance. Traditionally, work design emphasized factors like skill variety and task identity. While aimed at efficiency, this approach often resulted in rigid job structures with limited adaptability. Additionally, employees would feel 'force-fitted' into specific roles, hindering their growth and satisfaction. Such poor work design has hidden costs that affect business, ranging from cash losses to reputational damage.

Even a Gallup survey found that globally, loss caused by employees' [lack of engagement](#) (due to mundane and unfulfilling jobs) cost employers \$7.8 trillion, equivalent to 11% of global gross domestic product.³ Hence, there is a need to move towards more innovative approaches that consider employee efficiency, well-being and sustainability (see [Figure 1](#)).

Figure 1: Need for a better work design



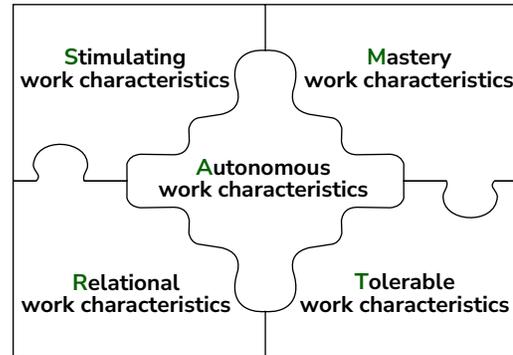
Source: Adapted by the authors from the article by Parker and Knight

For instance, the recent emergence of generative Artificial Intelligence has created an urgent need to reimagine the work environment for many white- and blue-collar jobs. Modern work design models such as the SMART Work Design model consider both conventional work design principles and drivers of engagement like employee mental health, remote work options and hybrid schedules.

Redefining work design as SMART

The article by Parker and Knight outlines the [SMART Model of Work Design](#), which includes five dimensions (see [Figure 2](#)) of job design to enhance employee well-being and performance.⁴

Figure 2: SMART dimensions



Source: Adapted from the original article by Parker and Knight

Here are five dimensions that an organization must focus on to create a better work design model:

1. **Stimulating Work Characteristics:** emphasize variety and job complexity which keeps employees mentally engaged by making them think out of the box and use their imagination.
2. **Mastery Work Characteristics:** capture the extent to which an employee fits in the broader system and provide employees with clear, actionable feedback to ensure a complete understanding of their role. These help employees improve their skills and foster a sense of achievement and pride in work.
3. **Autonomous or Agency Work Characteristics:** offer freedom and flexibility. Given more autonomy, employees experience heightened job satisfaction and develop a more robust sense of ownership over their responsibilities which can catalyze innovation and boost efficiency.
4. **Relational Work Characteristics:** focus on meaningful social relationships such as colleague or supervisor support or praise from team members. Such interactions help employees feel positive about their work and provide a sense of community which can enhance job satisfaction and engagement.
5. **Tolerable Work Characteristics:** seek to minimize the negative aspects of work, such as role overload, role conflict, work-home interference among others. By addressing these factors, organizations can help maintain employee well-being, prevent burnout and ensure that employees can perform effectively.

A shift to better work design requires a broader focus beyond individual tasks and responsibilities to encompass the larger work environment, using a holistic approach to better work design. These dimensions are not just theory but have been manifested in various ways by organizations, in contexts ranging from healthcare to high-tech, as our examples below illustrate.

- *Perth Hospital:* The SMART work design approach was used in a [study](#) at Perth Hospital, Australia with the goals of improving role clarity and feedback (use of [mastery work characteristics](#)) and facilitating relationship building (use of [relational work characteristics](#)) in line with the organization's strategic objectives.^{5,6,7} The hospital organized interdisciplinary briefings before each surgery, in which team members discussed the upcoming procedures and areas of concern. As a result, teams experienced a 30% boost in efficiency and reported improved team communication and greater involvement.
- *Smart Work, Bosch Way:* Bosch introduced the concept of [Smart Work](#) to 'enable teams to organise their working day and place of work in a flexible way'.⁸ The organization leveraged '[Autonomous or Agency Work Characteristics](#)' to increase employee autonomy and flexibility.⁹ The company lets teams and their leader decide how they want to shape their collaboration. Smart workshops helped the teams

Characteristics of SMART work design:

1. Stimulating Work Characteristics emphasizes variety and job complexity
 2. Mastery Work Characteristics provides clear, actionable feedback
 3. Autonomous or Agency Work Characteristics offer freedom and flexibility
 4. Relational Work Characteristics focus on meaningful social relationships
 5. Tolerable Work Characteristics seek to minimize the negative aspects of work
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formulate clear rules about communicating accessibility, availability and transparency. They also let the employees work from wherever they could achieve the best results to 'assist in finding the ideal balance in today's modern hybrid work setting' (use of [Stimulating Work Characteristics](#)).¹⁰ This gave workers more freedom and adaptability, leading to increased task ownership and mastery.

- *Project Oxygen at Google:* The founders of Google initially hypothesized that efficient managers were not needed to run the organization. However, extensive surveys led to a different conclusion. The company



launched [Project Oxygen](#) in 2002 to identify and develop effective manager characteristics.¹¹ This project leveraged [Relational Work Characteristics](#) and data to show a 'tight connection between managers' quality and workers' happiness'.¹² The company identified traits of a good manager, asked employees to assess their managers and arranged special training for managers to increase their effectiveness (use of Mastery Work Characteristics). The initiative contributed to a more supportive and growth-oriented work environment (Relational Work Characteristics). Employees also benefit from managers who are better equipped to provide guidance, support and development opportunities.

Pitfalls of un-SMART

A [study](#) by the Work Institute has shown that 22% of employees leave their jobs due to a lack of career development opportunities, which is closely linked to work design.¹³ Failure to adopt SMART work design can result in talent shortages, decreased employee engagement and hindered organizational growth, as happened with [Boeing's](#) failure to include the principles of SMART Work Design.¹⁴ The company faced issues that culminated in the 737 Max crisis, when Boeing had to be grounded after 346 people died in crashes in less than five months. Let us look at the specific issues and map them to SMART dimensions:

- **Stimulating:** The work environment at Boeing was blamed for hindering innovation and communication. There was pressure to meet deadlines at any cost, even ignoring safety standards.
- **Mastery:** The importance of fast actions over quality led to a lack of learning and development opportunities for the employees. Employees were not trained to deal with the complexities of the new aircraft, leading to an increase in errors.
- **Autonomous:** The company had a rigid hierarchy, which gave employees less autonomy in making decisions.
- **Relational:** Lack of proper communication and collaboration affected the organizational culture. Different functions worked in silos and there was a disconnect between management and frontline workers.
- **Tolerable:** The work environment had high stress and unrealistic expectations, leading to burnout and low morale.

In India, the meteoric rise and subsequent stumble of edtech firm [Byju's](#) raised many questions about the factors behind its downfall.¹⁵ While financial prudence is



paramount, the company's work structure could also be a contributing factor. A rigid hierarchy, monotonous tasks and an overwhelming workload could lead to a stifling work environment. This, coupled with unclear goals and limited autonomy, could have eroded employee morale and productivity. The allegations about the abusive workplace practices highlight the need for addressing any concerns employees have and creating a healthy and safe work environment.

Applying Work Design

When implementing a SMART work design model, keep in mind:

- The division and allocation of tasks impact the employees' stimulating work characteristics
- In contrast, the allocation of authority shapes the autonomous work characteristics of employees
- Coordination based on information helps workers in mastering tasks
- Social-based coordination strengthens workplace relationships
- Finally, the effort required to attain system goals affects employees' tolerable work characteristics

The effectiveness of SMART work design also depends on organizational readiness. Organizations with top-down, bureaucratic cultures may struggle to implement autonomy (agency) or foster collaboration (relational). Technical upgrades and training are required to deal with skill gaps and address the issues of implementation and execution. There is no standard instructional manual for deploying SMART work designs. The implementation needs to be customized to the context: For instance, in high-risk industries (e.g., aviation or healthcare), autonomy might be restricted to ensure strict compliance with protocols. Recognizing these limitations ensures realistic expectations and better application of the principles. See [Figure 3](#) for an illustration of how different work environments might impact different dimensions of SMART.

Figure 3: How SMART work design can be implemented for different work environments

Smart Work Design Dimensions	Work From Home	Hybrid	Work From Office
Stimulating	HIGH – Diverse tasks and problem solving keep engagement high	MEDIUM - Moderate balance of stimulation from both remote and in-person tasks	LOW – Office work may involve more routine tasks with less variety
Mastery	HIGH – Regular feedback and high role clarity	MEDIUM – High role clarity and intermittent feedback	LOW – Rare feedback and job monotony
Autonomy	HIGH – Frequent decision making and method autonomy	MEDIUM – Medium autonomy with structured time for in-person interaction	LOW – More method autonomy but less decision-making autonomy
Relational	MODERATE- Relational characteristics	High – Leveraging virtual as well as in-person connection	HIGH- Strong support from direct interactions
Tolerable	MODERATE – Work load and role conflict is moderate	MODERATE – Some amount of workload and work-life balance	LOW – With clear boundaries, a low level of work-role conflict is achieved

Source: Developed by the authors based on the insights from the article by Parker and Knight

Ready for SMART work design?

Organizations should consider implementing the Smart Work design concept as it offers a more considered approach to job design and focusses on employee well-being, flexibility and autonomy. Breaking down traditional job roles into individual tasks and projects allows organisations to match work assignments to employees' specific skills and abilities. This strategy allows employees to focus on tasks that match their interests and strengths, boosting organisational agility and efficiency while also fostering employee engagement and satisfaction.

Smart Work Design must be appropriately implemented to prevent any possible issues such as increasing micromanagement, job insecurity and working in isolation. As mentioned in the essay, companies should

A Gallup survey found that globally, loss caused by employees' lack of engagement (due to mundane and unfulfilling jobs) cost employers \$7.8 trillion, equivalent to 11% of global gross domestic product

set up guidelines to effectively handle these obstacles to preserve employee liberty and enable equitable access to opportunities while guaranteeing strong support networks. A resilient, adaptive and motivated workforce is only possible through a work design model that balances organizational objectives and the human aspect of job deconstruction. This will ultimately lead to lasting success in the rapidly evolving corporate environment.

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