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Job Evaluation of executive jobs in Australia

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Abstract

Job evaluation has been used for more than half a century to determine the ‘size’ of a job and to guide the appropriate level of remuneration. However, although the nature of work has changed significantly, job evaluation has not, but despite this it is still surprisingly popular. Much of the literature that describes these issues focuses on the link between job evaluation and remuneration in general. However there is a notable gap in the investigation of the specific issues related to the way *executive* jobs are evaluated and rewarded. This paper reports on a study that uses grounded theory and convergent interviewing techniques to investigate this gap within a number of publicly listed Australian companies.

Keywords

Job evaluation, executives, remuneration strategy, grounded theory

Introduction

Job evaluation occurs in every organisation. Simply comparing two jobs and deciding that one is more important than the other is a form of job evaluation (Schuster & Zingheim 1992) Its definition can be summarised as a formal procedure for hierarchically ordering a set of jobs or positions with respect to their value or worth, usually for the purpose of setting pay rates (US National Academy of Sciences in Nethersell 2001). Others have defined job evaluation in similar terms, with the concepts of relative value, internal equity, and comparison of different jobs common, as is reference to its use in grading and determining pay structures (Armstrong & Murlis 1991; Balkin & Gomez-Mejia 1987; Patten 1987; Schuster & Zingheim 1992).

The exclusion of the job holder is particularly important to the process of job evaluation, and it is concerned with relationships rather than absolute measures (Armstrong & Murlis 1991; Balkin & Gomez-Mejia 1987; Hilling, 2003; Nethersell 2001; Patten 1987; Schuster & Zingheim 1992). Job evaluation does not and cannot measure, in definite terms, the inherent value of a job; rather it is a comparison with other jobs, against defined standards or comparisons, of the degree to which a common criterion or factor is present in different jobs. This creates problems when, due to the changing nature of work, new types of work emerge. If there is nothing already existing against which to compare this newly created work, then job evaluation, as defined in the literature, would be very difficult to carry out. It is reasonable to assume then that the use of job evaluation would have decreased over the last few decades as new ways of working have emerged, and indeed continue to emerge at a great rate. In practice, however, the use of job evaluation has increased, and it is currently being used by the majority of organisations (Brown 2000).

This study set out to understand how job evaluation was being applied to executive jobs in a group of companies from the list of top fifty publicly listed companies on the Australian Stock Exchange.

Method

Grounded theory is a qualitative approach to research and is concerned with exploring a process to build or discover theory from analysing that process (Creswell 1994; Hussey & Hussey 1997; Miles & Huberman 1994; Stake 1995).

Grounded theory is defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon. Grounded theory emphasises being immersed in the data – being *grounded* – so that embedded meanings and relationships emerge. The theory evolves during the actual study by the continuous interaction between analysis and data collection. These theories may be modified as incoming data are analysed and compared against that previously collected, with directions for further collection being guided by what emerges.

The process outlined below summarises the various concepts, components and sequence of the study in an effort to give an overview of the process that actually took place. However, as the process is modified as the study progresses it does not follow a pre-determined pattern of linear steps. Accordingly, the following summary describes the various concepts, tools and techniques in an order that helps explain the flow of activity. However, in line with the dynamic nature of grounded theory, they will appear and then reappear at various stages in the study.

A summary of the research process

It is important for the researcher to raise their awareness of their own pre-conceived ideas and beliefs about the phenomenon under investigation. In this study this included making notes, firstly to consciously identify these ideas, and secondly to help prevent imposing personal views on the data collection and analysis process.

Theoretical sampling was used, whereby specifically targeted informants were selected as the study progressed (Glaser & Strauss 1967). In grounded theory, informants are chosen when they are needed rather than prior to the study. In the beginning, the researcher goes to the most obvious places and the most likely informants in search of information. However, as concepts are identified and theory starts to develop, further individuals, situations and places are incorporated in order to strengthen the findings (Goulding 2002).

Once the initial informants were identified, formal, in-depth interviews were used as the main data collection mechanism. In conducting these interviews the convergent interviewing technique (Dick 1998) was used where the issues covered in the interviews were identified by the informants rather than by the researcher. This technique was used in an effort to obtain as much rich data as possible from the informants. In addition, documents were accessed and analysed, and finally, literature was used as a source of data (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1990).

Data were collected, coded, and analysed concurrently, facilitating decisions about the type of data to then collect and from whom (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Coding of the data involved open, axial, then selective coding. Themes became evident, and categories were identified and systematically compared to other categories, enabling the core category to emerge. The core category became central and all other categories were integrated around this (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1990).

As coding categories emerged, these were linked together in theoretical models and the constant comparative method was used for asking when, why, and under what conditions these themes occurred in the data (Glaser 1978). The conditional matrix as advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) was used to help understand the various influences on the phenomenon, as well as to trace the relationships and consequences between various data as they emerged.

Memo writing began when the data collection began and continued throughout the research (Glaser & Strauss 1967). Memos enabled ideas to be documented as they emerged and to ponder theories as they developed. Theoretical sensitivity was used throughout the process to remain aware of the subtleties of the meaning of the data without trying to force the emerging theory (Glaser 1978; Strauss & Corbin 1990).

Data collection continued until no new categories emerged. This concept is called theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1990) and is critical to the grounded theory technique. Following analysis of the data, informant review of the study findings was conducted for verification and credibility testing, as well as to ensure fit and understandability.

Discussion

The findings related to the use of job evaluation and its use in the companies studied are summarised below.

Changes to executive jobs and the impact on remuneration

Jobs have changed significantly over the last several hundred years. Bridges (1995) described the transition of jobs from the pre-nineteenth century when they were generally not clearly defined, through a period where jobs had very narrowly defined boundaries, to more recent times when jobs once again are often loosely defined and broad. Jobs are no longer 'boxes' of clearly defined activity with specifiable and regular duties explicitly described in a job description (Bridges 1995; Fay 2001; Lawler 2000).

This study focused on the jobs performed by executives and found that informants echoed the ideas expressed in the literature. It reports that the type of work carried out by executives has changed significantly, particularly over the last decade or so. It suggests that executive jobs have become broader and less clearly defined, that the business world has become more complex and more global, and that for publicly listed companies, the scrutiny from investors was having a major impact. In addition to specific areas of responsibility, executive jobs included accountability for a wide range of issues such as human resources, occupational health and safety and environmental issues as well as the specific area/s for which they are responsible.

Informants spoke of leadership being the most important competency for executives today and viewed the quality of leadership of executives as crucial in differentiating companies and increasing the probability of success.

In this study, the theme underpinning much of the discussion about the changes to executive jobs suggested by informants were more specifically about *how* executives carry out their jobs rather than *what* they do. Accordingly, describing executive jobs centred very much on behavioural descriptions of the executives themselves rather than any real discussion about the actual job.

It also found that the pressure from investors for more explanation about decisions concerning executive remuneration was having a major impact on job evaluation processes. Some of the informants believed that investors like analytical job evaluation because it provided a rationale for remuneration decisions. Consequently they persevered with it, although all companies in this study that use it, modify the process, some significantly. Job evaluation tools were considered inadequate, and they did not get to the heart of what the informants said they needed to assist them to make decisions about executive remuneration. However, for most of these companies in this study, the alternatives available were not suitable either. They persevere with job evaluation processes and modify them by overlaying a significant element of judgment[1] based on the specific and individual characteristics of the incumbent. This is in direct contrast to the literature which stated that job evaluation is a process based on issues about the job, not the person (Gomez-Mejia & Balkin 1992; Nethersell 2001; Schuster & Zingheim 1992). However the findings indicate that despite the presence of a job evaluation process, in reality judgment was the overriding characteristic or tool of the decision-making process when it came to evaluating executive jobs. In effect then, what was happening was that the value of a job was determined by the characteristics of the incumbent, and so the value of the job was likely to change every time the incumbent changed.

Overall, the data indicated that what was happening with respect to executive remuneration in the companies in this study could be summarised as follows. Remuneration decisions were largely based on a judgment of the leadership and other skills of the incumbent. The key competencies that were looked for in an executive include leadership, interpersonal skills, general business acumen, and the ability to build relationships and manage teams. In addition, companies actively sought executives who had potential for other roles and responsibilities, and may recruit an executive who was 'overqualified' for the immediate job in order to have someone in place with potential for other jobs within the company. This impacted on remuneration levels in the short-term, with such executives typically being paid more than what was appropriate for the specific job, according to the size of the job based on salary survey data. However, in the literature on job evaluation, there was a clear distinction between the job and the person and in a faithful application of job evaluation, characteristics of the person are not considered (Armstrong & Murlis 1991; Balkin & Gomez-Mejia 1987; Hilling 2003).

Job evaluation – for and against

The process of job evaluation is quite prescriptive, and each of the components of this process has been described as having certain elements of judgment present (Lawler 1990). However the literature highlighted that the process of job evaluation is underpinned by rules that have been designed to limit variability in judgment (Emerson 1991; Nethersell 2001). These rules are as follows: job evaluation is concerned with the job and not the person; it is based on an assumption of 'standard'

[1] Based on these interviews judgment is defined for the purposes of this study as *the formation of an opinion or a notion about something from the information or circumstances presented.*

performance; it is concerned with the job at a particular time; and it is not concerned with pay or status (Balkin & Gomez-Mejia 1987; Lawler 1990).

Consistent with the literature (Brown 2000), this study found that analytical job evaluation was still being widely used. However the informants seldom found it a satisfactory tool for evaluation of executive jobs. Even though it was still in use, the users modified the rules and processes in order to achieve company structures, relationships, and remuneration levels determined as appropriate through more subjective means. The literature suggested that analytical job evaluation was popular because it was seemingly ‘scientific’ and its analytical nature appealed to many people (Armstrong & Murlis 1991; Lawler 1990). Many of the informants indicated that they had a need for *some* system, and in the absence of any alternative that was seen as better satisfying that need, then analytical job evaluation would have to do.

This study found that the suitability of job evaluation for executive jobs was affected by a number of issues, all of which were confirmed in the literature. The work of executives was thought to be unique, and executives were ‘one of a kind’ individuals whose personal qualities were particularly important (Balkin & Gomez-Mejia 1987). It was recognised that poor decision-making by executives could have long-term and far-reaching consequences (O'Neill 1999), executive jobs were political (Bloom & Milkovich 1995), there was a loss of personal privacy (Kay & Rushbrook 2001; O'Neill 1999), and jobs were difficult to describe (O'Neill 1999). Informants raised all of these issues in highlighting the difficulties of applying job evaluation.

The literature highlighted a number of advantages and disadvantages of job evaluation and these are summarised below. However, not all of these were found in the study to be important at the executive level. Several writers (Armstrong & Murlis 1991; Emerson 1991; Lawler 1990) suggested that a major disadvantage was that job evaluation failed to respond to individual performance and the market. This was the most common disadvantage identified by the informants. While the literature provided little advice on how to address this, a number of informants described how they merged elements of judgment and job evaluation and so have developed a process that worked for them. However, they tended not to be satisfied with this because they recognised that it was not in the true spirit of job evaluation. Nonetheless they persisted with it due to the absence of something that they thought better suited their needs.

A number of writers identified job evaluation as a political and highly negotiated process (Gooding & Gregory 2001; Lawler 1990; Nielsen 2002; Schuster & Zingheim 1992) and this was echoed by the informants. However, it was identified not so much as a disadvantage, but rather as an accepted part of the process for evaluating executive jobs.   The influence of the CEO and other senior executives in determining the size of jobs, where they sat in the organisation structure, and the corresponding remuneration were features in all of the companies in this study that utilised formal job evaluation.

The seemingly objective nature of job evaluation was noted in the literature as an advantage (Armstrong & Murlis 1991; Bowers 2001; Lawler 1990) and this proved to be true for many of the companies in this study. The informants described how job evaluation assisted them to justify decisions about the size of executive jobs and remuneration and this appealed to many in this study. Particularly important to some of the informants was that job evaluation provided a common language, both within and between companies (Armstrong & Murlis 1991) and so assisted in discussions about jobs and remuneration.

Job evaluation was described in the literature as having little mystery as it was tried and true, having been around for many years (Armstrong & Murlis 1991; Bowers 2001; Lawler 1990). Many of the informants agreed with this, but for some it appeared that the presence of an element of mystery was a distinct advantage in some companies. Comments about job evaluation being an art rather than a science were common in the interviews. Informants indicated that this belief allowed the job evaluation process to be easily amended to incorporate subjective elements based on the competencies of the incumbent, without appearing to openly taint the process. This process of amending the evaluation was usually referred to in the interviews with innocuous words such as ‘tweaked’ and ‘changed’, but in one interview the informant used the word ‘abuse’ to describe what she did to the process.

The literature suggested that the central control of an organisation’s pay system was another compelling reason to use job evaluation (Bowers 2001; Lawler 1990). However it was also noted that job evaluation could lead to higher salary costs (Lawler 1981). The informants in this study did not identify control of the pay system as important at all or as a reason for their perseverance with job evaluation at the executive level. Indeed, there were several comments from informants related to paying whatever remuneration was required to attract and retain a particular individual, because the cost of *not* doing so was considered to be far greater than the cost of doing it. This suggested that the advantage of control of costs, and the disadvantage of higher costs were not regarded as important issues by the informants.

Job evaluation was identified in the literature as aiding internal equity, fairness and comparability (Brown 2000; Nethersell 2001). This was identified by few of the informants as being important. However, more important to them was *external* equity, and external market comparisons were very important to them. Rather than referring to comprehensive salary surveys for executive remuneration data, informants said that they more often looked to external advisers to provide specific market salary data about a very small number of comparable jobs and individuals.

Several disadvantages of job evaluation that were noted in the literature but not identified by informants were that job evaluation can be costly, time-consuming, bureaucratic and discriminatory (Armstrong & Murlis 1991; Arvey 1987; Bowers 2001; Lawler 1981; Nethersell 2001). Perhaps the disadvantages of cost and bureaucracy were not raised by the interviewees in this study because the companies studied were large companies, and as such, there was a tolerance for cost and bureaucracy. In support of this notion, Welbourne (1997) found that as an organisation grows, it adds the administrative functions that implement job-based employment systems as well as being more likely to want employment systems that are job-based in an attempt to minimise employment -related litigation. She added that there was an implied acceptance of the added costs and bureaucracy that such arrangements bring. Discrimination too was not raised at all by the informants.

Several reasons may be important here and these follow, although these are based on the researcher's assumptions rather than on anything raised by the informants. The informants were mostly male, and so may not be attuned to look for issues related to gender in the way that evaluation is conducted. In addition, the group under research – executives in large Australian publicly listed companies – are assumed to be predominantly male, based on the general statistic that men outnumber women in managerial jobs by more than three to one (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency 2003).

Weeks (2002) argued that a disadvantage of job evaluation was that it became an end in itself, and this was found to be particularly true for those companies with senior remuneration managers. In these companies, job evaluation processes were found to be more prescriptive, time-consuming and complex than in those companies without senior remuneration managers. In companies that did not have a senior remuneration manager, job evaluation tended to be used much more loosely and in many cases, in name only. This could be explained by the likelihood that dedicated remuneration managers would be more focused on the job evaluation system in place because this was an important part of their job. However, in companies without a dedicated remuneration manager, the head of human resources assumed responsibility for executive remuneration as well as having many other diverse issues to address; creating rules and processes for job evaluation was not a high priority in these instances.

Implications for theory

In every company in this study there were real differences between the 'theory' of job evaluation and the reality within the companies. The existing theories do not acknowledge these differences and so this study provides a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge. It has documented how some companies using job evaluation have modified the job evaluation processes in order to make them more useful and relevant to them.

Implications for policy and practice

As well as addressing a gap in the literature about executive job evaluation practices, the 'real world' application of this study is significant.

Investors in large publicly listed companies should be aware that decisions about executive job size, and therefore remuneration, involve significant elements of judgment by decision-makers within companies, and these judgments may often override other apparently systematic decision-making processes when determining executive remuneration. It appears that the personal characteristics and the competency, or skill-sets, of the individual executives are the key. The presence of an analytical job evaluation process often provides a perception of objectivity to remuneration decisions. However decisions reached through this process can be, and are, often overturned by the chief executive and/or other senior executives in the company. Thus, despite the use of job evaluation, negotiation of the final job size is common and is based on judgment. Investors should also be aware that the reason that some companies persist with using job evaluation techniques is that decision-makers from the companies in this study believe that investors will not accept that remuneration decisions for executives are largely based on judgment. By keeping job evaluation processes in place for executive jobs, decision-makers are able to point to a well-accepted and widely used process that is used around the world, thereby giving investors a sense of security that there is some logical and objective basis for decisions. An understanding of these issues by investors, directors and other senior managers will provide valuable information for them to review the role of job evaluation as well as their remuneration strategies and policies for executives. At the very least, the findings of this study should assist them to have more meaningful and productive discussions, as well as participate more effectively in executive remuneration decisions.

Executives themselves should also be aware of the implications of this study. Armed with the knowledge that executive job size and remuneration decisions are based largely on the personal characteristics of individuals and their ability to manage across a wide range of disciplines, as well as competencies such as leadership, the ability to build and manage a team, interpersonal skills and a high level of general business acumen, executives will be able to make more effective decisions about self-education and development. If they wish to move into more senior roles in organisations and increase their remuneration, then developing the areas identified in this study is likely to be beneficial to them.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge that there are a number of limitations of this study which should be taken into account when considering the conclusions detailed above.

The main limitation of this study is that the participating companies are large Australian publicly listed companies. As a result it is not possible to say that the conclusions of this study can be generalised or applied to other companies such as smaller publicly listed companies, private companies, public sector organisations and so forth. In addition, the findings cannot be applied to publicly listed companies in other countries.

The other main focus of the study was on executives, so the findings cannot be generalised or applied to other levels of staff within those companies, or any other company.

Fear of negative publicity due to the sensitive nature of the subject of this study may have prevented some companies from participating and so some relevant issues may not have emerged. In addition, those informants who did participate may not have been totally open about policy and practices within their company for fear of negative consequences if the information became public, despite the researcher's promise of confidentiality. Accordingly the findings may not be a true indication of the executive job size and remuneration decision-making processes for all large publicly listed companies in Australia. Although these limitations are acknowledged they do not detract from the significance of the findings.

Conclusions

It can be seen from this study that job evaluation for executive jobs is still popular in many companies in Australia today. However, there are many questions about its usefulness and whether it adds anything to the understanding of the work done by executives. At best, it appears to be used as a ‘prop’ to help explain remuneration decisions to investors but in reality, it would appear that it is being highly modified and therefore its reliability must be questioned.

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