

Characteristics of people

To manage people effectively, it is necessary to understand the factors that affect how people behave at work. This means taking into account the fundamental characteristics of people as examined in this chapter under the following headings:

- individual differences – as affected by people’s abilities, intelligence, personality, background and culture, gender and race;
- attitudes – causes and manifestations;
- influences on behaviour – personality and attitudes;
- attribution theory – how we make judgements about people;
- orientation – the approaches people adopt to work;
- roles – the parts people play in carrying out their work.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

The management of people would be much easier if everyone were the same, but they are, of course, different because of their ability, intelligence, personality, background and culture (the environment in which they were brought up), as discussed below. Gender, race and disability are additional factors to be taken into account. Importantly, the needs and wants of individuals will also differ, often fundamentally, and this affects their motivation, as described in the next chapter.

The headings under which personal characteristics can vary have been classified by Mischel (1981) as follows:

- *competencies* – abilities and skills;
- *constructs* – the conceptual framework which governs how people perceive their environment;
- *expectations* – what people have learned to expect about their own and others' behaviour;
- *values* – what people believe to be important;
- *self-regulatory plans* – the goals people set themselves and the plans they make to achieve them.

Environmental or situational variables include the type of work individuals carry out; the culture, climate and management style in the organization, the social group within which individuals work; and the 'reference groups' that individuals use for comparative purposes (eg comparing conditions of work between one category of employee and another).

Ability

Ability is the quality that makes an action possible. Abilities have been analysed by Burt (1954) and Vernon (1961). They classified them into two major groups:

- V:e:d – standing for verbal, numerical, memory and reasoning abilities;
- K:m – standing for spatial and mechanical abilities, as well as perceptual (memory) and motor skills relating to physical operations such as eye/hand coordination and mental dexterity.

They also suggested that overriding these abilities there is a 'g' or general intelligence factor which accounts for most variations in performance.

Alternative classifications have been produced by

- Thurstone (1940) – spatial ability, perceptual speed, numerical ability, verbal meaning, memory, verbal fluency and inductive reasoning;
- Gagne (1977) – intellectual skills, cognitive (understanding and learning) skills, verbal and motor skills;
- Argyle (1989) – judgement, creativity and social skills.

Intelligence

Intelligence has been defined as:

- 'the capacity to solve problems, apply principles, make inferences and perceive relationships' (Argyle, 1989);
- 'the capacity for abstract thinking and reasoning with a range of different contents and media' (Toplis *et al* 1991);
- 'the capacity to process information' (Makin *et al*, 1996);
- 'what is measured by intelligence tests' (Wright and Taylor, 1970).

The last, tautological definition is not facetious. As an operational definition, it can be related to the specific aspects of reasoning, inference, cognition (ie knowing, conceiving) and perception (ie understanding, recognition) that intelligence tests attempt to measure.

General intelligence, as noted above, consists of a number of mental abilities that enable a person to succeed at a wide variety of intellectual tasks that use the faculties of knowing and reasoning. The mathematical technique of factor analysis has been used to identify the constituents of intelligence, such as Thurstone's (1940) multiple factors listed above. But there is no general agreement among psychologists as to what these factors are or, indeed, whether there is such a thing as general intelligence.

An alternative approach to the analysis of intelligence was put forward by Guilford (1967), who distinguished five types of mental operation: thinking, remembering, divergent production (problem-solving which leads to unexpected and original solutions), convergent production (problem-solving which leads to the one, correct solution) and evaluating.

Personality

Definition

As defined by Toplis *et al* (1991), the term personality is all-embracing in terms of the individual's behaviour and the way it is organized and coordinated when he or she interacts with the environment. Personality can be described in terms of traits or types.

The trait concept of personality

Personality can be defined as the relatively stable and enduring aspects of individuals that distinguish them from other people. This is the 'trait' concept, traits being predis-

positions to behave in certain ways in a variety of different situations. The assumption that people are consistent in the ways they express these traits is the basis for making predictions about their future behaviour. We all attribute traits to people in an attempt to understand why they behave in the way they do. As Chell (1987) says: 'This cognitive process gives a sense of order to what might otherwise appear to be senseless uncoordinated behaviours. Traits may therefore be thought of as classification systems, used by individuals to understand other people's and their own behaviour.'

The so-called big five personality traits as defined by Deary and Matthews (1993) are:

- *neuroticism* – anxiety, depression, hostility, self-consciousness, impulsiveness, vulnerability;
- *extraversion* – warmth, gregariousness, assertiveness, activity, excitement seeking, positive emotions;
- *openness* – feelings, actions, ideas, values;
- *agreeableness* – trust, straightforwardness, altruism, compliance, modesty, tender-mindedness;
- *conscientiousness* – competence, order, dutifulness, achievement-striving, self-discipline, deliberation.

A widely used instrument for assessing traits is Cattell's (1963) 16PF test. But the trait theory of personality has been attacked by people such as Mischel (1981), Chell (1985) and Harre (1979). The main criticisms have been as follows:

- People do not necessarily express the same trait across different situations or even the same trait in the same situation. Different people may exhibit consistency in some traits and considerable variability in others.
- Classical trait theory as formulated by Cattell (1963) assumes that the manifestation of trait behaviour is independent of the situations and the persons with whom the individual is interacting – this assumption is questionable, given that trait behaviour usually manifests itself in response to specific situations.
- Trait attributions are a product of language – they are devices for speaking about people and are not generally described in terms of behaviour.

Type theories of personality

Type theory identifies a number of types of personality that can be used to categorize people and may form the basis of a personality test. The types may be linked to descriptions of various traits.

One of the most widely used type theories is that of Jung (1923). He identified four major preferences of people:

- relating to other people – extraversion or introversion;
- gathering information – sensing (dealing with facts that can be objectively verified) or intuitive (generating information through insight);
- using information – thinking (emphasizing logical analysis as the basis for decision-making) or feeling (making decisions based on internal values and beliefs);
- making decisions – perceiving (collecting all the relevant information before making a decision) or judging (resolving the issue without waiting for a large quantity of data).

This theory of personality forms the basis of personality tests such as the Myers-Briggs Types Indicator.

Eysenck (1953) identified three personality traits: extroversion/introversion, neuroticism and psychoticism, and classified people as stable or unstable extroverts or introverts. For example, a stable introvert is passive, careful, controlled and thoughtful, while a stable extrovert is lively, outgoing, responsive and sociable.

As Makin *et al* (1996) comment, studies using types to predict work-related behaviours are less common and may be difficult to interpret: 'In general it would be fair to say that their level of predictability is similar to that for trait measures.'

The influence of background

Individual differences may be a function of people's background, which will include the environment and culture in which they have been brought up and now exist. Levinson (1978) suggested that 'individual life structure' is shaped by three types of external event:

- the socio-cultural environment;
- the roles they play and the relationships they have;
- the opportunities and constraints that enable or inhibit them to express and develop their personality.

Differences arising from gender, race or disability

It is futile, dangerous and invidious to make assumptions about inherent differences between people because of their sex, race or degree of disability. *If* there are differences in behaviour at work, these are more likely to arise from environmental and cultural factors than from differences in fundamental personal characteristics. The

work environment undoubtedly influences feelings and behaviour for each of these categories. Research cited by Arnold *et al* (1991) established that working women as a whole 'experienced more daily stress, marital dissatisfaction, and ageing worries, and were less likely to show overt anger than either housewives or men'. Ethnic minorities may find that the selection process is biased against them, promotion prospects are low and that they are subject to other overt or subtle forms of discrimination. The behaviour of people with disabilities can also be affected by the fact that they are not given equal opportunities. There is, of course, legislation against discrimination in each of those areas but this cannot prevent the more covert forms of prejudice.

ATTITUDES

An attitude can broadly be defined as a settled mode of thinking. Attitudes are evaluative. As described by Makin *et al* (1996), 'Any attitude contains an assessment of whether the object to which it refers is liked or disliked.' Attitudes are developed through experience but they are less stable than traits and can change as new experiences are gained or influences absorbed. Within organizations they are affected by cultural factors (values and norms), the behaviour of management (management style), policies such as those concerned with pay, recognition, promotion and the quality of working life, and the influence of the 'reference group' (the group with whom people identify).

INFLUENCES ON BEHAVIOUR AT WORK

Factors affecting behaviour

Behaviour at work is dependent on both the personal characteristics of individuals (personality and attitudes) and the situation in which they are working. These factors interact, and this theory of behaviour is sometimes called interactionism. It is because of this process of interaction and because there are so many variables in personal characteristics and situations that behaviour is difficult to analyse and predict. It is generally assumed that attitudes determine behaviour, but there is not such a direct link as most people suppose. As Arnold *et al* (1991) comment, research evidence has shown that: 'People's avowed feelings and beliefs about someone or something seemed only loosely related to how they behaved towards it.'

Behaviour will be influenced by the perceptions of individuals about the situation they are in. The term *psychological climate* has been coined by James and Sells (1981) to

describe how people's perceptions of the situation give it psychological significance and meaning. They suggested that the key environmental variables are:

- role characteristics such as role ambiguity and conflict (see the last section in this chapter);
- job characteristics such as autonomy and challenge;
- leader behaviours, including goal emphasis and work facilitation;
- work group characteristics, including cooperation and friendliness;
- organizational policies that directly affect individuals, such as the reward system.

ATTRIBUTION THEORY – HOW WE MAKE JUDGEMENTS ABOUT PEOPLE

The ways in which we perceive and make judgements about people at work are explained by attribution theory, which concerns the assignment of causes to events. We make an attribution when we perceive and describe other people's actions and try to discover why they behaved in the way they did. We can also make attributions about our own behaviour. Heider (1958) has pointed out that: 'In everyday life we form ideas about other people and about social situations. We interpret other people's actions and we predict what they will do under certain circumstances.'

In attributing causes to people's actions we distinguish between what is in the person's power to achieve and the effect of environmental influence. A personal cause, whether someone does well or badly, may, for example, be the amount of effort displayed, while a situational cause may be the extreme difficulty of the task. Kelley (1967) has suggested that there are four criteria that we apply to decide whether behaviour is attributable to personal rather than external (situational) causes:

- *distinctiveness* – the behaviour can be distinguished from the behaviour of other people in similar situations;
- *consensus* – if other people agree that the behaviour is governed by some personal characteristic;
- *consistency over time* – whether the behaviour is repeated;
- *consistency over modality* (ie the manner in which things are done) – whether or not the behaviour is repeated in different situations.

Attribution theory is also concerned with the way in which people attribute success or failure to themselves. Research by Weiner (1974) and others has indicated that when people with high achievement needs have been successful, they ascribe this to internal factors such as ability and effort. High achievers tend to attribute failure to

lack of effort and not lack of ability. Low achievers tend not to link success with effort but to ascribe their failures to lack of ability.

ORIENTATION TO WORK

Orientation theory examines the factors that are instrumental, ie serve as a means, in directing people's choices about work. An orientation is a central organizing principle that underlies people's attempts to make sense of their lives. In relation to work, as defined by Guest (1984): 'An orientation is a persisting tendency to seek certain goals and rewards from work which exists independently of the nature of the work and the work content.' The orientation approach stresses the role of the social environment factor as a key factor affecting motivation.

Orientation theory is primarily developed from fieldwork carried out by sociologists rather than from laboratory work conducted by psychologists. Goldthorpe *et al* (1968) studied skilled and semi-skilled workers in Luton, and, in their findings, they stressed the importance of instrumental orientation, that is, a view of work as a means to an end, a context in which to earn money to purchase goods and leisure. According to Goldthorpe, the 'affluent' worker interviewed by the research team valued work largely for extrinsic reasons.

In their research carried out with blue-collar workers in Peterborough, Blackburn and Mann (1979) found a wider range of orientations. They suggested that different ones could come into play with varying degrees of force in different situations. The fact that workers, in practice, had little choice about what they did contributed to this diversity – their orientations were affected by the choice or lack of choice presented to them and this meant that they might be forced to accept alternative orientations.

But Blackburn and Mann confirmed that pay was a key preference area, the top preferences being:

1. pay;
2. security;
3. workmates;
4. intrinsic job satisfaction;
5. autonomy.

They commented that: 'An obsession with wages clearly emerged... A concern to minimize unpleasant work was also widespread.' Surprisingly, perhaps, they also revealed that the most persistent preference of all was for outside work, 'a fairly clear desire for a combination of fresh air and freedom'.

ROLES

When faced with any situation, eg carrying out a job, people have to enact a role in order to manage that situation. This is sometimes called the 'situation-act model'. As described by Chell (1985), the model indicates that: 'The person must act within situations: situations are rule-governed and how a person behaves is often prescribed by these socially acquired rules. The person thus adopts a suitable role in order to perform effectively within the situation.'

At work, the term *role* describes the part to be played by individuals in fulfilling their job requirements. Roles therefore indicate the specific forms of behaviour required to carry out a particular task or the group of tasks contained in a *position* or job. Work role profiles primarily define the requirements in terms of the ways tasks are carried out rather than the tasks themselves. They may refer to broad aspects of behaviour, especially with regard to working with others and styles of management. A distinction can therefore be made between a *job description*, which simply lists the main tasks an individual has to carry out, and a *role profile*, which is more concerned with the behavioural aspects of the work and the outcomes the individual in the role is expected to achieve. The concept of a role emphasizes the fact that people at work are, in a sense, always acting a part; they are not simply reciting the lines but interpreting them in terms of their own perceptions of how they should behave in relation to the context in which they work, especially with regard to their interactions with other people and their discretionary behaviour.

Role theory, as formulated by Katz and Kahn (1966) states that the role individuals occupy at work – and elsewhere – exists in relation to other people – their *role set*. These people have expectations about the individuals' role, and if they live up to these expectations they will have successfully performed the role. Performance in a role is a product of the situation individuals are in (the organizational context and the direction or influence exercised from above or elsewhere in the organization) and their own skills, competences, attitudes and personality. Situational factors are important, but the role individuals perform can both shape and reflect their personalities. Stress and inadequate performance result when roles are ambiguous, incompatible, or in conflict with one another.

Role ambiguity

When individuals are unclear about what their role is, what is expected of them, or how they are getting on, they may become insecure or lose confidence in themselves.

Role incompatibility

Stress and poor performance may be caused by roles having incompatible elements, as when there is a clash between what other people expect from the role and what individuals believe is expected of them.

Role conflict

Role conflict results when, even if roles are clearly defined and there is no incompatibility between expectations, individuals have to carry out two antagonistic roles. For example, conflict can exist between the roles of individuals at work and their roles at home.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HR SPECIALISTS

The main implications for HR specialists of the factors that affect individuals at work are as follows:

- *Individual differences* – when designing jobs, preparing learning programmes, assessing and counselling staff, developing reward systems and dealing with grievances and disciplinary problems, it is necessary to remember that all people are different. This may seem obvious but it is remarkable how many people ignore it. What fulfils one person may not fulfil another. Abilities, aptitudes and intelligence differ widely and particular care needs to be taken in fitting the right people into the right jobs and giving them the right training. Personalities and attitudes also differ. It is important to focus on how to manage diversity as described in Chapter 57. This should take account of individual differences, which will include any issues arising from the employment of women, people from different ethnic groups, those with disabilities and older people.
- *Personalities* should not be judged simplistically in terms of stereotyped traits. People are complex and they change, and account has to be taken of this. The problem for HR specialists and managers in general is that, while they have to accept and understand these differences and take full account of them, they have ultimately to proceed on the basis of fitting them to the requirements of the situation, which are essentially what the organization needs to achieve. There is always a limit to the extent to which an organization, which relies on collective effort to achieve its goals, can adjust itself to the specific needs of individuals. But the organization has to appreciate that the pressures it makes on people can result in stress and therefore become counter-productive.

- *Judgements about people* (attribution theory) – we all ascribe motives to other people and attempt to establish the causes of their behaviour. We must be careful, however, not to make simplistic judgements about causality (ie what has motivated someone's behaviour) – for ourselves as well as in respect of others – especially when we are assessing performance.
- *Orientation theory* – the significance of orientation theory is that it stresses the importance of the effect of environmental factors on the motivation to work.
- *Role theory* – role theory helps us to understand the need to clarify with individuals what is expected of them in behavioural and outcome terms and to ensure when designing roles that they do not contain any incompatible elements. We must also be aware of the potential for role conflict so that steps can be taken to minimize stress.