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Excerpt

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I. The work preoccupations of executives

Like many large international firms today, Octane Ltd is a large vertically-integrated concern or group of companies controlling a whole series of activities from research, development and manufacturing through to wholesale and retail marketing. It has wholly or partly owned subsidiaries in many countries in the western world. Octane maintains a headquarters office which is divided into a number of functional departments, broken down into smaller divisions or branches. The headquarters departments are, broadly speaking, of two types. First, there are operational departments that are responsible for the direction of the operating companies. Second, there are service departments that have the primary function of providing technical aid to companies.

Octane is in many respects one of the United Kingdom's leading companies. It is among the largest and is highly successful in its field. It has shown considerable public spirit in its donations and operations. Its personnel and welfare practices are well abreast of most that are considered desirable and ethical in large industrial organizations. In recent years the Staff Department has become highly conscious of costs and has made strenuous efforts to maintain and increase opportunities for individual employees to contribute to productivity. A company-wide appraisal scheme is operated and through this it is hoped that latent talents among the staff can be identified and developed.

Research steps

We held two group discussions in each of five departments: stores, engineering, central staff, supply and development, personnel and sales. The composition of the groups was roughly representative of all members of these departments earning between £1,800 and £3,000 per annum. Each group had about eight participants and seventy-six men were seen in all during these discussions. Each group discussion was started by a research worker on the following lines:

'The staff Research Panel is developing a study of the preoccupations of the company staff so far as their work here is concerned—what people like yourselves think of the company as a place to work, what you like about it, what you

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dislike, how it compares with other companies and so on. We are still at an exploratory stage but certain broad issues have begun to appear relevant to the study.

How much opportunity people feel they have to influence the way things are done in the company.

How far they feel their abilities are used.

What opportunities people feel there are for promotion.

What determines who gets promoted.

Whether one feels concentrated in one department or involved in the success of the company as a whole.

How the company compares with other organizations and with which other organizations it would be appropriate to compare it.

What are the main positive features of the company.

How the company can be improved in these respects or generally.

I don't want to confine you to these issues because there may be something else that is important to you, and if so I should like to know, but at some point I'd like to run over the matters I've mentioned.'

Members of the group were encouraged to talk freely, though the discussion leader would intervene from time to time to change the topic or ask for elaboration and explanation.

Either one or two of the investigators attended. The discussions lasted 1½–2 hours. They were tape recorded in order to facilitate a detailed, systematic analysis of their content and a sharing of the material among all members of the social science team. These recordings of discussions were not shown to any members of the company and were entirely confidential to the research workers. The same principle was observed with subsequent data based on work with individuals.

At the end of the group sessions participants were handed a form on which they were invited to expand on any item they thought of special interest during the discussion or to express personal views as to whether relative emphases had been right. The response was poor and these forms were not used in the analysis.

One of the investigators, Mr R. Holmes, then drafted an interview guide for use with a sub-sample of the men who had been seen in the group discussions. This was based largely on a content analysis of the discussions and on the discussions that had ensued among the social scientists and the executives on the project committee. These discussions centred on the most interesting points to follow up from both the operational and scientific points of view and technical issues concerning length of interview, sequence and form of questions and so on.

Mr Holmes then carried out individual interviews with twenty-eight

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participants in the group discussions. These were selected to represent the distribution of age and seniority in their departments. It was decided to see them as their earlier participation in the discussions would make it possible to enter the interview situation far more quickly than would otherwise have been the case. As they were informed, the individual interview material would be used to check or reconsider the findings that had emerged in the group discussions.

The interviews covered the nature of the respondent's job, his contacts with his superior, the extent to which he could initiate action and see the result of his efforts, the extent to which he felt his resources to be used, his participation in decision-making, the standing of his department as he saw it, his views of the firm's selection, promotion and appraisal procedures and his overall attitude toward his employers.

The individual interviews were used mainly to tap more systematically and more deeply the central topics that had so far been defined as important. The interviews were complementary in function to the group discussions. The discussions had brought a range of matters quickly and economically to our attention, allowed participants to comment on what others said and gave the investigators the opportunity to see something of interaction between colleagues. The interviews were more focused, were concentrated on specific questions and were aimed to secure material that could be quantified.

In addition, twenty-five of those seen in the individual interviews completed a questionnaire based on one used in a previous study by Dr Himmelweit and designed to provide comparative data as well as to contribute to the present study. This consisted of sixty-six specific questions dealing with educational and work history, the respondent's attitudes to his career and present post, his interest in the firm and his evaluation of the relative importance for him of various aspects of his post.

Findings

The following is a summary of certain major findings from this exploratory study.¹

¹ What follows is my own precis of those of the joint findings of the research team which I consider relevant to this book. Since every precis is to some extent an interpretation of data I should like to make it clear that this interpretation is my own.

Since the precis is based on a combination of group discussion data and of interviews and questionnaires used with half to two-thirds of the sample I have chosen to make only occasional use of the numerical data.

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Most respondents were reasonably satisfied with life in the company and spoke positively of it as an employer. A reasonable salary was among the most frequently mentioned benefits. The firm was seen as providing security. Considerable satisfaction was expressed with welfare arrangements, provision for recreation, fringe benefits and consideration for staff. The reputation of the firm and its products was said to be high. Working relations were described as pleasant. At the same time there were complaints that 'gentlemanliness' led to insufficient stringency in dealing with non-productive members of staff. The company was said to retain 'dead wood'.

While the men expressed their contentment on the welfare and consideration side they criticized the way the firm was run and the fact that they experienced the work as lacking in challenge. As they put it, these aspects of their occupational roles were more important than, but less satisfactory than, welfare arrangements and pleasant personal relations.

Outspoken criticism of the firm occurred in the sphere of organizational structure. It was said that ideas and initiative were less welcome than conformity and acceptance. It was hard to try to change things without being labelled a troublemaker. Even their superiors lacked influence as sources of upward communication. It was felt that there was a company-wide inability to delegate and that senior managers as well as people at the level of our respondents were apt to be engaged on routine duties. There were endless layers of management and this made for delays in decision-making and minimal contact between those who made policy and those who carried it out. The firm was less aggressive than its competitors. There seemed to be more concern with not making mistakes and with making things palatable to colleagues than with innovation.

On the whole, respondents felt that they had done as well for themselves as they could reasonably expect. Those at the middle of the age-range interviewed were markedly the least satisfied with their progress. Respondents thought that the firm recruited people with unnecessarily high qualifications for the jobs available and it was felt that this led to frustration. While young people were attracted into the firm in the hope of receiving rapid promotion in fact the firm needed only a proportion of effective people and the majority of those recruited would have to stay in fairly routine work.

Career development was not considered to be satisfactory, especially for graduates, who did not appear to go through a series of carefully planned stages. About three-quarters of those individually interviewed said they had no idea of what their promotion prospects might be. A high

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association was found between overall satisfaction and knowledge of prospects, contentment with prospects and having a clear future post in view. Of the five who said in interview that they saw some pattern to their future prospects, all were satisfied with the company generally. Of the seven who were fairly contented with their prospects six were satisfied. Of the eight who said they had a clear post in view which they expected to occupy in ten years' time, seven were satisfied.

The respondents interviewed could be divided into age categories, 29–34 ('young'), 35–44 ('middle') and 45 and over ('older'). The young were reasonably contented. They expressed themselves as happy to belong to Octane, they felt they had done well to join it, they were the most ambitious and they believed their prospects to be good. The middle category were distinctly the least satisfied: nearly half of them felt they had not done as well as they had expected and about the same proportion said they had done worse than their contemporaries at school. The older category were more satisfied than this. They were not optimistic about their prospects, but they were the most appreciative of the pay and the most contented with the welfare arrangements. Those who lacked academic qualifications and those who had come into Octane after an earlier spell of work elsewhere both felt that they could probably not have done so well in another company.

In the questionnaire respondents were asked what qualities they felt were needed for promotion. The qualities mentioned and the relative frequency of mention are shown below.

Qualities stated to be necessary for promotion

Quality	No. of mentions [†]
Ambition, determination, ruthlessness	13
Diplomacy, tact, patience, acceptability	12
Ability	12
Intelligence, understanding, knowledge	8
Experience	6
Luck, opportunity	6

Staff who said that they had not been promoted as fast as they had hoped and were doing less interesting work than they wished said that they stayed in the firm because of the reasonable rates of pay, fringe

[†] There are more mentions than respondents (25), because several respondents mentioned more than one type of quality.

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benefits, pleasant working atmosphere, security, and the difficulty of moving to a competitive company.

There was a good deal of discussion of the conflict between the desire to stay and the expressed interest in trying to improve one's position elsewhere. Some respondents described the impact of the company's security and amenities as 'capture by the shilling lunch'. The element of capture was repeated in statements to the effect that they would recommend their employers to young recruits only if they had technical skills that were transferable and would enable them to maintain independence, if they wished, of the particular company and industry. At some points respondents appeared to be intimating that they were reluctant to try their luck elsewhere in case their current employer had made a correct estimate of their capacities.

Respondents complained about lack of feedback on performance for those people (among whom they seemed to include themselves) whose performance was neither outstandingly good or disastrous. Most said they would especially like to know what aspects of their performance they should try to improve. They said that they were not appraised regularly and, when they were appraised, the results were not communicated to them. The influence of the appraisal system on promotions was in any case thought to be peripheral; appraisal and promotion were not seen as integrated into one system. They were also nervous that their own abilities might be (adversely) judged on the basis of the quality of the appraisals they made of their own subordinates.

People tended to see promotions as determined by forces other than personal ability, such as luck or being in the right place at the right time, or by such personal attributes as ruthlessness or diplomacy. A majority said they could not see the results of their work, there were no major decisions that were theirs alone and there were no complete tasks they could point to as their own achievement.

While respondents felt very attached and committed to the firm they did not feel so committed to the work; a proportion seemed as alienated from their work as assembly-line workers are reported to be from theirs. Nearly half the respondents felt they were 'under-used' in the sense of possessing abilities they were not called upon to exercise. They seemed to feel partially redundant in the sense of their full potential not being drawn on or realized.

Significant *variations* existed between the responses of men in the different departments. Those in the stores department were least happy. They said that their department was contracting and that promotion

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prospects were (therefore) poor. They found their work boring and repetitive. Staff felt unwanted and partly redundant.

The men in the engineering department were very attached to the firm and enjoyed their work. At the same time they felt that their professional expertise was not sufficiently recognized and that their promotion prospects were worse than for those not technically qualified. They said they did not have enough responsibility and were not able to use their skills to the full. The members of the central staff department were the most satisfied of those studied. They were more satisfied than those elsewhere with the pay they received, the welfare arrangements, the organization of the firm, the opportunities they had to work in their own way and the opportunities they had to try out new ideas. Against this, they considered that their promotion prospects were poor and that the influence of their department in personnel matters was somewhat low. In supply and development, many of the staff saw themselves as an elite doing important and exciting work and thought their department of central importance in the company. They were critical of the management structure, which they regarded as frozen and over-elaborate. They felt that their promotion prospects were worse than for people of equal ability in other departments. Product sales department were similar to supply and development in many ways—feeling themselves to be a favoured department doing interesting work but frustrated by the organizational structure. Respondents here were discontented with their pay and critical of senior management. They felt that the hierarchical structure produced slow decision-making and little risk-taking, which was unsuitable for marketing, and that there was no clear promotion policy, and did not feel stretched in their work.

Implications: high expectations, feelings of under-use and disappointment

From the group discussions I subsequently built up a picture of what may be described as *an ideal work environment* and set of tasks as *pictured or implied by the men in the sample*. This emerged as follows:

One's employing organization should be part of a stable industry. It should be a socially worthwhile business with a worthwhile/significant product. It should have scope for growth and be able to give its employees a feeling that it is getting somewhere. It should constitute/provide an aggressively profit-oriented atmosphere, display entrepreneurship, be enterprising in its business methods and have punch in its operations. It should have a steady, consistent and clear policy.

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One's department should be successful, it should have a clear objective known to its members, it should be close to the centre of operations rather than (merely) providing a service. Its function should be appreciated within the rest of the organization. Members of the department should work as a team.

In its internal administrative arrangements the organization should provide staff with opportunities to identify with it, should constitute a democratic (non-authoritarian) environment, and should allow a degree of informality alongside its prescribed procedures. But the management should not worship a god of impersonal efficiency or intrude into one's private life.

One's senior colleagues should guide one in relation to aims and methods, recognize one's abilities and be in free communication with one. One wanted to be taken into the confidence of seniors, to have the opportunity to explain oneself to them. One wanted seniors to care about one's opinions and to carry weight with them. As far as colleagues at the same level were concerned, one wanted pleasantness, friendliness, dependability, candour and congeniality. One wanted to count with colleagues. One wanted to work with colleagues in such a way that one could act without unnecessary checking and without having to inform or consult everyone; at the same time one wanted to be consulted where one had expertise and to have direct contact with those concerned with the same job. Colleagues should not pirate one's ideas. One wanted to be able to differentiate oneself from colleagues and to have that differential contribution recognized. One disliked losing colleagues as this cast doubt on the worthwhileness of the job and of the employing organization. As for juniors, one wanted younger people around, but these should be people who thought about the job and did not work only for the money.

In its personnel practices, the employing organization should provide an initial placement that was appropriate to one's intellectual/technical training and was not an anti-climax. It should use one's resources fully, challenge one, stretch one mentally. One should have an opportunity to take responsibility for work that contributed significantly to the purposes of the organization; this would help one to feel wanted and useful. One should be able to feel that by one's own individual efforts one was re-investing in one's own and the company's future.

One should be given the opportunity to influence the way things were done by the organization and to make a mark. One wanted to be placed close to the hub of operations and know what was going on in the organization. The firm should consider one systematically for promotion and transfer, give one a chance to change one's job, watch over one's career and prevent one from being stuck. One should be consulted about one's own work and career and be allowed to state one's aspirations for record and consideration: one should on entry and subsequently be given an accurate and not over-rosy picture of one's likely prospects and promises should be honoured. Procedures should exist to help one learn one's image and systematically to review one's salary. The firm should provide security of tenure, a settled life and give appropriate

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rewards. It should not involve one in a rat race or promote on the basis of considerations apart from capacity to contribute to the work.

In the actual work one did, one should be doing a whole job, be in charge of a project, be able to see the end product of one's work, exercise one's skills in a field in which one felt and was recognized to be an expert. One's work should be effective in some way within or for the company. One should have enough time to do a job to a level that met one's standards. One should be able to have one's contribution identified. One should have changes of work that open up new realms of thought and experience. The job should keep one busy within one's capacity, challenge one's ingenuity, be involving. One should be able to work out solutions with colleagues and then be able to negotiate those solutions with the other colleagues concerned. One disliked anything that prevented one from doing a properly professional job, interruptions, blocks in communications, administrative delays, being prevented from doing what one felt to be necessary for 'political' reasons or because it impinged on someone else's sphere of interest.

I was struck by the amount of reward, satisfaction and concern for themselves the men seemed to want from their job. They seemed to me (and this is a personal judgment) to be placing more in the way of expectation on their employing organization and seniors than these could reasonably be expected to bear. The picture of the ideal employing organization is so idealistic as to be quite unrealistic. Perhaps only a child in arms receives the amount of care, attention and personal solicitude described. Apparently our current set of social arrangements and our personal mechanisms incline us toward unrealistic expectations of our employers and superiors.

One possible interpretation of this set of attitudes and desires that occurred to me was that by early middle age one has inevitably suffered some disappointments and set-backs in all main areas of life, including marriage, parenthood, friendships, recreations and so on, but that it creates fewer subsequent problems for oneself to represent the source of all one's disappointments as one's employing organization. This is, after all, not a single person with whom one has confrontations and recriminations. The question remained in my mind, however, of what place most men of this kind expect to be played in their overall life by their work and how they relate the gratifications and disappointments of a normal career to other aspects of their lives.

It was a surprise for the management and myself to find that such a high proportion of the men we saw felt that they were under-utilized, more than this, that their personal resources were rejected. In considering this finding one had, of course, to make some allowance for the fact that

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people who are studied often react to study by invoking a set of ‘explanations’ of their fate which serves to justify their current position, behaviour and outlook. Clearly, a man who says that he is under-utilized and that this is because his employers do not recognize or want to recognize talent is providing a superficially acceptable ‘explanation’ of why he is not more senior or more devoted to his duties. A theory of this kind constitutes an alibi of sorts for failing in some way important to oneself. Even allowing for some exaggeration from this source, however, it did seem remarkable how widespread the image was of under-use.

I was struck by the fact that the men actively wanted to be more used by ‘the organization’, i.e., by their seniors. This was in contrast with the popular picture of the industrial organization (in effect its senior management) ruthlessly treating its employees as objects and of their resenting it. These men were complaining vociferously that they were not more unambiguously organizational resources. This seemed puzzling. But we had some clues in incidental references they had made to the tolerance by the organization of ‘dead wood’, that is of persons who were really casualties whom the senior management was carrying only out of a sense of moral obligation. Clearly there was something repugnant in the possibility that in this busy firm one had one’s place not because one was useful and one’s contribution was important but because one was tolerated or kept more or less out of pity. This raised the fundamental question of what part his work and his interpersonal relations at work play in the outlook of the middle-aged man.

The repeated mention of under-use and the frequent emphasis on wanting to be considered for promotion raised the further question of why advancement was so important to these men. The money involved was apparently only part of the explanation, for the sorts of promotions they were desiring were not of an order that could make radical changes in their present standards of living. It seemed that other factors were at work, that their occupational roles and the meanings of those roles and the associated tasks and functions were such that personal advancement through the organizational hierarchy was important.

Another feature of the findings was the emphasis on disappointed expectations. Examining the results, the possibility occurred to the management and myself that at the stage of initial recruitment the employing organization, which was after all in competition with other searchers for talent, might tend to over-emphasize opportunities within the organization. Very possibly the new recruit would come more than half-way in this—in justifying his choice to himself and others he would