

What is Organizational Behavior?

OB links research and action to enhance individual, work group, and organizational performance in achieving some public good or benefit.

The Robbins model of OB

S. P. Robbins has been among the most influential writers on OB from a business perspective. He defines OB as “a field of study that investigates the impact of individuals, groups, and structure have on behavior within organizations for the purpose of applying such knowledge toward improving an organization’s effectiveness” (2001, p. 6). Though from a business perspective effectiveness means return on investment rather than public good or benefit, Robbins’s definition is certainly compatible with the definition presented by DDA. Other components of Robbins’s model of OB are also directly applicable to management in public and nonprofit organizations, which makes it useful to review what Robbins has to say (the following discussion is drawn from Robbins, pp. 19 – 22).

The purpose of OB research is to establish the predictability of human behavior in given circumstances. Robbins therefore divides his model into dependent and independent variables.

Dependent variables in OB

The dependent variables in OB are the *employee behaviors* that managers try to influence. There are five categories of these behaviors.

1. *Productivity*: The efficiency and effectiveness with which individuals, work groups, and organizations achieve their goals. *Efficiency* refers to the effort or resources required to achieve a goal, *effectiveness* to the completeness with which goals are achieved. Both are necessary when evaluating the productivity of individuals, groups, or organizations. For example, intense effort may be effective in achieving a goal in the short run, but the level of effort may also be unsustainable and thus ineffective over time. Managers must understand what factors influence the shifting balance between effectiveness and efficiency with the goal of generating sustainable productivity.
2. *Absenteeism*: Failure of individuals to report for work, primarily unscheduled or unanticipated absences. Not all such absences are “bad,” of course. Life happens: employees or members of their family become ill or unexpected events occur. Management must maintain its flexibility in responding to these. When factors in the organization or the workplace tend to increase unanticipated or unscheduled absences, however, absenteeism reduces productivity and becomes a management problem.
3. *Turnover*: The departure of workers from the organization, voluntarily or involuntarily. When employees leave, organizations must spend scarce resources to recruit, select, train, and develop replacements. Higher turnover rates therefore mean higher costs.. If replacements are *not* recruited, remaining employees will have face increased workloads, which can generate further problems (e.g., low morale, stress, reduced work quality).

Knowing why employees leave is the first step in managing turnover. Employees may leave an organization either *voluntarily* or *involuntarily*.

Voluntary departures occur when people quit to take other jobs, to retire, to relocate, to return to school, and so on. Some voluntary turnover always exists – indeed, should exist for an organization to stay fresh – and high voluntary turnover is common in some settings (e.g., those employing high numbers of younger, unskilled, seasonal, or part time employees). Still, frequent voluntary turnover should never be ignored because it usually indicates that problems exist within the organization or workplace.

Involuntary departures occur when employees are discharged for inadequate performance, for disciplinary reasons, or for organizational reasons like restructurings or workforce reductions. High rates of involuntary departures for disciplinary reasons or poor performance may signal problems in (a)

recruitment, selection, and training and (b) supervisory and managerial practices within the organization.

4. *Organizational citizenship*: Robbins defines this as “discretionary behavior . . . not part of the employee’s job requirements, but that nevertheless promotes the effective functioning of the organization” (p. 21), which may be translated as employees’ willingness to do more than meet basic expectations. Good organizational citizenship includes supportive, positive attitudes; stepping forward to accept additional responsibilities, taking leadership roles in organization activities, avoiding conflict, and so on. Some elements of organizational citizenship are difficult to measure objectively, others are not.
5. *Job satisfaction*: The extent to which employees believe their efforts are being fairly rewarded. This will reflect the level at which employees believe they *should be* rewarded or *expect to be* rewarded for their work. Rewards take many forms, varying across settings and workforces, and are not limited just to *economic rewards* like salary and benefits. *Non-economic rewards* are where employees have strong mission orientations, have received specialized professional training, and identify themselves with communities of like-minded professionals. Managers must be sensitive to the variability of the rewards sought by different members of their organizations.

There is an important difference between job satisfaction and the preceding four dependent variables: Strictly speaking, job satisfaction is an attitude; productivity, absenteeism, turnover, and organizational citizenship are behaviors.

Behaviors are much easier to observe and measure than are attitudes. This may lead managers to concentrate on behaviors, working on the assumption that if good work behaviors exist, then job satisfaction is also likely to exist. This assumption is not always justifiable. Research does indicate that job satisfaction is associated with job performance, but the further assumption that higher job satisfaction is causally related to *higher productivity* is *not* supported by the evidence. It should be noted that the relationship between job satisfaction and productivity in public and nonprofit organizations remains under-studied.

Independent variables in OB

The independent variable in OB are those factors that shape employee behaviors and attitudes (i.e., productivity, absenteeism, turnover, organizational citizenship, and job satisfaction). Many of these independent variables are outside the manager’s control, but managers must still be aware of these variables in order to anticipate their effects.

Most researchers agree that the independent variables shaping employee behaviors and attitudes are best conceptualized as a set of three layers: the individual employee, work groups or teams, the organization as a whole.

1. *Individual-level variables*

There are several categories of individual-level variables. Although some might appear given or fixed, and thus beyond the manager’s control, managers can nonetheless influence how employees respond to these individual-level variables.

Basic individual characteristics are simply part of the employee, who brings them with her/himself into the organization. The most familiar examples are demographic characteristics like age, ethnicity, formal education level, marital status, religion, and sex. Other examples are an employee’s existing personality traits, emotional patterns, values, attitudes, and basic abilities like physical dexterity and cognitive skills. As a general rule, managers must take these characteristics as given. The primary management task is then to understand how such characteristics are likely to affect an employee’s job performance.

There are other individual-level variables that may be more open to management intervention, however. This will particularly be the case when employees and managers can identify the payoffs for *both* employees and the organization. Robbins identifies four such individual-level variables: perception, individual decision-making, learning, and motivation.

- A. Perception is the process of organizing the stimuli we receive from our environment (including from other people) into meaningful patterns. There are at least three components to perception: the perceiver, setting, and the perceived (e.g., another person, an object).

As a *perceiver*, an employee brings with her/him a specific combination of abilities (e.g., eyesight, hearing, attentiveness to physical details or nuanced behaviors), attitudes, values, expectations, and past experiences. These predispose the perceiver to interpret stimuli (what people say, their body language, their appearance) in specific ways.

The *settings* in which employees find themselves affect these predispositions. Settings may be familiar or unfamiliar, for example. When an individual interprets a familiarity as congenial, different predispositions will be triggered than when the individual interprets unfamiliarity as threatening.

The *perceived* is filtered by an employee's predisposition and the setting. Behavior is thus based to a considerable extent the individual employee doing the perceiving and the setting in which it occurs, rather than on the objective characteristics of who or what is being perceived.

The filters one uses as a perceiver – that is, one's perceptual predispositions and the effects of different settings on them – are open to change. People may learn to be more attentive to nuances in others' behaviors, for example, to suspend their expectations until more information is available, or to distinguish past situations from the present one. Understanding why people perceive as they do is part of understanding why they behave as they do. It also allows the manager to help employees respond to environmental stimuli in more productive ways.

- B. Learning occurs in many different ways, varying by individual, content, and the means by which information is disseminated. Some individuals handle conceptual and abstract learning very well, others respond better to experiential learning or detailed, step by step instructions. What is effective in one context may no longer be adequate in another. To help employees reach individual and organizational goals, managers must understand something about learning generally and also about how their employees learn specifically. In contemporary organizations, it is particularly important that managers be able to help employees in learning to learn, that is, to teach the skills necessary for acquiring, evaluating, and creating information. There skills are highly correlated with increased sense of competence and higher job satisfaction among employees. Managers must also remember, however, that not all employees will be capable of all kinds of learning. According to the proverb, giving someone a fish feeds her/him for the day, but teaching someone to fish feeds her/him for life. That may be true, but not everyone is capable of learning to fish equally productively.
- C. Decision-making abilities and preferences vary considerably. Decision-making abilities are closely related to how individuals perceive and learn. This means that decision-making strategies should be consistent with how an individual does her/his best learning, adjusted for different settings and issues. Further, preferences for specific decision-making strategies reveal underlying attitudes and values (e.g., valuing some sources of advice or information over others, weighting some types of information over others). No decision-making strategy is absolutely comprehensive or best; each emphasizes some factors over others. Managers must understand this, both in themselves and in their employees.
- D. Motivation is among the most intensively studied aspects of OB. It also remains one of the most unsettled. Needless to say, individual motivations are usually quite complex. Perhaps the most useful generalization is simply that managers must understand that this complexity exists and therefore not expect their employees to all be motivated by the same incentives or to the same extent. Finding the key to an individual's motivation can be quite difficult. Whether it is worth the manager's while to do so depends on the employee's centrality to the organization, existing levels of productivity, and the productivity gains that might be achieved.

2. *Group-level variables*

A basic principle of OB research and practice is that group behavior is more than the sum of its parts. By pooling the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) of individuals, groups may elevate their collective performance above the seeming limitations of their individual members. The reverse is also possible: group behaviors may suppress collective performance below the KSAs of individual members. Managers should therefore understand the dynamics of group behavior in some detail. Issues addressed in OB research on groups include:

- the dynamics of group behavior and the implications for creation of effective work groups
- group purpose, duration, and stakeholders
- intra- and inter-group communication patterns
- leadership and leadership styles
- authority, power, and group politics
- intra- and inter-group relations (interactions)
- intra- and inter-group conflict

Each of these issues affects individual behavior within groups and the cumulative productivity of work groups. They must be addressed by managers when creating work groups.

3. *Organization-level variables*

An organization's structure (e.g., hierarchical vs. open, "tall" vs. "flat," functional vs. operational) affects the behaviors of people working in it. So, too, do processes and procedures, including the rigidity with which they must be followed. Basic human resource policies and procedures are among the most important of these (e.g., recruitment, selection, training, development, promotion). Finally, each organization tends to develop a specific culture, or more likely cultures. These have particularly important influences on individual social learning (e.g., organizational or unit cultures may undercut managers' efforts to persuade employees to conform to formal behavioral expectations). Where managers identify organizational-level variables that interfere with desired individual or group behaviors, they may wish to intervene but must understand that their abilities to change organizational-level variables can be limited.

Reference

Robbins, S. P. (2001). *Organizational behavior* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.