AVT BUSINESS SCHOOL

RADICAL PRACTICALITY · PRACTICE 09

Let Frontline Teams Design Their Own Work

Why the people doing the work should be the ones designing it

WHITE PAPER — 25TH ANNIVERSARY PROGRAM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Most Wasted Resource in Every Organization

In most organizations, the people who do the work do not design the work. Managers design the processes, set the methods, define the sequence, and choose the tools. Employees execute. This division — inherited from Frederick Taylor's scientific management over a century ago — remains the default operating model in the vast majority of companies worldwide. And it is, according to a converging body of evidence from organizational psychology, management research, and real-world practice, one of the most significant drags on performance, engagement, and innovation that organizations impose on themselves.

Hamel and Zanini's research in *Humanocracy* is unambiguous: autonomy is the single strongest predictor of engagement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment — stronger than humility, courage, authenticity, or any other leadership behavior. Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory, supported by a meta-analysis of 192 studies, confirms that autonomy is one of three basic psychological needs that drive motivation and performance. Hackman and Oldham's Job Characteristics Model, the foundational framework for work design, places autonomy at the center of what makes work meaningful.

And yet Hamel and Zanini's BMI research found that only 11% of employees report "substantial" or "complete" autonomy over their priorities, methods, and leadership. The gap between what the research prescribes and what organizations practice is vast. This white paper examines why that gap exists, what happens when it is closed, and how to start closing it this week.

CHAPTER 1

Taylor’s Ghost

In 1911, Frederick Winslow Taylor published *The Principles of Scientific Management*, arguably the most influential management text ever written. Its central argument: the design of work should be separated from its execution. Managers should study work scientifically, determine the “one best way” to perform each task, and then train workers to follow the prescribed method exactly. Workers contribute their labor. Managers contribute their brains.

Taylor’s model was enormously successful in the industrial age. For factory work that was repetitive, physical, and measurable, the separation of design from execution produced real gains in efficiency. But over a century later, the model persists in organizations where the work is neither repetitive nor physical — in knowledge work, in service work, in creative work, in leadership itself. The assumption that managers should design and employees should execute has survived the world that created it.

What Taylor Got Wrong

Taylor assumed that workers were primarily motivated by money and that they lacked the capacity to improve their own processes. Both assumptions have been thoroughly refuted. Deci and Ryan’s Self-Determination Theory, supported by decades of research and a recent meta-analysis of 192 studies across workplace settings, has established that human motivation rests on three basic psychological needs: autonomy (the need to feel volitional and self-directing), competence (the need to feel capable and effective), and relatedness (the need to feel connected to others). When these needs are satisfied, people are more motivated, more creative, more persistent, and more productive. When they are frustrated — as they are in Taylorist work design — motivation degrades, engagement collapses, and talent exits.

Hackman and Oldham’s Job Characteristics Model (1976), the foundational framework in work design research, identifies autonomy as one of five core job characteristics that determine the meaningfulness of work and the motivation of the worker. Meta-analytic evidence consistently shows that autonomy is the strongest predictor of job satisfaction, internal work motivation, and organizational commitment. It is not one factor among many. It is the factor.

> *Hamel and Zanini: “Individually, or in small teams, we are daring, resilient, creative, and energetic. But when we’re herded by the thousands into bureaucratic pens, many of those admirable qualities get trampled underfoot.”*

CHAPTER 2

The Nucor Model: What Happens When You Let Go

If you want to see what happens when frontline teams design their own work, look at Nucor Corporation — America's largest steelmaker, one of the most consistently profitable companies in one of the most brutal industries on earth, and one of the most radical experiments in self-management ever conducted at scale.

The Numbers

Nucor employs approximately 31,600 people and generates over $35 billion in annual revenue. It operates as a super-flat, decentralized organization with just four layers of management: the CEO, a small executive team, plant general managers, and the frontline. There are no corporate offices to speak of — until recently, the entire headquarters staff numbered fewer than 100. Each division operates as an independent business with its own P&L, its own procurement, its own staffing, and its own product decisions.

How Frontline Teams Work

Nucor's frontline steel workers design their own processes, choose their own methods, and organize their own work. They are not following a script handed down by industrial engineers. They are continuously inventing and refining the way steel gets made. When a team finds a better method, they implement it — without asking permission.

The compensation system reinforces this autonomy. Workers receive a relatively modest base wage — below industry average. On top of that, they receive team-based bonuses tied directly to the tons of steel their team produces above a threshold. These bonuses can double or triple total compensation. In some years, frontline Nucor workers have earned $170,000 to $200,000, making them among the highest-paid manufacturing workers in the world.

> *Nucor achieves a paradox that most organizations consider impossible: the lowest per-ton labor cost in the industry combined with the highest-paid steel workforce in the world.*

The Accountability System

Autonomy at Nucor is paired with fierce accountability. Because bonuses are team-based, every member of a team has a direct financial stake in every other member's performance. Social loafing is not tolerated — not by managers, but by peers. Doug Kirkpatrick, documenting Nucor's self-management practices, notes that workers have literally chased underperforming colleagues off the work site. When a colleague underperforms, it is a direct personal financial hit to everyone else.

Nucor does not allow temporary fill-ins; when someone is absent, the remaining team members absorb the work. This creates powerful social pressure to show up, contribute, and continuously improve. The accountability is horizontal, not vertical — it flows between peers, not from managers to reports.

What Hamel and Zanini See

In *Humanocracy*, Hamel and Zanini hold up Nucor as a definitive proof that frontline autonomy does not produce chaos — it produces excellence. The company's results are not despite its flat structure and frontline empowerment. They are because of it. When the people doing the work are also the people designing, improving, and owning it, the quality of the work improves — continuously, from the bottom up, without a management directive.

CHAPTER 3

The Science of Autonomy

Nucor is a compelling case study. But the scientific evidence behind frontline autonomy is even more persuasive, because it is not a single company — it is hundreds of studies across dozens of industries and cultures.

Self-Determination Theory

Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is among the most extensively validated frameworks in motivational psychology. A 2025 meta-analysis synthesizing 192 studies found that satisfaction of the three basic psychological needs — autonomy, competence, and relatedness — consistently predicted adaptive workplace outcomes including job satisfaction, work engagement, and organizational commitment. Critically, the effects were mediated by autonomous motivation: when people feel that their actions are self-chosen rather than externally imposed, they work harder, persist longer, think more creatively, and experience less burnout.

Controlled motivation — the feeling that one is acting under pressure, obligation, or external reward — was associated with burnout but not with adaptive outcomes. In other words, you can compel compliance, but you cannot compel commitment. Commitment comes from autonomy.

Hackman and Oldham's Job Characteristics Model

The Job Characteristics Model (JCM), developed by Hackman and Oldham in 1976 and refined in 1980, identifies five core job characteristics that determine the motivating potential of a job: skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and feedback. Of these five, autonomy occupies a unique position: it is the characteristic most consistently linked to experienced responsibility for outcomes — the feeling that the results of the work depend on your own effort, initiative, and decisions.

Meta-analytic evidence compiled by Humphrey, Nahrgang, and Morgeson (2007) in a comprehensive review of 259 studies confirmed that autonomy is among the strongest predictors of job satisfaction, internal work motivation, and performance. The effect is robust across industries, cultures, and job types — from factory floors to executive suites.

The Whittington Meta-Analysis

Whittington and colleagues, in a meta-analysis of 319 studies and 151,134 participants, tested the theoretical mechanisms through which job autonomy influences performance. Their finding: autonomy leads to better job performance primarily by enhancing intrinsic work motivation and reducing role ambiguity and mental strain. The path from autonomy to performance runs through meaning — when people control how they work, the work itself becomes more meaningful, and meaningful work produces better outcomes.

CHAPTER 4

Why Managers Hold On

If autonomy produces better outcomes, why do managers resist it? The barriers are psychological, structural, and self-reinforcing.

The Control Illusion

Managers believe that controlling the process controls the outcome. This is true for simple, repetitive tasks with a narrow range of acceptable methods. It is false for complex, variable, or creative work — which describes most work in modern organizations. For complex work, the person closest to the task has better information about what will work than the person supervising from above. Control does not improve the outcome. It degrades it by replacing local knowledge with distant judgment.

The Identity Threat

For many managers, designing work is what it means to be a manager. If frontline teams design their own work, what is the manager for? This is not a trivial question. It touches on professional identity, status, and career definition. The honest answer is that the manager's role shifts from designing and directing to enabling and developing — a transition that servant leadership researchers like van Dierendonck and Nuijten have documented as both more effective and more difficult. It requires managers to derive satisfaction from their team's capability rather than from their own authority.

The Risk Asymmetry

If a manager designs a process and it fails, the failure is expected — managers are allowed to make mistakes. If a frontline team designs a process and it fails, the failure is seen as evidence that they should not have been given the autonomy in the first place. This asymmetry means that the rational strategy for any manager is to retain control: the risks of delegation are personal and visible, while the benefits are diffuse and slow to materialize.

The Bureaucratic Self-Interest

Hamel and Zanini are frank about this: bureaucracy persists because it serves the interests of bureaucrats. Every manager whose authority depends on being a bottleneck has a structural incentive to remain one. Every staff function whose headcount depends on the complexity of the processes it administers has a structural incentive to maintain that complexity. The hierarchy is not a neutral framework. It is a system of interests — and those interests resist redistribution.

CHAPTER 5

Beyond Nucor: Where Else This Works

— **Toyota Production System:** Toyota's legendary quality and efficiency rest on a principle that is, at its core, about frontline work design: any worker on the production line can pull the andon cord to stop the entire line when they see a problem. The frontline worker has the authority to halt production — an act that would be unthinkable in a Taylorist factory. Toyota workers also continuously redesign their own processes through kaizen (continuous improvement) circles, submitting millions of improvement suggestions per year.

— **Buurtzorg:** 10,000 nurses in the Netherlands self-manage in teams of 10–12, designing their own schedules, patient care approaches, and administrative processes. There are no middle managers. The result: higher patient satisfaction, shorter care episodes, and lower costs than traditional home care providers.

— **W.L. Gore:** The maker of Gore-Tex operates without traditional job titles or job descriptions. Associates choose their own projects, define their own roles, and are evaluated by peers rather than managers. The company has been on Fortune's "100 Best Companies to Work For" list for over two decades consecutively.

— **FAVI:** A French automotive supplier that produces gearbox forks for major car manufacturers. CEO Jean-François Zobrist eliminated the planning department, the HR department, and most management positions in the early 1990s. Frontline operators now manage their own production schedules, customer relationships, and quality control. The company has not lost a customer in over 25 years.

The pattern is consistent across industries, countries, and workforce types: when frontline teams are given genuine authority over how they work, performance improves. The improvement is not marginal. It is structural.

CHAPTER 6

A Practical Guide to Starting

Week 1: Ask the Question

Choose one frontline team. Ask them a single question: "If you could redesign how you do your work — the process, the sequence, the tools — what would you change?" Ask each person to write their answer independently before sharing. Collect the responses. Do not evaluate them yet — just listen.

Week 2: Give Permission for One Change

From the team's suggestions, identify the one that is most feasible and most likely to produce a visible improvement. Give the team explicit permission to try it for 30 days. Be specific about the boundaries: what they can change and what they cannot. Make the experiment visible — not to surveil it, but to learn from it.

Month 1: Observe and Support

Resist the temptation to intervene. The team will make adjustments, encounter problems, and iterate. This is the process working, not the process failing. Your role is to remove obstacles, not to redesign the redesign. Ask: "What do you need from me to make this work?" — not "What have you changed and why?"

Month 2: Expand the Scope

If the first experiment produced results, expand. Give the team authority over a second process. Or extend the practice to a second team. The key is to build evidence that frontline autonomy produces better outcomes — evidence that makes the next expansion easier to justify.

Month 3: Pair Autonomy with Accountability

Autonomy without accountability is license. Nucor pairs autonomy with team-based gainsharing. Toyota pairs it with visible performance metrics. The mechanism matters less than the principle: the team owns both the process and the results. If they design a better way and it works, they should feel the benefit. If it doesn't, they own the learning.

CHAPTER 7

The AVT Challenge

Letting frontline teams design their own work is Radical Practicality at its most structurally transformative. It does not require a reorganization, a consultant, or a technology platform. It requires one thing: the willingness to ask the people doing the work how it should be done — and then to trust their answer.

The evidence is not ambiguous. Three meta-analyses, fifty years of job design research, and case studies from Nucor to Buurtzorg to Toyota all point in the same direction: autonomy drives performance, engagement, and innovation more powerfully than any other single factor. The orthodoxy it challenges — that managers should design the work and employees should execute it — is Taylor's ghost, a relic of the industrial age that persists in the knowledge economy because nobody has questioned it loudly enough.

Our challenge to every AVT member:

1. Choose one frontline team. Ask: "If you could redesign how you do your work, what would you change?"
2. Give them permission to try their top suggestion for 30 days. Define the boundaries, then step back.
3. Resist the temptation to intervene. Support instead of supervise.
4. After 30 days, assess: was the outcome better or worse? Was the team more engaged? What did they learn?
5. Share one observation with the AVT community.

Nucor built the most profitable steel company in America on this principle. Toyota built the most admired manufacturing system in the world. Buurtzorg built a healthcare provider with 10,000 nurses and no middle managers. You can start with one team, one process, one question. The question is simple. The answer will surprise you.

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This white paper is part of AVT's 25th Anniversary Program: 25 Practices Nobody Uses (But Should). Letting frontline teams design their own work is Practice 09 because it addresses the deepest structural legacy of industrial-age management: the assumption that the people closest to the work are the least qualified to improve it. They are not. They are the most qualified. And the evidence has been telling us this for fifty years.