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A Comparative Study of Employees' Work Motivation and Perception of Occupational Change in Hierarchical and Flat Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigates the differences in employee work motivation and attitudes toward organizational change between hierarchical and flat organizational structures. It aims to identify structural factors influencing motivation and adaptability in dynamic workplace environments.

Methods: Using a cross-sectional, causal-comparative design, 178 full-time employees (91 in hierarchical and 87 in flat organizations) were surveyed. Instruments included Herzberg's Two-Factor Job Motivation Questionnaire and Dunham's Attitude Toward Change Questionnaire. Non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis) were applied due to data non-normality. Demographic moderators such as gender, education, and work experience were also analyzed.

Findings: Employees in hierarchical organizations reported significantly higher levels of both work motivation ($M = 101.42$ vs. 77.03) and attitude toward change ($M = 103.91$ vs. 74.43) compared to those in flat organizations. Motivation factors such as job security, recognition, supervision, and job responsibility were significantly more influential in hierarchical settings. Salary, career advancement, and interpersonal relationships did not significantly differ between structures. Education level significantly affected motivation and change perception, while gender and work experience did not.

Conclusion: Hierarchical organizations may foster greater employee motivation and adaptability to change due to structural clarity, supervision, and formal recognition. However, rigid hierarchies may reduce flexibility and innovation. Organizations are encouraged to adopt hybrid structures that balance clear role definition with adaptability and empowerment. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts and industry-specific dynamics.

Keywords: Organizational structure, Hierarchical organization, Flat organization, Work motivation.

Introduction

Organizational change is an inevitable process that affects all companies (Singh & Tiwari, 2011). The nature of changes in an organization can range from superficial to complex, depending on the elements being modified. These may include objectives, leadership, communication, rewards, support methods, or organizational structure (MOHAMMADPOUR et al., 2017). Various studies have shown a significant relationship between different aspects of change and job success (MOHAMMADPOUR et al., 2017; Rahman Seresht & Moghaddam, 2007). Additionally, research indicates that change can enhance organizational performance and competitiveness (Rebeka & Indradevi, 2015). Organizations that fail to adapt and improve their conditions struggle to survive in competitive environments. Therefore, change is crucial for sustaining and ensuring long-term success (Al-Haddad & Kotnour, 2015).

Studying employees' attitudes toward workplace change is essential, as it is a key factor influencing job success and organizational performance (Karácsony et al., 2023). In a competitive business landscape, companies that effectively implement strategic responses to evolving conditions are more likely to achieve higher efficiency and profitability (Belas et al., 2020; Georgalis et al., 2015; Sackmann et al., 2009). Achieving this requires selecting an organizational structure that aligns with the company's needs and facilitates an effective change management strategy. Organizations with different structures can adopt various strategies to implement change effectively (Georgalis et al., 2015). Furthermore, for organizational changes to lead to meaningful improvements, employees must be motivated to support and implement them. Employees are the key agents executing these transformations, and their attitude toward change (Fugate et al., 2012) and level of job motivation are critical to success. Many studies have shown that employees' resistance or lack of motivation hinders reforms and change initiatives (Beer & Nohria, 2000; Bovey & Hede, 2001). Therefore, an important question arises: which type of organization can better encourage employees to accept and adapt to change?

(Jeffrey, 2025) reviewed the relationship between motivation and organizational structure, concluding that employee morale is influenced by the

organization's framework. He found that an organization's structure can have both positive and negative effects on employees. Negative effects include a lack of motivation, inefficient delegation of work, low performance, dissatisfaction, and decreased effectiveness. On the other hand, positive effects include timely work completion, strong policies, high performance, job satisfaction, and improved efficiency. Given the significant role of organizational structure in employee motivation, change acceptance, and implementation, this study aims to examine employees' job motivation and attitudes toward change in hierarchical and flat organizational structures. Organizational structures are generally categorized into three types: simple (flat), hierarchical, and matrix (Harris & Raviv, 2002). Since matrix structures are less common, this study focuses on attitudes toward change and job motivation in the first two types. Organizations with a flat structure, due to their minimal hierarchy, operate with limited complexity. Employees in these organizations typically work as teammates, sharing responsibilities in a collaborative manner. In such organizations, employees receive guidance from a single manager. The absence of formal protocols allows for a more flexible, leader-oriented organizational framework where coordination and direct supervision replace rigid managerial directives (Ahmady et al., 2016).

Findings from (Reza Hamidizadeh & Asl, 2019) indicate that circular structures, a variation of flat organizations, have fewer management layers and smaller senior leadership teams. While this structure can eliminate some of the constraints of hierarchical models, it may also slow decision-making and implementation processes. Additionally, flat structures reduce the high administrative costs associated with interdepartmental relationships and traditional hierarchical systems, allowing organizations to allocate more resources to customer service and internal efficiency. Given these characteristics, it is hypothesized that flat organizations foster greater flexibility toward change compared to hierarchical structures. Conversely, a hierarchical organizational structure consists of multiple employee layers, with a central decision-maker at the top (Harris & Raviv, 2002) (Jeffrey, 2025). Studies on hierarchical organizations suggest that they may enhance problem-solving speed due to

centralized decision-making, though this may sometimes come at the expense of quality (Mihm et al., 2010). Regardless of their structure, all organizations aim to achieve progress and fulfill their objectives. Hierarchical and flat organizations differ in how they distribute tasks, define roles, and establish work procedures to align employee performance with strategic goals.

Job motivation plays a crucial role in job satisfaction, career progression, and organizational success (Jana et al., 2025; Mnyani, 2022; Nasution et al., 2021; Singh & Tiwari, 2011). Unlike skills or competencies, motivation pertains to the internal and external factors that drive individuals to take action and perform at their best (Riyanto et al., 2021). It is this intrinsic drive that explains why some individuals excel in their roles while others struggle (Dal Forno & Merlone, 2010). Given the differences in governance styles between hierarchical and flat organizations, job motivation levels among employees may vary accordingly. Research by (Friesen et al., 2014) suggests that hierarchical organizations may provide stronger motivation for some employees due to their structured frameworks. This study, which surveyed 73 participants using a Likert-scale questionnaire, found that hierarchical organizations, through clearly defined structures, fostered better performance and employee motivation. Additionally, individuals who lack strong self-regulation skills tend to feel more effective and motivated within hierarchical systems.

Due to the distinct working conditions in hierarchical and flat organizations—including differences in job nature, career advancement, and professional development—job motivation levels are expected to differ between the two. This study proposes the following key hypotheses: Employees in flat organizations exhibit a more positive and flexible attitude toward change compared to those in hierarchical organizations. Employees in hierarchical organizations demonstrate higher job motivation due to structured frameworks, financial incentives, and clearer career paths. Job motivation levels in hierarchical and flat organizations differ significantly based on financial compensation, competition, and professional development opportunities.

Methods and Materials

Research Design

This study employs a comparative cross-sectional design to examine differences in work motivation and attitudes toward change among employees in hierarchical and flat organizations. A causal-comparative approach was initially suggested; however, since no experimental manipulation or control over variables was implemented, this study does not establish causality. Instead, it identifies associations and differences between the two organizational structures.

Potential confounding factors such as organizational size, industry type, and company culture were not explicitly controlled, which may influence both work motivation and attitude toward change. However, demographic variables such as gender, education level, and work experience were analyzed to assess their impact.

Participants and Sampling

The study's population consisted of employees working in organizations with either hierarchical or flat structures. A convenience sampling method was used due to accessibility constraints, which may introduce selection bias. To mitigate this issue, efforts were made to include employees from diverse sectors to enhance generalizability. A total of 178 participants were surveyed, including 91 employees from hierarchical organizations and 87 from flat organizations. The inclusion criteria required that participants: Be full-time employees in either a hierarchical or flat organization. Have at least one year of work experience in their respective organizations to ensure familiarity with their workplace structure. Work in professional roles that involve organizational decision-making or operational responsibilities.

The exclusion criteria ruled out: Part-time or temporary workers, as they may not be fully integrated into the organizational culture. Employees from matrix organizations, as the study focused solely on comparing hierarchical and flat structures. A power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1, which determined that a minimum sample of 176 participants (88 per group) was required to achieve an effect size of 0.5 with a

power of 0.80. This confirms that the sample size was adequate for statistical analysis.

Instruments

Herzberg's Work Motivation Questionnaire: Work motivation was assessed using Herzberg's Two-Factor Job Motivation Questionnaire, which includes intrinsic and extrinsic motivation factors. The questionnaire consists of 10 subscales, covering aspects such as: Intrinsic Factors: Growth & career advancement, recognition, job responsibility, job position, and job nature. Extrinsic Factors: Working conditions, salary, supervision, job security, and interpersonal relationships. The reliability of the questionnaire was tested using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a coefficient of 0.81, indicating high internal consistency. Previous studies have validated this instrument for measuring employee motivation across different organizational settings.

Dunham's Attitude Toward Change Questionnaire (AOCQ): Employees' attitudes toward change were measured using the Dunham Attitude Toward Change Questionnaire (AOCQ), which evaluates three dimensions: Affective Attitude (emotional response to change), Cognitive Attitude (beliefs about change) and Behavioral Attitude (tendency to engage in or resist change). This questionnaire consists of 18 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The reliability test for this study produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.89, confirming strong internal consistency. Before distribution, a pilot study was conducted with 40 employees from a separate organizational sample to ensure the clarity of the questionnaire items. No major modifications were required.

Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected using an anonymous, self-administered survey distributed electronically via email and organizational communication platforms. The survey was available for two weeks, and participants were reminded twice to encourage participation. To reduce social desirability bias, respondents were informed that: Their responses would be kept confidential and used only for research purposes. No identifying information would be collected. The survey was not affiliated with their employers, ensuring that

answers would not impact their job status. A total of 210 surveys were distributed, and 178 completed responses were collected, resulting in a response rate of 84.8%. Incomplete surveys were excluded from the analysis.

Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS 26. The analysis followed these steps: The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test and Shapiro-Wilk test were conducted to assess normality of work motivation and attitude toward change scores. Results indicated non-normal distribution, necessitating the use of non-parametric tests. Levene's test for equality of variances was also applied, and heterogeneity was detected in some subscales, confirming the need for non-parametric statistical methods. To compare work motivation and attitude toward change between hierarchical and flat organizations, the Mann-Whitney U test was used instead of the independent t-test due to non-normal distribution. For subgroup analyses (e.g., effect of job role, gender, education level), the Kruskal-Wallis test was employed. Since p-values alone do not indicate practical significance, effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d and eta-squared (η^2) for Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests, respectively.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed ethical research guidelines and obtained approval from the Ethics Committee of Central Tehran Branch, Islamic Azad University. All participants provided informed consent before participating. Voluntary participation: Employees were not obligated to participate and could withdraw at any time. Responses were anonymous, and no personal identifiers were collected. Survey data was securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

Findings and Results

A total of 178 questionnaires were collected, with 91 employees working in hierarchical organizations and 87 employees working in flat organizations. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov normality test confirmed the normal distribution of the job motivation and attitude toward change questionnaire data for both hierarchical and flat

structures, with significance values of 0.1 and 0.2, respectively.

Table 1

Mean and standard deviation of research variables

Variable	Group	N	M	SD
Work Motivation (total)	Hierarchical	91	101.42	10.12
	Flat	87	77.03	9.83
Attitude Toward Change (total)	Hierarchical	91	103.91	9.94
	Flat	87	74.43	9.76

However, Levene's test for the equality of variance assumption was violated (Sig < 0.001, Sig = 0.017), meaning that parametric tests such as the T-test and

Table 2

Levene's test for the equality of variance assumption

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	F	Sig.
Change (Equal variances assumed)	5.811	0.017
Motivation (Equal variances assumed)	39.042	1.00

Initially, to examine whether there was a significant difference between job motivation and attitude toward change in employees of hierarchical and flat organizations, the Mann-Whitney U test was used. This non-parametric test, equivalent to the independent T-test, is applied when the researcher aims to determine whether there is a significant difference between two independent groups in terms of the grouping variable. In this study, the independent groups were hierarchical and flat organizations, while the dependent variables were job motivation and attitude toward change in employees.

The Mann-Whitney U test results showed that there was a significant difference in job motivation and attitude toward change between employees in

Table 3

The Mann-Whitney U test results

Variable	Mann-Whitney U	Wilcoxon W	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Motivation	2874.000	6702.000	-3.156	0.002
Change	2647.000	6475.000	-3.816	0.001

Additionally, Kruskal-Wallis non-parametric analysis, used instead of one-way ANOVA to determine the significance of each job motivation factor in hierarchical and flat organizations, showed that there was a significant difference between hierarchical and flat organizations in the following job motivation factors: Work environment policy (P=0.015), Job security (P<0.001), Supervision (P=0.045), Recognition and

ANOVA could not be used. Instead, equivalent non-parametric tests were applied.

hierarchical and flat organizations (Sig < 0.001, Sig = 0.002). In other words: The mean job motivation score of employees in hierarchical organizations (according to Herzberg's theory) was 101.42, indicating a moderate level, while in flat organizations, the mean score was 77.03, indicating a low level. Employees in hierarchical organizations also showed greater flexibility toward change (Mean: 103.91) compared to those in flat organizations (Mean: 74.43). However, according to Dunham's theory, the maximum possible score for a positive attitude toward change is 160, meaning that both organizational structures still fall significantly short of achieving maximum flexibility toward change.

appreciation (P=0.002), Job nature (P<0.001), Job responsibility (P<0.001).

The mean job motivation score for employees in hierarchical organizations was higher across all these factors compared to those in flat organizations, suggesting that these factors are more prominent and effective in hierarchical structures. However, no significant difference was found between hierarchical and flat organizations regarding: Salary and wages

($P=0.187$), Employee relationships ($P=0.118$), Work environment conditions ($P=0.196$), Career advancement opportunities ($P=0.533$), Job position ($P=0.888$).

Table 4

Kruskal-Wallis Test Results for Gender and Work Experience Effects on Work Motivation and Attitude Toward Change

Factor	P-Value
Work Environment Policy	0.015
Job Security	< 0.001
Supervision	0.045
Recognition & Appreciation	0.002
Job Nature	< 0.001
Job Responsibility	< 0.001
Salary & Wages	0.187
Employee Relationships	0.118
Work Environment Conditions	0.196
Career Advancement	0.533
Job Position	0.888

Furthermore, the findings of this study, which demonstrated that employees in hierarchical organizations were more flexible toward change compared to those in flat organizations, also confirmed

that the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes toward change significantly differed between these two types of organizations ($P=0.001$).

Table 5

Kruskal-Wallis Test Results for Education Level Effects on Work Motivation and Attitude Toward Change

Attitude Type	Kruskal-Wallis H	df	Asymp. Sig.
Affective Attitude	7.838	1	0.005
Cognitive Attitude	17.856	1	< 0.001
Behavioral Attitude	13.206	1	< 0.001

Finally, gender, work experience, and education level were tested as moderating variables to determine whether these factors influenced job motivation and attitude toward change. No significant difference was found between men and women in terms of job motivation and attitude toward change in hierarchical and flat organizations ($\text{Sig} = 0.407$, $\text{Sig} = 0.847$). No significant difference was found in job motivation and

attitude toward change between employees with long work experience and new employees ($\text{Sig} = 0.629$, $\text{Sig} = 0.080$). A significant difference was observed in both job motivation and attitude toward change based on education level ($\text{Sig} = 0.011$, $\text{Sig} = 0.023$), indicating that higher education levels positively affect both job motivation and adaptability toward change.

Table 6

Summary of Key Findings and Effect Sizes

Variable	Organizational Type	Mean	Std. Dev.	Mann-Whitney U	p-value	Effect Size (r)
Work Motivation	Hierarchical	101.42	10.12	7666.0	1.98e-27	0.968
	Flat	77.03	9.83			
Attitude Toward Change	Hierarchical	103.91	9.94	7792.0	3.43e-29	0.984
	Flat	74.43	9.76			

This study's findings indicate that hierarchical organizations foster higher job motivation and greater flexibility toward change compared to flat organizations. Furthermore, employees in hierarchical organizations scored higher on job motivation indicators, particularly

recognition, job security, supervision, and job responsibility. However, salary, employee relationships, and career advancement did not significantly differ between the two organizational structures. Education level played a key role in both job motivation and

adaptability to change, whereas gender and work experience had no significant impact on these factors.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined differences in work motivation and attitude toward change between employees in hierarchical and flat organizational structures. The findings revealed significant differences between the two groups, with employees in hierarchical organizations reporting higher motivation and greater adaptability to change compared to those in flat organizations. The results indicate that employees in hierarchical organizations exhibit higher levels of motivation and greater adaptability to change than those in flat organizations. These findings suggest that structured environments with clear roles, responsibilities, and career progression pathways may enhance employee motivation and willingness to embrace change. One possible explanation for this trend is that hierarchical organizations offer greater clarity in job roles and promotional opportunities, which aligns with Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory of Motivation (Herzberg, 1966).

According to this theory, intrinsic factors such as recognition, career advancement, and responsibility contribute to higher motivation. In contrast, flat organizations, which emphasize flexibility and teamwork, may lack formal recognition structures, making it harder for employees to see clear career progression. Interestingly, the findings showed that salary and financial incentives were not significant predictors of motivation, contradicting some previous studies (Besharati, 2022; Tan & Waheed, 2011). This suggests that while financial incentives remain important, they may not be the primary factor driving motivation in structured workplaces. Instead, factors such as job security, recognition, and clear performance expectations appear to have a stronger impact on motivation levels.

Similarly, attitude toward change was significantly higher in hierarchical organizations, which may be explained by the structured change management processes typically found in such environments. Employees in hierarchical settings may feel more supported during organizational transitions due to clear leadership, structured communication, and defined roles in change initiatives (Fugate et al., 2012). Conversely, in

flat organizations, employees may experience uncertainty regarding who is responsible for decision-making, leading to resistance toward change. However, while hierarchical organizations may promote higher motivation and adaptability to change, they may also lead to rigidity, bureaucracy, and reduced creativity if not managed effectively. Therefore, balancing structure with flexibility is crucial for maximizing both motivation and innovation.

The results of this study align with previous research showing that hierarchical organizations often provide a more structured work environment that fosters motivation (Friesen et al., 2014). Friesen's study found that hierarchical structures, through formalized rules and clear expectations, enhance job engagement and satisfaction. However, the finding that salary was not a significant factor in motivation contrasts with previous studies that emphasized financial rewards as a key driver of motivation (Besharati, 2022) (Tan & Waheed, 2011) (Jeffrey, 2025). This suggests that intrinsic motivators (e.g., career growth, recognition, job security) may play a more dominant role in structured workplaces, whereas extrinsic motivators (e.g., salary) may have a greater influence in less structured environments. Additionally, previous research by (Mihm et al., 2010) suggested that hierarchical organizations improve decision-making speed but may reduce decision-making quality. This raises an important consideration: while hierarchy enhances motivation and adaptability, organizations must ensure that decision-making efficiency does not compromise creativity or employee autonomy.

The findings of this study have important implications for organizational leaders, HR professionals, and managers who seek to improve employee motivation and adaptability to change. While hierarchical structures provide clear career paths and job stability, they should avoid excessive bureaucracy that can stifle innovation. HR departments should ensure that employees are recognized for their contributions and have opportunities for skill development and leadership roles. Change management strategies should focus on transparent communication and employee involvement to further improve adaptability.

To enhance motivation, flat organizations should establish clearer career progression paths, even in less formalized structures. Implementing recognition programs and mentorship opportunities can help

compensate for the lack of hierarchy. During organizational changes, leadership should ensure that decision-making responsibilities are clearly defined to reduce uncertainty. Organizations should consider hybrid structures that combine the benefits of hierarchy (e.g., clarity, stability, recognition) with the flexibility of flat organizations (e.g., collaboration, autonomy, innovation). Companies undergoing change should implement structured yet adaptable frameworks to help employees transition smoothly.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged: The study relied on a convenience sample, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research should use random or stratified sampling to ensure broader representation. The study relied on self-reported measures, which may introduce social desirability bias (i.e., employees may overstate their motivation or adaptability to change). Future research should incorporate managerial assessments or behavioral observations for validation. Different industries have different workplace cultures that may influence motivation and adaptability. Future studies should examine whether findings vary across industries (e.g., technology vs. healthcare vs. manufacturing).

The study used a cross-sectional design, meaning it only captured a snapshot in time. Longitudinal research is needed to examine how motivation and change adaptability evolve over time. To address these

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. Ethical considerations in this study were that participation was entirely optional.

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limitations, future research should: Investigate how motivation and adaptability change over time, especially during organizational transformations. Explore how leadership style interacts with organizational structure to impact motivation and change adaptability. Compare results across various industries to determine whether hierarchical structures are more effective in specific fields. Combine self-reported surveys with objective performance metrics, manager evaluations, or workplace observations to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

This study provides strong evidence that hierarchical organizations foster higher work motivation and adaptability to change compared to flat organizations. However, motivation in hierarchical structures appears to be driven more by intrinsic factors (e.g., recognition, job security, career advancement) rather than extrinsic ones like salary. While hierarchical organizations provide structured environments that support motivation and change readiness, excessive rigidity can be a drawback. Therefore, organizations should strive for a balance between structure and flexibility to optimize both motivation and innovation. Future research should explore how leadership, industry context, and organizational culture interact with structure to shape employee motivation. By understanding these factors, organizations can design better workplace environments that enhance both employee well-being and business performance.

Transparency of Data

By the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contribute to this study.

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