

TheTrophicLink

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About fairness in the workplace

Following a discussion with a colleague about fairness in the workplace, I gave myself two hours to research it. [This article](#) proved to be a great starting point: *Fairness at work: its impacts on employee well-being*, by Fujishiro, Kaori, 2005.

What is fairness in the workplace (also known as organisational justice)?

Distributive fairness (justice): individuals assess their contribution:reward ratio, and compare this with their assessment of colleague's ratio. This seems to be deservedness based fairness, rather than sameness (everyone receives the same reward, regardless of contribution), or need (reward is based on need rather than contribution) based fairness. High distributive fairness might be thought of as a meritocracy based on equality of opportunity.

Procedural fairness: involvement in decision making processes. Enhances perception of fairness because individuals feel they have a chance to influence decision, and or that merely expressing one's opinion has positive effects.

Interactional justice: fairness of interactional treatment of employees in organisational procedures. E.g., fairness during a hiring or promotion process. Enhanced by truthfulness, respect, propriety of questions, and justification.

[About equality versus equity](#). Seems that in the workplace, equality is the greater influence, though measures to promote equity exist.

[Dr Angie Hobbs, on BBC Today](#): "For me, the most attractive interpretation is that each person is of equal worth and should have the opportunity – ideally, an equal opportunity – to access goods, but most of the goods themselves will be proportionally distributed, according to need in some cases and merit in others."

Fairness assessment requires perception of ones own situation relative to the perception of others. So accurate perception is required for accurate assessment of fairness. Accurate perception is likely related to effective communication (Owen's own thoughts.)

My conclusion: workplace fairness is about how fair workers perceive their environment, probably mostly based on meritocratic values.

Is fairness in the workplace important?

Two meta-analyses found that high workplace fairness predicts "high job satisfaction, high performance, low withdrawal, fewer counterproductive behaviors, high organizational commitment, and more organizational citizenship behaviours." (quote from Fujishiro, 2005, full reference to meta-analyses below).

Quotes from Fujishiro, 2005:

- "Fairness, or justice, is one of the most fundamental concerns in society."
- "A lack of perceived fairness was negatively associated with employee well-being."
- "... high workload was associated with high strain only when perceived fairness was low."
- "low levels of organizational justice may act as an occupational stressor and have detrimental effects on employee health and well-being"
- "A large-scale longitudinal study conducted in Finland has found that a lack of organizational justice is associated with subsequent self-rated health status decline (Elovainio, Kivimaki, & Vahtera, 2002),

absence due to sickness (Kivimaki et al., 2002), and psychiatric disorders (Kivimaki, Elovainio, Virtanen, & Stansfeld, 2003).”

The ease with which I found very convincing evidence for positive effects of fairness in the workplace made me conclude that fairness in the workplace is an important issue, both from the perspective of individual and organisation success.

Objections to fairness

Might there be studies / theories / ideas about why unfairness might be desirable? Or why concerning oneself with fairness in the workplace may be pointless or unprofitable. Here is what I came up with in the little time I allowed to research and think about this.

The world isn't fair. I.e., reality isn't fair. There is no such thing as a fair system. I.e., its broken and always will be.

There may be higher priority issues in the workplace.

Expectations of absolute fairness may be created, or absolute fairness maybe sought, at the cost of performance. I.e., there must be a curve of diminishing returns relating gains in performance to effort spent increasing fairness.

[This was a stimulating read](#), as I disagree with lots of it. “Our idea of fairness isn't actually obtainable. It's really just a cloak for wishful thinking.”

My conclusion: one needs to think carefully if investment in increasing fairness perception is worthwhile (i.e., benefits likely to outweigh costs).

How to increase workplace fairness (should you wish to!)

[Google “how to increase workplace fairness”](#).

From [Workplace Tribes](#): “Treating people fairly is important. *Ensuring that they feel fairly treated is even more important.*“

I ran out of time, but will read more about this soon.

Stuff I found but didn't have time to read or properly think about

<http://tinybuddha.com/blog/how-to-deal-with-unfairness-and-change-the-things-you-can/>

[You did not mean it: Perceived good intentions alleviate sense of unfairness.](#)

How fairness in the work place is related to giving / taking / matching strategies, sensu [Adam Grant's Give and Take](#).

The two meta-analyses mentioned above:

[Cohen-Charash, Y., & Spector, P. E. \(2001\). The role of justice in organizations: A meta- analysis. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes*, 86\(2\), 278-321.](#)

[Colquitt, J. A., Conlon, D. E., Wesson, M. J., Porter, C. O. L. H., & Ng, K. Y. \(2001\). Justice at the millennium: A meta-analytic review of 25 years of organizational justice research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86\(3\), 425-445.](#)



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