

Human Enrichment: Can I Get A Little?

Written by William Singleton, DVM, ACLAM, Dipl.

Enrichment can be defined as the provision of novelty and complexity to a given situation or environment to make it more stimulating. It will vary depending upon species, institution, primary housing environment and available resources. Historically the concept of enrichment in the laboratory animal research community has focused primarily on nonhuman primates and the provision of novelty and complexity to their living environments, ultimately leading to more species typical behaviors. Governmental regulations also require the opportunity for exercise for canines that live in housing environments that don't allow significant levels of activity. Although regulations do not require the provision of enrichment to many of the species commonly used in laboratory animal medicine, there is a universal trend to provide enrichment to all species when possible.

Case Study: A large produce truck pulls up to the loading dock with the week's delivery of fresh produce... huge strawberries, perfectly ripe bananas, watermelons at the peak of their ripeness and the biggest mangos one could imagine. Julius, on his first day of work, was being given a tour of the animal facility. Seeing the fruit, he thought he was working in the best place ever because employees got all these great fruits. After several weeks of orientation, he was given the task of working the loading dock on a Monday morning when animals and produce were delivered to this facility. Although adequately trained in working the loading dock, he was paired with a seasoned employee. When the produce truck arrived, Julius asked his colleague where the produce went, since he had never seen any in the staff break room. He was told that it went to the primates for their enrichment. As if he could read Julius' mind, he quickly added that the fruit was not for the employees, who would be reprimanded if caught eating any. Julius, being a model employee, complied but did have the passing thought that it would be nice if the employees could get just a little.

What Do You Think?

Do you really need enrichment? If you do, what would/does human enrichment look like for you? Would just a piece of fruit do? Would something more substantial, like a bonus or a raise work better? When we talk about human enrichment, do we mean environmental enrichment like we provide to animals or simply the general enrichment of humans? A literature search on human enrichment resulted in a variety of articles ranging from recovering from trauma, understanding universal consciousness and improving a student's ability to progress successfully through school. The literature search revealed no universal definition for human enrichment. So our challenge is to define what human enrichment is for those of us working in laboratory animal environments, to make that definition relevant to the human experience, and not to extrapolate too heavily from what we have learned from the provision of enrichment to laboratory animals.

Do humans need to be enriched? More specifically, do you and I need to be enriched during our daily work experience? If we accept our initial definition of enrichment as the provision of novelty and complexities to a given situation, we can see that there are many situations that would constitute enrichment in our daily lives.



The birth of a baby, a new car, moving to a new home, starting a new eating regimen, developing a hobby, starting a new job, reading a book, traveling to new cultures, and learning a new language are just a few activities that potentially provide enrichment. These things add value to our lives and make us feel good.

What would constitute enrichment in the work setting? If we can define the minimum requirements for a work setting, we can see what might be enriching at work. Is there a minimum standard that is ideal for any work situation? Tom Wujec, in his book *Return on Imagination: Realizing the Power of Ideas*, states that people move into a flow of efficiency when the challenge of the job is just above the skill level. Malcolm Gladwell states in his book *Outliers* that the keys to a fulfilling job are autonomy, complexity and a connection between effort and reward. I find these two lines of thought to be complimentary. Find a job you like to do, get the training required to perform your job and then find opportunities to maximize your skill sets: you are on your way to “flow”. Add to that the appropriate recognition for work done well, and you have the ideal job.

I believe it is in the area of “connection between effort and reward” that we find the realm of human enrichment in the work place. Proper job assignments and training are extremely important in any work environment and represent the basic foundation of satisfying work; how we are recognized can be that one factor that makes all the difference.

Several studies have been done to answer the question, “What is the ideal form of recognition?” To my surprise, the results of these studies unanimously determined that the most significant form of recognition is a non-monetary demonstration of appreciation for work done. The challenge for those in management positions is to find what forms of recognition can be considered adequate enrichment to create and maintain the ideal work environment.

What forms of recognition can lead to positive stimulation of the work experience? Money is a good place to start, for certainly receiving adequate pay for the job done is desired by all. But, as the study revealed, money is not the greatest form of enrichment. Advancement is a way to demonstrate recognition and appreciation. Offering variety to the work experience can also be a demonstration of appreciation. Award programs, advanced training, employer sponsored social gatherings, informative staff meetings where information is freely shared and healthy dialog is encouraged are additional ways in which recognition/enrichment can be given.

Ultimately for humans, enrichment needs to make us feel valued and good about the contribution we are making. We can deduce that enrichment, when appropriately given to animals, may make them feel good, but we don’t have to make assumptions about what works and what doesn’t work as effective enrichment for us. For some, it’s money; for others, it’s the opportunity to share ideas and see them implemented; others just want a handshake and a sincere thank you for a job well done. As with animals, there is not one form of enrichment that works for all. Some days, a banana just will not do, and then there are other days when a banana will hit the spot. We should take the time to think about what kind of enrichment works for us and share that information with those who are empowered to provide it.

You never know, someday there may be a banana at work -- just for you!



Return on Imagination: Realizing the Power of Ideas

Authors: Tom Wujec, Sandra Muscat

Publisher: Financial Times Prentice Hall

Outliers: The Story of Success

Author: Malcolm Gladwell

Publisher, Little, Brown and Company, 2008.

