Engaging Employees through High Performance Work Practices: Case Studies from Higher Educational Institutions

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Abstract

Human resource management plays an important role in an organization. In recent years, scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to investigating the relationship between high performance work practices and organizational performance. There have been numerous studies focused on empirically examining the impact of high performance work practices on performance outcomes. These studies suggest that there is a significant positive relationship between high performance work practices and performance. However, the majority of the studies used organization-dominated performance measures, notably financial-economic indicators such as return on average assets, return on equity, turnover, sales, labor productivity and profitability. Therefore, less attention has been paid to exploring the concept of performance from an employee's perspective. Using a resource-based view of the organization, organizations can simply develop sustained competitive advantage by generating value in a unique way through employees, which is difficult for competitors to replicate. Thus, it is proposed that academics and practitioners should explore how organizations can develop sustained competitive advantage by keeping their employees engaged with their roles and organization. This paper explores high performance work practices and employee engagement in the selected higher educational institutions. This paper employs qualitative case study methodology. Data were gathered from two case studies and observation on high performance work practices and employee engagement. The research thus provides evidences on the high performance work practices that can keep the employees engaged.

Keywords: Human Resource Management, High Performance Work Practices, Employee Engagement, Resource- Based View Theory, Higher Educational Institution, Case Study.

1. Introduction

Human resource management (HRM) refers to all management decisions or actions that affect the nature of the relationship between the organization and its employees.[1] It plays an important role in an organization. In recent years, scholars have devoted a great deal of attention to investigating the relationship between high performance work practices (HPWPs) and organizational performance. There appears to be growing interest evidence that HPWPs significantly enhances organizational performance.[2-4] Based on these empirical evidences, it is also becoming increasingly clear that human resource (HR) is one important element that can help an organization to be more innovative and achieve competitive advantage.

Porter[5] has introduced the concept of competitive advantage as the source of superior performance in organizations. According to Porter, organizations should have a distinct product or service or value compared to its competitors in order to effectively compete in the market. However, using a resource-based view of the organization, Barney[6] suggests that organizations can simply develop sustained competitive advantage by generating value in a unique way through employees, which is difficult for competitors to replicate. According to this view, if employees are a source of competitive advantage, they should not be viewed as a cost to be minimized or avoided.[7–8] More organizations are now considering their employees as assets in an attempt to gain competitive advantage, as other organizational resources, such as technology, new product, natural resources and economies of scale, are easier to replicate by competitors.[10]

As mentioned earlier, there have been numerous studies focused on empirically examining the impact of HPWPs on performance outcomes. These studies suggest that there is a significant positive relationship between HPWPs and performance.[3–4,11] However, the majority of the studies used organization-dominated performance measures, notably financial-economic indicators such as return on average assets, return on equity, turnover, sales, labor productivity and profitability. Therefore, less attention has been paid to exploring the concept of performance from an employee's perspective.

The work of higher educational institutions (HEIs) employees has become increasingly complex demanding team work and collaboration between individuals.[12] Many HEIs are developing into global organizations with staff from numerous countries around the world.[13–14] However, very little research has examined the functioning of multicultural staff groups or employees.[15] Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore how organizations engaged their employees, in particular HEIs. This paper also aims to explore the similarities of the HPWPs employed in the two case study HEIs.

2. High performance work practices

High performance work practices (HPWPs) is an identifiable set of HRM practices that are thought to have a universal, additive, significant positive effect on organizational performance.[16] As the individual practices have limited capability to develop competitive

advantage in isolation, HPWPs should be considered as a collection group.[6, 17–18] Scholars have named this set of HPWPs according to their studies such as innovative human resource practices,[19] high involvement work practices;[21] and 'best practice' HRM.[18]

What are the practices that constitute HPWPs? There is little consensus on the content of practices that should comprise the HPWPs model. For example, Boselie et al.[22] review the variety of different HPWPs applied in 104 published articles and found not one fixed list of general applicable HPWPs that define HRM. They noted that the most often mentioned HPWPs are: training and development; contingent pay and reward schemes; performance management and appraisal; and recruitment and selection. Prior to that, Becker and Gerhart[9] point out that of the 27 HRM practices included in five major studies of HRM- performance relationships,[23-27] not a single practice is common to all five studies. However, there are two practices namely self-directed work teams and problem solving groups/quality circles, on which four studies agree; and two more practices (i.e. contingent pay and hours training per year after initial training) on which three studies agree. The operationalization of HPWPs varies widely in different studies. Although scholars support the notion of the specific set of HPWPs, the question of which practices should be compliment together seems unanswered.[28] However, *"until consensus is achieved on conceptual matters, and perhaps even then, it would seem that HRM can consist of whatever researchers wish or, perhaps, what their samples and data sets dictate"*.[22]

At present, there are two perspectives that can explain how HPWPs operates in practice, which are the contingent and universalist perspectives. The contingent perspective suggests that a different set of HPWPs should be adopted depending on the business strategy.[28-29] On the other hand, the universalist perspective suggests that organizations with a specific set of HPWPs, regardless of size, industry or business strategy, should always achieve superior performance outcomes.[17-18] This specific set of HPWPs should be viewed as a collection of HRM practices rather than individual practices.[17] Instead of matching the HPWPs

with organization's business strategy to enhance organizational performance, the universalists suggested a set of 'best practice' HRM. Pfeffer[7,17] asserted that organizations wishing to succeed in today's global business environment must take appropriate HR investment to acquire and build employees who possess better skills and capabilities than their competitors. As for a resource to be a source of competitive advantage, it must be valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable. This notion is rooted on the resource-based view of the organization which posits that organizations can simply develop sustained competitive advantage by generating value in a unique way through employees, which is difficult for competitors to replicate.[6] Therefore knowledge, skills, experiences, capabilities, motivation, satisfaction, and engagement of the employees are the most unique and valuable resources that can lead to competitive advantage of the organization, particularly for the HEIs.

3. Resource based view theory

The resource-based view (RBV) is a theory that sees resources as essential to superior organizational performance.[31] The advocates of RBV claim that organizations should treasure inside the organization to develop sustainable competitive advantage instead of treasuring at competitive environment for it.

In RBV theory, resources are given the key role in helping organizations to achieve superior organizational performance. According to RBV, resources of organizations that are valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and not have substitutes are the key sources of sustainable competitive advantage for sustained superior performance.[33] These attributes are generally known as VRIN attributes. If a resource (tangible/intangible) of an organization shows VRIN attributes, the organization can gain and sustain competitive advantage as they outperform competitors and do

things differently.[31-32]

In response to authors such as Black and Boal[34] who debated that the dynamics of resource creation had been overlooked in the RBV, Barney[35] revised the VRIN attributes to become the VRIO attributes which included a focus on organizational processes of an organization. Thus, Barney[44] restated that an organization's potential to attain a competitive advantage depends on the value, rarity, and imitability of its resources and capabilities. Barney[45] added that in order for an organization to realize the potential, it must be organized in a way that it can exploit its resources and capabilities. Only valuable resources that are rare and inimitable could explain variation in performance differences across competitors.[35] Hence, on the basis of the RBV theory, there is an identifiable sets of HPWPs that are thought to have universal, additive and significant positive effect on organizational performance. These sets of HPWPs should be considered as a collection group which *"can enable a firm to realize its full competitive advantage"*.[6]

4. Employee engagement

Employee engagement has become one of the most significant concepts in the field of management in recent years.[36-38] Kahn[68] (1990) initially pioneered the employee engagement concept, suggesting that engaged employees are physically, cognitively and emotionally involved in their job roles and experience a sense of meaning (reward for investing in role performance), psychological safety (a sense of trust and security at work) and availability (a sense of having the physical and psychological resources necessary for the job). Connell and Wellborn[38] found that engagement consist of daily behavior, emotions and thought processes. In this case, behavioral engagement was described as time spent on work, intensity of concentration and effort, tendency to stay on task and propensity to initiate action when given the opportunity. Cognitive components of engagement were assessed as performance and individuals' understanding of why they are doing what they are doing. Emotional components of engagement included heightened levels of positive emotion during the completion of an activity.

According to Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzales-Roma and Baker,[40] engagement is a *"positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Rather than a momentary and specific state, engagement refers to a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behavior. Vigor is characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being strongly involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Absorption is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work."* Thus, it is proposed that an engaged employee has a strong sense of vigor towards, dedication to, and absorption in work activities.[41]

The National Leadership Council[42] defined engaged employees as those who are motivated consistently to go beyond expectations and commit to staying with their employing organizations over the longer term. They also invest emotionally and intellectually in their work, their organizations or 'brands', their clients, and the products or services they offer.

5. The importance of employee engagement

Why is employee engagement important? Employee engagement has emerged as a driver for organizational success. Selmer, Jonasson and Lauring[43] stated that engaged employees are active and have an effective connection with their work and often are able

satisfy the demands of their jobs. Employee engagement is also important because it is needed to inspire employees to achieve their organization's goals.[42] In fact, many leaders recognize that they need employee engagement in order to develop a "*clear strategic perspective for their business*".[42]

Patelco Credit Union who was awarded the Employee Voice Award for Raising Engagement 2017 used several ways to engage their employees including emphasizing internal career notifications and promotions, launching individual development planning tools to support career conversations between team members and managers, providing training to managers to help them be more effective in their roles, and launching career paths for member contact center and mortgage lending employees.[44] According to them, it was essential to engage employees because engaged employees assisted their members and this lead to the credit union's success. However, engagement as such

cannot be registered directly. Rather one can measure outcomes in behaviors and achievements that may be seen as a result of engagement.[43]

6. Ways of increasing employee engagement

Employees will go out of their way to assist their organizations if they are provided with sufficient guidance, feedback and autonomy.[45] This is especially important in the current economic downturn. Organizations need to ensure that employees remain committed and motivated in their work despite lower salaries and budget cuts.[54] Morgan[46] in her work on the Co-operative Group found that it takes tremendous effort to instill commitment amongst employees. According to her, organizations should engage their employees in every aspect of the job in order to reinvigorate the organization brand. This shows that employee engagement is very important to achieve organizational success. She found the Group's employees became more engaged after attending the cooperative's brand programs together.

Coca-Cola used social media elements in its online staff engagement program which is targeted at improving its internal communications strategies.[47] This program includes daily news, feature length articles and insights to connect their employees globally and keep them engaged with their organization. Sainsbury's, easyJet and Bacardi have also utilized video content to involve staff in marketing campaigns. EasyJet used staff holiday photos for its 'Europe by easyJet' campaign while Bacardi invited staff to create video content that was posted on the intranet as part of its 'Bacardi Together' activity.[47] These were all attempts to engage employees, either via marketing activities or increased understanding of the organizations' brands.

Motivating and retaining the best employees was the factor most cited by executives for boosting their future business success.[48] Tesco, for example, has a reputation for sharing success and rewards across all of its staff and its managers are recognized to be the change agents for increasing employee engagement.[48]

Burke and Sheldon[49] suggested that organizations should work on finding more innovative ways, such as the World Café method, of engaging staff rather than giving reports on progress as part of a top-down approach. World Café events are good ways of producing ideas, distributing knowledge, encouraging innovative thinking and discovering action in real-life situations.[50] Participants would set up an informal 'café-style' environment with tables and tablecloths, drinks, snacks and colored pens, and invite employees to explore issues through discussion in small groups. Discussions are held in 20 to 30 minute rounds, with each table focusing on a different issue or idea. This comfortable and informal style inspires more open conversation and encourages creativity and vision; the discussions, debates, drawings and the recording of information on the tablecloth help participants to gain a more vivid and clear vision for their service areas. Using the World Café approach, one staff member from each table acts as the 'host' and recaps the discussion for the next group, to provide a continuum of ideas.[50]

Burke and Sheldon[49] found two very interesting findings in their study. First, staff at all levels said that they valued being involved in influencing service developments, and secondly, they thought they were more appreciated. The World Café approach to engaging employees enables them to use their leadership skills in an informative and enjoyable way.

Employee engagement in heis Bakker and Demerouti51 found that engaged HEIs employees tended to experience positive emotions, including happiness, joy and enthusiasm. They also experienced better health and were able to create their own job and personal resources. Most importantly, they were able to transfer their engagement to others around them.51

Employee engagement and hpwps: empirical findings Various scholars have discussed empirical evidence that lends some support for employee engagement and HPWPs. For example, Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti and Xanthopoulou52 found a positive direct relationship between job resources (such as supervisory support and feedback) and employee engagement. DeBraine and Roodt53 found a positive relationship between job demands and employee engagement. Other scholars such as Kahn,68 Xanthopoulou et al.,37 and Swanberg et al.,54 found a positive relationship between feedback, job control, autonomy and employee engagement, respectively. In other studies, Brummelhuis et al.55 found a positive relationship between flexible working arrangements and employee engagement, and mediated by effective and efficient communication.

In terms of perceived leadership styles, Tims et al.,[56] and Wang and Hsieh[57] found a positive relationship between the following perceived leadership styles and employee engagement: authentic leadership, transformational leadership, charismatic leadership and ethical leadership.

In terms of individual psychological states, individuals who possess high personal strength and competency (such as self-esteem, self-efficacy and resilience) were found to be positively related with employee engagement.[58-59] Optimism was found to be positively related with employee engagement but negative mood was found to be negatively related with employee engagement.[60] Other studies found a positive relationship between psychological empowerment,[61] job satisfaction[62] and employee engagement.

In terms of perceived HRM practices such as recruitment, selection, perceived organizational support, safety environment, communication, training and development, remuneration, and teamwork, the practices were found to be positively related with employee engagement.[63-65]

Nevertheless, organizational experiences such as sexual harassment, bullying, and interpersonal conflicts were found to be negatively related with employee engagement.[66]

In overall, the above empirical evidences show that positive antecedents such as personal strength, ability, job design, and positive perceptions of leaders are related with high levels of employee engagement, whereas negative antecedents such as burnout, sexual harassment, bullying and personal conflicts are related with low levels of employee engagement. The above empirical evidences also show that HRM practices such as safety environment, communication, training, and remuneration systems are related with high levels of employee engagement.

Therefore, build on these empirical evidences; this research aims to explore how organizations engage their employees, in particular HEIs. This paper also aims to explore the similarities of the HPWPs employed in the two case study HEIs.

7. Methodology

This paper describes an exploratory study that investigated how HEIs engaged their employees. A case study was written based on interviews and observations of two faculties in two different HEIs. A comparison was then made of the two cases to see if there were

any similarities. These were then related to the literature review to ensure whether the occurrences in the cases was supported or negated by the literature.

8. Case study 1: assessment team beta and discussion

Assessment Team Beta consists of six executives, a manager and a Deputy Dean for Assessment. Their role is to produce the assessment components of the university's Business School, which include assignments and examinations, at the level of quality required. The Business School serves not only the local students of the university but also its overseas partners; churning out thousands of assignments and examination papers each year. The Dean acts as mentor to the team, conducting training and signing off the papers to be printed.

Each semester, the cycle for assessment starts with the manager allocating the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) for each subject according to their area of expertise. He then passes this to the Deputy Dean and Dean for approval. The list is distributed to the SMEs for them to start working on the assessment components. Once the components are submitted, they are reviewed but other SMEs in the same expert area. Changes are made and then reviewed by the Dean. The SMEs make further corrections which are then verified by the Deputy Dean. Sometimes the processes are repeated to ensure that the components are up to the standards set by the school. The four executives keep everything running smoothly by monitoring the progress of the SMEs and under the manager's and Deputy Dean's guidance, take care of the process flows up to final output.

While these processes are going on, the SMEs are also involved in their teaching and other scholarly activities. They also have to review and moderate assessment components from their overseas partners and the differing deadlines create stress and pressure to them. Most days, they bring work home and often stay back late to finish the papers on time. But despite all this, deadlines are met and quality is preserved at all times. Everyone works together despite the heavy workload and tension, and keep smiling throughout the tough times. The Dean and Deputy Dean maintain a healthy work atmosphere and there are coffee breaks and cookies always – a way of motivating everyone to stay together as a team. Most of the team members have been with the university for more than 8 years and have achieved very high performance during their appraisals. These support Connell and Wellborn's[38] view that engagement consists of daily behaviour, emotions and thought processes where engaged employees spend time on work, concentrate and focus on their work and tend to stay on task and propensity until a goal is achieved. The case also supports the NLC's[42] definition of engaged employees as those who are motivated consistently to go beyond expectations and invest emotionally and intellectually in

their work and Schaufeli and Bakker's[67] view that an engaged employee has a strong sense of vigor towards, dedication to, and absorption in work activities.

9. Case study 2: teaching at alpha university and discussion

Alpha University (AU) is an Arab establishment which has five schools and approximately 60% of their workforce consists of multicultural employees.

AU takes its teaching very seriously. Before the semester ends, the Dean will assign five courses for each lecturer for the following semester, with a maximum teaching load of 16 contact hours per week. Each class contains around 25 to 30 students. At the beginning of each semester, lecturers will distribute the course syllabus to their classes in order to provide students with a clear prospectus of their attendance, grading policies, schedules and deadlines for examinations and assignments. Lecturers will be

available in their office at least 6 hours per day. At the same time, lecturers are required to upload course materials such as presentation slides, exercises, tutorials, notes, research articles, and useful links on Moodle. They are also required to actively manage online discussion forums with students for each course alongside conducting online quizzes and mid-term examinations. All final examination papers are prepared by the relevant lecturers in an accurate and strictly confidential manner. Besides teaching, each lecturer must hold administrative positions such as the institutional quality assurance committee member, MBA program council committee member, recruitment coordinator, student advisor, industrial training advisor, and course leader.

Also, each lecturer must conduct research, present and publish at least one paper in a high impact factor journal in a year. Training workshops on teaching and learning are provided every week to achieve high standards of work.

All lecturers are kept well informed of what is going on in AU. Emails, meetings, and annual assembly are used to deliver information and data. The Dean uses open communication with lecturers to obtain and share information and data. AU provides high financial benefits to its employees. Everyone enjoys working together and look forward to coming to work despite the high workload and stress. They voluntarily stay back late at the office to get on top of work and prepare for upcoming deadlines. The café and vending machines are always available for them even after office hours. They feel safe and secure while working as the campus is guarded by security officers.

This case confirms the Schaufeli et al.'s[67] definition of engaged employees where individuals with a strong sense of vigor towards, dedication to, and absorption in work activities are engaged employees. Engaged employees at AU precede to higher service, quality and productivity which leads to higher customer satisfaction, increased students enrollments and increased profits.

The above evidences support the previous studies[28,42, 54,58-59,62] that personal strength, competency, supervisory and coworkers supports, feedback, autonomy, optimism, satisfaction, job demand, and flexible work arrangement engaged the employees with their jobs where the engaged lecturers at AU are happy with their job, ready to do extra work for no additional pay but just to help their associates, and ready to stay

back late to get on top of work and to prepare for upcoming deadlines.

The evidences also support the previous studies[18,22,32,39] where recruitment, training program, performance appraisal, remuneration, communication, leaderships, teamwork, decision making and safety are the HPWPs that are related with super performance. Both HEIs provide similar HPWPs for their employees and the evidences indicate that these HPWPs enhanced their employee engagement. Hence, this paper support the RBV theory's notion where there is an identifiable sets of HPWPs that are thought to have universal, additive and significant positive effect on performance. Furthermore, organizations' resources (i.e. human capital and organizational work processes) that are rare, valuable, cannot be duplicated or too costly to be duplicated and imperfectly imitable are the key resources of sustainable competitive advantage for sustained superior performance.[6]

10. Limitation of the study

Findings of this study were beneficial to discover employee engagement through HPWPs at two case study HEIs. However, these findings cannot be generalized to be made for other employees in other business industries.

11. Conclusion

Employee engagement is essential in managing an organization, given its positive relationship with employee well-being and

performance. Assessing, enhancing and sustaining employee engagement are therefore a primary concern of many organizations especially HEIs as there is intense competition in the industry. Employee turnover is high and getting people to stay is no longer a matter of offering high reward schemes. The two case studies show that employees tend to stay when they feel energized and they absolutely love their work - in other words, they stay because they are engaged. Engaged employees show better results in performance and the organization is able to stay competitive in the market.

Acknowledgments

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