

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ROLE AMBIGUITY AND JOB PERFORMANCE AMONG EMPLOYEES OF THE SERVICE SECTOR SMES IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Small and medium size enterprises (SMEs) play a crucial role in the economic development of Malaysia. The service sector forms the largest sector of the SMEs establishments. Employees of the service sector SMEs have often been associated with low level of job performance and past research have shown that there are many factors that can contribute to employee poor performance. One of the factors that often been associated with poor job performance is when employees experiences role ambiguity. Thus the main aim of this conceptual paper is to present a conceptual understanding on the relationship that exists between role ambiguity and job performance.

Keywords: SMEs, Service sector SMEs, Job performance, Role ambiguity.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 SMEs in Malaysia

The effect of globalization, changing demographics, skills gaps and worker shortages can affect a nation ability to maintain its competitiveness (Davenport, 1999; Fernandez, 2001; Laprade, 2006). In addition Galagan (1997) expressed that given the many challenges that employees have to face due to the dynamism of workplace, it is rather difficult for employees to maintain their job performance. Nevertheless, employers tend to have high expectation with regards to employee job performance by continuously monitoring employees' job performance through various performance management activities (Dessler, 2011). Thus having labour force which are well equipped with the right skills and well prepared will ensure that business will not lose out due to lack of ability to compete both nationally and internationally (Tomaka, 2001). Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in this context would not be alienated from similar circumstances.

SMEs are regarded as critical since the sector has been contributing to the growth and promoting competitiveness of many nations (Caniel & Romijn, 2005). This primary economic contribution made by the SMEs to a country had given rise to the interest for researchers to examine the various obstacles that hinder their progress (Alasadi & Abdelrahim, 2008). Che Ros, Kumar and Lim (2006) concluded that SMEs in Malaysia are important in driving the Malaysian economy and its unemployment issues. The Malaysian SME Annual 2007 indicated that sustainable SMEs will be able to help in economic growth which in turns helps in job creation and income generation (www.smeinfo.com.my) and is always regarded as the backbone of Malaysian economy (Ramayah & Koay, 2002).

While the SMEs sector plays an important role in Malaysia, it also faces with many challenges. Although SMEs represent 99.2% of the total business establishments in Malaysia, the SMEs contributed only 32% to the GDP (SME Annual Report, 2007; Sin, 2010). This is lower than the average contribution in other Asian countries such as in China and Japan that is over 50% (Ndubisi, 2008; Osman, Ho & Galang, 2011). Past studies had highlighted that problems faced by Malaysian SMEs in general will lead the sector to appear less competitive (Salleh & Ndubisi, 2006) and act as hindrances that prevent good performance (Moha, 1999; Hall, 2002; Stuti, 2005). Skill shortages and low productivity of employees has been highlighted as one of the ongoing problem that dampens the progress of SMEs in Malaysia (SMIDEC, 2002; Wang, 2003; Ting, 2004; UPS, 2005; Salleh & Ndubisi, 2006).

2. Problem Statement

Previous researches on employee job performance had shown that individual level factor like role ambiguity (e.g. Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Singh, 1993; Abramis, 1994; Bhuian, Menguc & Borsboom, 2005; Murkherjee & Maholtra, 2006; Lang, Thomas, Bliese & Adler, 2007) had effect on the job performance of employees. Even though there seems to be wide research interests on the effect of role ambiguity on job performance, most of them were conducted in abroad thus very little evidence exists to understand the job performance of employees in the Malaysian context. Thus there is a need to investigate whether similar factor may also affect those employees from the SMEs as well since studies on role ambiguity were mostly carried out among the larger enterprises.

In Malaysia, the service sector forms the largest sector of the SMEs establishments with a total of 86.5 % of the total SMEs establishment (Department of Statistics, 2006). It generally includes the services, primary agriculture and information and communication Technology (ICT). this there are 2.2 million employment in the service sector SMEs as compared to the manufacturing sector, 740,438 and agriculture sector, 131,130 (Aris, 2007). Even though the service sector SMEs has the highest employment, the labor productivity of the manufacturing sector over took the service sector SMEs at RM64, 089 with only RM47, 151 from the service sector (SME Annual Report, 2007). The job performance of employees in the service sector SMEs tend to be low due to lack of right skills (Salleh & Ndubisi, 2006). This perhaps supported by the fact that almost 72 % of employment in the service sector SMEs were made up of those that receives education of Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and below, which may affect the ability of the employees to deliver expected standard of job performance due to lack of skills (Aris, 2007). Therefore this paper aims to explore the proposition on the relationship that may exist between role ambiguity and job performance of employees to pave way for further empirical investigation

3. Literature Review

3.1 Job performance: conceptual, theoretical and empirical review

Job performance has always been regarded as important factor in employee management. Campbell's (1990) model makes clear distinctions among performance components, performance determinants, and the antecedents of performance determinants. Performance components refer to the performance dimensions that constitute various parts of the overall job performance. Campbell posited that the performance components is a function of three performance determinants which are the declarative knowledge, procedural and skills knowledge and motivation (Campbell, 1990; Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, & Sager, 1993: pg 43). These are basically the direct determinants of performance, which is the focus of this paper. In detail, declarative knowledge includes knowledge about facts, principles, goals and self- knowledge, which represents an understanding of a given task's requirements.

Procedural knowledge and skill includes cognitive skills, psychomotor skills, physical skills, self-management skills, and interpersonal skills. Motivation is a combined effect from three choice behaviors: the choice to perform, the level of effort, and the persistence of the effort (Campbell et al., 1993). In other words, in order to perform the behaviors in one of the dimensions, a person needs to know what to do, how to do it and possess the desire to do it.

Job performance reflects the ability of the individual employees realizing their respective work goals, fulfilling expectations as well as attaining job targets and/or accomplishing a standard that are set by their organizations (Eysenck, 1998; Maathis & Jackson, 2000; Bohlander, Snell, & Sherman, 2001). Most people will immediately define job performance as what a person does at work. Different stages of job as well the complexity of a job can affect the overall performance of the job holder (Murphy, 1989; Ackerman, 1997). This could mean that job performance as a construct can be defined in different ways since it can be affected by the stage and complexity of the job (Grubb, 1999). Sarmiento and Beale (2007) refer to job performance as the result of two aspects which consist of the abilities and skills (natural or acquired) that an employee possesses, and his/her motivation to use them in order to perform a better job.

Campbell et al., (1993, pg. 40) define performance...“as synonymous with behavior. It is something that people actually does and can be observed. By definition, it includes only those actions or behaviors that are relevant to the organization's goals and that can be scaled (measured) in terms of each individual's proficiency (that is, level of contribution). Performance is what the organization hires one to do, and do well”. Even though there are many attempts to introduce various frameworks of performance, Campbell's definition of performance has been acceptable as the basic definition for performance (Borman, Hanson, & Hedge, 1997; Motowidlo, Borman, & Schmit, 1997; Schmitt & Chan, 1998). Even though there are many attempts to introduce various frameworks of performance, Campbell's definition of performance has been acceptable as the basic definition for performance (Borman et al., 1997; Motowidlo et al., 1997; Schmitt & Chan, 1998). Thus in synthesizing the above mentioned definitions, job performance is hereby defined as what an employee is/are expected to do in relation to the demand of their job as when they are hired and covers only those actions or behaviors that are relevant to the organization's goals and measurable in terms of each individual's proficiency.

Past researches on job performance have found a stream of factors that could have influence the employee performance ranging from individual/employee related factors, organizational level factors as well as environmental factors. A longitudinal study of twenty-five years by Jaramilloa, Mulki and Marshal (2005) on the effect of organization commitment on the salesperson job performance while Al Ahmadi (2009) found job performance to be positively related with employee organizational commitment and job satisfaction as well as with some personal related factor like age, experience, gender, nationality and marital status. In the meantime, Gu and Chi (2009) found job satisfaction is also significantly related to job performance while lack of interpersonal skills have also contributed to poor performance. Studies by Sarmiento and Beale (2007) among shop-floor employees demonstrated that job satisfaction have positive relationship with job performance as proven in other studies. On the other hand this study had found no significant relationship between age and education with shop floor employees' performance while relationship between education and job performance seems to have a negative relationship. Similarly, study on nurses' job performance by Al Ahmadi (2009) found that education and job performance to have negative relationship. On the contrary study by Ng and Feldman (2009) revealed differing

results in which education was found to be positively related to the employee job performance. Research by Karatepea, Uludagb, Menevisc, Hadzimehmedagic and Baddar (2006) in Northern Cyprus discovered that self-efficacy, competitiveness and effort have a significant positive effect on the job performance of the frontline employees.

3.2 Role ambiguity: conceptual, theoretical and empirical review

One of the focuses of studies in the field of human performance is on job related role ambiguity. Since the opposite end of role ambiguity is role clarity one can only experiences one or the other as when work is performed. Jackson and Shuler (1985) stressed on the importance of having clear understanding of one's role from an individual perspective as it is said to have an influence on one's motivation, satisfaction and performance. Furthermore the lower role ambiguity or higher role clarity can have various types of effects ranging from less psychological stress (Lang, Thomas, Bliese & Adler, 2007), greater interests, innovation, self actualization, autonomy, self-esteem, less tension, less physical stress and lower intention to leave (Ivancevich & Donnelly, 1974) and greater satisfaction (Busch & Bush, 1978). There were many attempts to delineate the meaning of role ambiguity. Ilgen and Hollenback (1991) defined roles as the pattern of behaviours that are expected or required by the members of an organization. Kalbers and Cenken (2008) relate role ambiguity to lack of confidence that an employee perceives of his or her responsibility. In another perspective, role ambiguity is said to occur as when insufficient amount of information are given to an individual to perform a role and also commonly seen as a condition when disagreement happens in the work of community with little understanding on the employee side of what are expected for (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985).

Role ambiguity is also defined as the occurrence of insufficient information pertaining to powers, authority and duties to perform one's role (Kahn, Wolfe, Snoek & Rosenthal, 1964). Perhaps one of the famous definitions of role ambiguity after the work of Kahn et al. (1964) was given by Rizzo, House and Lirtzman (1970). When an employee is not equipped with good understanding about his (her) responsibilities and having little knowledge if what is expected pertaining to his (her) job performance, one is said to experience role ambiguity (Rizzo et al., 1970). Further Rizzo et al. (1970) explained role clarity occurs when an employee are clear with behavioral expectations which assist in giving the necessary knowledge of what is consider as acceptable behavior. Role ambiguity as a variable has receives many attentions in the past researches and has become a prominent position in many empirical researches (King & King, 1990; Ortqvist & Wincent, 2006; Tubre & Collins, 2000) and in various perspectives. Role ambiguity has found to have decreased job performance, satisfaction and commitment (Chang & Chang, 2007. In addition role ambiguity have also been linked to educational factor in studies by Koustelios, Theodorakis, and Goulimaris (2004); Thompson, McNamara and Hoyle (1997); and Wolverton, Wolverton and Gmelch (1999).

3.3 Exploring the role ambiguity and job performance link

The study on the relationship between ambiguities with job performance (as shown in Figure 1 below) has been studied by past researches. The interest to study on role ambiguity in the context of service sector SMEs arises because in any service setting, employees who are able to understand and clear about their roles in the organisation are likely to perform well in their job (Anderson, 2006). At the same time, past researches (e.g. Murkherjee & Maholtra, 2006; Lang, Thomas, Bliese, & Adler, 2007) had shown that role ambiguity influenced the employees' job performance in a service setting. Nevertheless there seems to be unclear direction or strengths in terms of the relationship between role ambiguities and job

performance of employees. Most past researches tend to reveal weak or no relationship between role ambiguities with job performance (e.g. Brief & Aldag, 1976; Michaels, Day & Joachimsthaler, 1987; Singh, 1993). At the same time it often found to have limited empirical evidence between role ambiguity and performance (Singh, 1993). These outcomes thus created a gap to re-examine the factor role ambiguity in the context of service sector SMEs. Therefore the proposition of this study is:

P1: There is a significant relationship between role ambiguity and the job performance of employees working in the service sector SMEs.

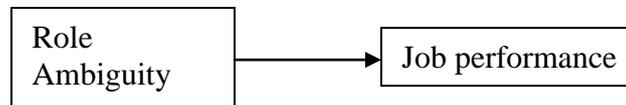


Figure 1: Role ambiguity and job performance link

A meta-analysis based on the work of Jackson and Shuler (1985) by Tubre and Collins (2000) found that in order for an individual to carry out a task effectively, sufficient information is imperative. This is because when there is a lack of information regarding what is to be achieved and the most effective work behavior that can help top achieve that will resulted in ineffective work performance. Although most research has found negative relationship between role ambiguity and job performance, the strength of association between role ambiguity and job performance varies widely according to types of occupation and performance measure (Jackson and Shuler, 1985).

An empirical result of Abramis (1994) proved evidence that role ambiguity/lack of role clarity resulted in the reduction in work performance. Besides that research on job performance has also found that it can be influenced by role ambiguity whereby a study by Singh and Rhoads (1991) in relation to front line service employees mentioned that there were several types of role ambiguity that service employees can experience such as with their superiors, the company, ethical issues, customers, co-workers, family and other managers. Knight, Kim and Crutsinger (2007), in their attempt to examine the causal relation between role stress, customer orientation, selling orientation, and job performance of retail salespeople, revealed that role conflict and role ambiguity affected customer orientation while affecting job performance when mediated by customer orientation

Behrman, Bigoness and Perreault (1981) revealed there is a positive relationship between job performance and ambiguity concerning family expectation. On the other hand the same study revealed ambiguity regarding sales manager and customer expectations is negatively related to job performance. It was also discovered when there are ambiguous managerial expectations; lower level of satisfaction was recorded. This effect of role ambiguity on job satisfaction and job performance was similarly found by Kahn et al. (1964) as cited by Walker, Churchill and Ford (1975), when employee experiences so much uncertainty about what is expected in performing a job, high level or anxiety and tension will develop which in turns reduced job satisfaction and this will then affect job performance.

Dubinsky, Michaels, Kotabe, Chae and Hee-Cheol (1992), carried out a study to compare whether role stressors such as role ambiguity and role conflict can influence the work outcome among salespeople in the US, Japan and Korea. The finding revealed that role ambiguity is significantly negatively related to the job performance of the employees and there is no difference in the magnitude of the coefficients when comparing between the three sample nations. The effect of having clarity in carrying out tasks was also highlighted be

several studies in which some found there is either or no association between one's job performance with whether one is clear about his or her role (Michaels, Day & Joachimsthaler, 1987; Wetzels, Ruyter, & Bloemer, 2000) but it will have significant negative relationship with job performance (House & Rizzo, 1972; Kahn et al., 1964; Zeithaml, Berry & Parasuraman, 1988).

The existing empirical research provides little support for the expected adverse effects of role ambiguity towards job performance. Though role ambiguity were found to have negative relationship with job performance (Lyonski & Johnson 1983; Behrman & Perreault 1984), Jackson and Schuler's (1985) meta-analytic studies found the effect of role ambiguity on job performance is rather weak and this was further supported by similar findings by Fisher and Gitelson (1983) and Berkowitz (1980). In addition studies by Bagozzi (1978); Hampton, Dubinsky and Skinner (1986); and Szilagyi (1977) have all found no association between role ambiguity and job performance which is contradicting with the result done by Bagozzi (1980) where role ambiguity found to affect the job performance of employees.

4. Conclusion

Generally this conceptual paper provides better insights for managers and owners of SMEs with regards to the factors that can influence the job performance of employees working in the service sector SMEs in Malaysia. By having this understanding, firms will be able to strategize on the approaches that can be taken to ensure that employees are given necessary information so that they are able to perform with adequate knowledge before undertaking job duties and responsibilities, thus minimizing the problem of role ambiguity. Therefore firms will have to look into how they can eliminate role ambiguity by first determining the causes for role ambiguity to exist. Perhaps firms from the service sector SMEs should consider carrying out job analysis activities so that a more specific job description can be developed. This will help employees to have greater clarifications with regards to their role. Research on role clarity had revealed the importance of role clarity especially in relation to service quality because it had been found to be strongly related to service quality performance (Murkherjee & Maholtra, 2006).

Role theory as expounded by Kahn et al. (1964) stated that role ambiguity (lack of the necessary information with regards to a given position), will result in a job holder engaging in a coping behaviour in an attempt to solve an unclear tasks in a move to overcome stress which in turns will distort the reality of the job requirements. This will then lead to a person feeling dissatisfied with his role, experiencing anxiety and thus perform less effectively. Based on this theory, the propensity for similar effect to be experienced by employees in the service sector SMEs can be expected. This outcome is predicted by looking at the nature of work of employees in the service sector SMEs. The fact that employees in a service setting tend to receive little training and with minimal supervision (Dubinsky & Mattson, 1979), the likeliness that they will be particularly susceptible to role ambiguity especially those in SMEs context are further supported. Furthermore Price (1994) found that small firms tend to have less formal human resource management (HRM) practices thus this tendency was also extended in their training policy as well. Nonetheless, this prediction can only be affirmed in an empirical study when the proposed research framework is to be further tested against data collected from the service sector SMEs in Malaysia.

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