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31 July 2024

IMPROVING EMPLOYEES' PERFORMANCE REQUIRES GETTING TO KNOW THEM

Adapting human resource practices to meet the underlying motivational needs of each employee is a key for maximising employee performance, a new study found.

Individuals tend to be motivated and perform better when the work environment helps them achieve their goals. This means, the success of human resource (HR) practices in influencing employee performance depends on whether these practices are seen as relevant to the fulfilment of an individual employee's motivational needs. A study recently published in Human Resource Management (HRM) examined how and why different employees' goals interact with specific bundles of HR practices, in order to explain different effects on employee performance.

“Over the past several decades, researchers have shown that the bundles of HR practices, often regarded as “high performance work systems”, are beneficial for enhancing employees' job performance. However, there's also been some growing recognition that these systems do not affect all employees equally. There were also several studies that showed that the positive effects of HR systems on employee performance are dependent on how employees interpret the HR systems. So the problem we identified here was the lack of a nuanced theoretical framework that explains how individuals perceive and respond to HR systems”, said Junhyok Yim, the lead author of the study and an assistant professor of management at City University of Hong Kong.

The study draws from the theory of purposeful work behaviour, which proposes that employees' goals are key to explaining how and why employees respond differently to work environments.

“The aim of our study was to develop a framework that helps explain how employees striving to fulfil their goals shape the effects of HR bundles on employee performance”, said Yim.

The study focused on three types of “employee strivings” - striving for communion, striving for status and striving for achievement. These are seen as key motivational factors that influence how employees interpret “communion-enhancing”, “status-enhancing” and “achievement-enhancing” bundles of HR practices respectively. “Communion strivers” are individuals motivated by relationships with others, “status strivers” seek recognition and opportunities for advancement, while “achievement strivers” are motivated by personal and work accomplishment.

The study found that the alignment of the HR bundles with an employee's motivational goals is key to understanding how employees perceive relevant bundles of HR practices and why they respond to specific HR bundles in different ways, which ultimately leads to differences in employee performance.

“By developing a new typology of HR practices – communion, status, and achievement-enhancing HR bundles, which are commensurate to employees' motivational goal strivings, our study provides

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a new way to combine HR practices that align more closely with employees' motivational needs. This expands the commonly used "ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO)" framework", said Yim.

The way each type of striving interacts with corresponding HR bundles is, however, different:

"We found that communion strivers are likely to be motivated to perform better when they experience communion-enhancing bundles of HR practices, which emphasise and facilitate social support, communication, and collaboration with other coworkers. We found a similar effect when it comes to the interaction between status-striving employees and status-enhancing HR practices, such as recognition and rewards, opportunities for advancement and achieving status in the organisation. However, achievement-enhancing HR bundles were, surprisingly, less effective when it came to improving the performance of achievement strivers", said David Sullivan, one of the study authors and an assistant professor in the Bauer College of Business at the University of Houston, USA.

While the study found that employee motivations play a key role in shaping the effectiveness of bundles of HR practices in increasing employee performance, it also highlights the importance of having a tailored approach.

"Every employee has these universal motivational goals, whether that's communion, status or achievement, at some varying levels. And so adopting any of the HR practices that we highlight in our research is likely to have a positive effect on organisations. However, the one thing that is really important to understand across all HR practices is, sometimes people have this belief that if only we can find this one-size-fits-all approach to solving this particular issue, then we have this silver bullet that we can just apply to every organisation. What our research demonstrates is, there is no one-size-fits-all approach that's going to work for every single organisation, every single employee. But in fact, we have to adapt and create more bespoke approaches to HR practices that meet the needs of our employees," said Sullivan.

For example, with communion-striving employees, our understanding of how much our employees value this particular aspect of motivation and how our HR practices can help augment the work environment is important for employee performance:

"Organisations can make sure they are implementing the proper level of communion-enhancing HR practices that would create supportive work environments with opportunities for more communication and teamwork. This is particularly important as organisations continue to face challenges with more remote work or aspects of dealing with more virtual work that have come from the pandemic", said Sullivan.

According to Sullivan, the same thing can also be said about striving towards status:

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“Understanding who our employees are and what motivates them is going to be important in terms of providing opportunities for recognition and reward that meet their needs for status, and through that, employee performance”, said Sullivan.

“Organisations that want to understand how providing opportunities for employees to perform better from the achievement-enhancing perspective are going to want to focus on either their employees having that underlying motivation or providing HR practices that can fulfil those particular needs. This means, providing opportunities that emphasise accomplishing outcomes, and offering rewards that focus on recognising employee accomplishments”, added Sullivan.

According to Sullivan, making sure that what we're putting into practice in our organisations aligns with the underlying needs of our employees is going to be critically important for helping employees achieve higher levels of performance. This will also help create work environments that ultimately will lead to more purpose for the employees, which is an underlying aspect of the theory of purposeful work behaviour.

“We want to encourage organisations to make sure that they know who their employees are, so that they're spending their resources, their time, their energy and efforts on the right practices to get the most out of their organisational output”, said Sullivan.

Yim's and Sullivan's co-authors were Matthew Call, an assistant professor of management at Texas A&M University, USA, Youngshin Kim, an associate professor in College of Global Business at Seoul Theological University of South Korea, Republic of Korea, and Yujun Sha, a doctoral student in the Management Department at City University of Hong Kong.

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Read the full article [here](#).

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HRM is a Financial Times Top 50 Business Journal published by Wiley.