

Worker, Work, and Work Dynamics: The Role of Multi-skilled, Proactive, and Customer-Focused Staff.

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Abstract

In today's world, organizations are increasingly becoming decentralized, facing fast-paced change, higher demands of innovation, greater operational uncertainty, increasingly blurred careers (Bindl and Parker, 2010) and the changing and volatile demands of products and services that bring some serious changes in work place and in the way products and services are produced (Kim and Seoul, 2003.). In order to better cope with such problems firms need individuals who have wide range of skills to perform various tasks, understand and have knowledge about the overall production process and the business, are good at problem solving, proactive, propose and influence changes in organizational routines, take initiative to solve problems immediately without the help of others (Kim and Seoul, 2003; Gerhardt et al. 2009). The research mainly critically reviews literature on importance of multi-skilled, pro-active, and customer focused employees. The research concludes that it is really that an organization needs multi-skilled, proactive and customer focused staff to be successful. The paper contributes to the literature and offers implications for HR officers that why an organization needs multi-skilled, proactive and customer-focused staff and how does it contribute in achieving organizational goals and objectives.

Keywords: *Multi-skilled, Proactive, Customer-focused, Staff, Successful Organization*

1. Introduction

Organizations are open systems as they operate in an ever-changing and competitive environment that affects the way they do businesses and, therefore, need to respond to the changing environment to survive and prosper (Worthington & Britton, 2009). To best fit with the changing environment and create value, organizations need to understand and respond to the environment (Ware and Grantham, 2003) including: the changing internal factors and activities such as organizational culture, structure, and systems; micro environmental factors such as customers, competitors, suppliers, intermediaries and other stakeholders; and finally, factors and activities which do not directly and immediately affect the organization but might have significant influence on the organization such as economic, social, cultural, political, legal, and technological forces (Palmer & Hartley,

2006; Meadow, 2010). Similarly, organizations bring intentional changes in order to gain competitive advantage which is evident by mergers, acquisitions, strategic alliances, joint ventures and multi-national corporations (Worthington & Britton, 2009). Sources of competitive advantages have shifted from capital and raw materials to talent (Ware and Grantham, 2003) and from technology and finance to the ‘human capital’ in today’s knowledge-based economy (Taylor, 2008). In today’s world organizations strive to improve their performance and to be more competitive. For this, organization brings innovation in their products, processes, markets, and in organizations. These innovations bring significant impact on an organization’s employees. For instance, technology has been bringing significant changes in equipments and production/services processes (Meadow, 2010). Increasing global competition and rapid diffusion of new technologies has exploded the rate of changes that has made learning critical for the performance of individuals, organizations, regions and nations (Burke & Ng, 2006). The critical need of learning for organizations has resulted in high demand for higher skilled labor (Meadow, 2010). The next section reviews literature on work, work force, work places and discusses pros and cons of multi-skilled, proactive and customer-focused employees followed by summary of the research.

2. Literature Review

Work, work force, and work places, all are facing dramatic changes, especially in developed countries. The traditional psychological contract which was based on commitment from employee and job security from the employer does not *exist* anymore which can be seen in the shape of flexible works and firms. In respect of recessionary and competitive pressures, employer now do not offer job for life and therefore offer fair pay and treatment and training and development opportunities (Taylor, 2008; Knight, 2009). One reason for the changing and dynamic work is that of demographic changes such as population of an organization changes through transformation as well through selection, births and deaths (Burke & Ng, 2006). Likewise, now-a-days jobs require more mental and emotional demands than physical demands. Furthermore, jobs in manufacturing sector are decreasing, whilst in service sector it is on the rise. Similarly, number of woman and old workers has been increasing in the work force (Meadow, 2010). On one hand, “Computing and communication technologies have transformed the traditional workplace into a virtual ‘workspace’” as today knowledge work can be done at anytime from anywhere on the planet from an airport to a local coffee shop (Ware & Grantham, 2003). But on the other hand, work has also become more dehumanizing as an individual’s labor has been reduced due to technological advancements in terms of automations, robots, internet, and computer aided design and manufacturing (CAD/CAM), computer integrated manufacturing (CIM), global Positioning System (GPS), navigation technologies, and information and communication technologies (Burke & Ng, 2006). Similarly, individuals have become underemployed, whilst a great number of people have become unemployed due to increasing demand from employers and firm’s efforts to reduce cost through employing downsizing and other cost reduction strategies, for example, Royal Mail recently downsized in order to cut cost.

Moreover, increasing job insecurity, forced mobility, and unemployment are increasingly becoming more prevalent that further increases job career discontinuity,

forced early retirements, job loss and detrimental effects on health of employees (Meadow, 2010). The frightening economic turmoil increases demand for multi-skilled workers, though there has ever been a good demand for multi-skilled workers at any point of time (Express Computer, 2010). The technology and economic changes have affected the demand for Human Capital. Human Capital generally refers to the skills, knowledge, experience, education, training, and aptitudes that an individual possess. It is positively related to individual's employment and wage premiums and improved organizational performance as well (Becker, 2009). According to Akhlaghi and Mahony (1997) multi-skilling means making people able to perform two or more jobs which are traditionally separate. Multi-skilled employees help improve company's performance (Akhlaghi and Mahony, 1997) but on the other hand it has resulted in polarization of more skilled versus less-skilled and changes in occupational structure (Lundvall, 2002). The impacts of polarization may be seen in the form of more uneven employment opportunities and high unemployment for low skilled workers or in more unequal income distribution between highly skilled and the rest of the labor (Meadow, 2010). Braverman (1974) supported the notion of deskilling of workers' which used to be a dominant general tendency in the past (Braverman, 1974). However, deskilling has resulted due to technological advancement and the employee should continually learn and develop new skills in order to secure their jobs and avoid obsolescence of their skills (Burke & Ng, 2006).

Nevertheless, different periods of time e.g. the 19th, 20th, and 21 centuries have different economic settings and thus have general tendencies for demand and supply of skills (Acemoglu, 2000). According to the theoretical model proposed by Becker and Murphy, cited in Kim and Seoul, (2003), the division of labor (specialization) is one of the important drivers that cause productivity and economic growth. Interestingly, US firm faced severe difficulties and challenges from Japan in 1980s when it was using division of labor and specialization. The reasons behind the difficulties faced by US were the changing and volatile nature of demand in terms of customized products and services and the introduction of new products that replaced the existing ones that led to significantly reduced demand of the existing products. Kim and Seoul argue that under the specialization the jobs are sub-divided and have strict demarcations which constraints the company to meet the volatile demands and changing situation immediately (Kim and Seoul, 2003). Unlike single-skilled employees, multi-skilled employees can increase productivity, decrease cost in terms of labor, space and other equipment etc. Thus contributes more to the bottom line of the business which can make him/her indispensable for the company. Similarly, multi-skilled staff helps a company in terms of providing the company with such a workforce which is flexible and self-managed as per requirements of the company (Express Computer, 2010).

An organization can produce efficiently existing products and services with specialization but with multi-skilling an organization is in a far efficient production mode where new products are continuously launched (Kim and Seoul, 2003). For instance, according to Dyck and Halper, cited in (Hoyt and Matuszek, 2001), Celestica and 1MB subsidiary claim to have achieved significant improvements in the productivity, quality, and lower costs due to implementation of multi-skilled employees. One more reason for

developing more than one skill is that people who have mastered one technical skill might face high level of obsolescence in their respective fields which would put them at risk to lose their jobs. For instance, an individual who has expertise and is a top performer in his/her field could contribute to the company's success in only that domain, technology or other field etc. If the market conditions do not favor such expertise and knowledge in that particular domain the individual's contribution to company's performance will be very much limited and, therefore, possibly the individual could lose the job. On the contrary, an individual who has multiple skills and knowledge about different related or adjacent fields will be far more effective in the market because market disturbances can affect verticals but it is unlikely that all verticals are similarly affected under recessionary pressures and downturn (Express Computer, 2010).

Multi-skilling benefits both employees and organization. Multi-skilled employees are more flexible, productive, and are of high quality and morale (Hoyt & Matuszek, 2001). Moreover, they have reduced job insecurity, better growth prospects and the ability to achieve their personal goals and objectives. Whereas, organization can utilize its workforce optimally deploy employees easily across projects, increase productivity and quality, have flexible workforce who knows about the organizations' needs and have high level of involvement (Express Computer, 2010). Dalton, cited in Hoyt and Matuszek (2001), reports that firms used flexible workforce and came up with estimated improvements in overall output, defects, yield, and downtime ranged from 30% to 40% and were highly correlated with multi-skilling. According to Kacter, cited in Hoyt and Matuszek (2001), the Cadillac Division of General Motors successfully formed multi-skilled employee's team for dealing with maintenance, design, and environmental technology to handle a wide range of requests from internal customers. The flexibility within the cross-trained teams successfully completed the job in time regardless of interruptions and sick days.

On the contrary, the study conducted by Hoyt and Matuszek found that multi-skilled workers are not significant predictor of financial performance in a statistical analysis of high- tech companies (Hoyt & Matuszek, 2001). Similarly, multi-skilling has an opportunity cost associated with it, that is, multi-skilled workers hardly improve their productivity through the division of labor or specialization whilst single-skilled workers likely increase their productivity by continuing to perform a job which is the productivity improvement through specialization (Akhlaghi & Mahony, 1997). Though multi-skilled workers have relatively high employability but individuals who experience more frequent job changes are more likely to indulge in activities and habits such as smoking more, consuming more alcohol, and exercise less. On the other hand, there are significant adverse effects on physical and mental health of those employees who perceive job insecurity (Meadow, 2010). According to Llyod (1996), multi-skilling also helps the company, in some cases, to minimize the turnover of the core labor force in times of down turn in economy when the company really needs such skills for survival. Likewise, it helps the company to cut their costs by reducing the headcounts and improve productivity (Lloyd, 1996). Similarly, due to multi-skilling in the maintenance area there will be "reduction in downtime, less repairs, quicker set ups and start-ups" (Lloyd, 1996).

However, the flip side of multi-skilling is that fewer job distinctions and flexible attitude towards that does what may potentially decrease the demarcation disputes. Blurring the distinctions between different previously defined tasks and job titles might result in disputes and uncertainty as to who is responsible and has the required skills for performing certain duties. This also suggests that employee may cross too far into other individual's job for which they were not sufficiently skilled or formally accredited (Akhlaghi Mahony, 1997). Similarly, Llyod argues that in terms of productivity the labor unit cost will rise. Interestingly, a company invests in its employees in terms of time and resources for deepening and widening the skills set of its employees has more positive Impact on their motivation than most other payment system (Lloyd, 1996). Moreover, there is a belief about multi-skilling that it helps bringing flexibility in work and in attitudes towards job demarcation that ultimately lead to lower disputes and conflicts. But the research conducted by Cordery, cited in Akhlaghi and Mahony (1997), reveals that "the highest levels of industrial strike activity occur among groups of skilled employees who, in turn, report high levels of job satisfaction". Number of factors have contributed to the work intensification such as changes in the products and processes of production, different production approaches such as lean production and Just in Time (JIT) systems, changes in work organizations such as increased demand for multi-skilling and flexibility, advancement and deployment of technologies such as automation and computerization, human resources management policies regarding high employees' participation and involvement, increased job insecurity and unemployment pressures, and practices of more work load without or less compensation (Knight, 2009). Work intensification has adverse impact on an employee's physiological and psychological health that ultimately effect employee's satisfaction and productivity (Meadow, 2010).

With introduction of new products or models in production system there might occur changes in the manufacturing processes, setups of new production lines, new machines, and equipments or tools, adjustment of existing lines, and the creation of new tasks. Due to conflicts between processes, malfunctioning and defects of machines, frequent changes in machines and tools, introduction of new tasks, and the difficulties in coordinating tasks with the processes exacerbates the uncertain situation. In order to better cope with such problems firms need individuals who have wide range of skills to perform various tasks, understand and have knowledge about the overall production process and the business, are good at problem solving, proactive, propose and influence changes in organizational routines, take initiative to solve problems immediately without the help of others (Kim & Seoul, 2003; Gerhardt, Ashenbaum & Newman, 2009). In today's dynamic and ever-competitive environment, organizations need proactive employees who take initiative, and use their creative and concrete knowledge of their jobs in the interest of organization (Meadow, 2010). According to Unsworth and Parker, cited in Veldhoven and Dorenbosch (2008), "*proactivity is a set of self-starting action-orientated behaviors aimed at modifying the situation or oneself to achieve greater personal or organizational effectiveness*". In other words, proactively is a behavioral attribute which refers to the willingness of employees to participate in extending work and dealing with increased flexibility demands. It can be divided into on-the-job proactivity and developmental proactivity. The former refers to employees who actively

engage in removing inefficiencies that arise in their work in the constantly changing work and work places, whereas, the latter refers to employees who learn and develop new skills and knowledge to ensure their future employability by scanning the work environment (Gerhardt, Ashenbaum and Newman, 2009). However, both on-the-job and developmental proactivity is vital for dynamic organization (Veldhoven & Dorenbosch, 2008).

The demographic developments in Europe and North America imply that old people will be a substantial part of the workforce in the near future. Wan and Fay, cited in Veldhoven and Dorenbosch (2008), found a negative relationship between developmental proactivity and age. Further, it implies from this that in the changing environment the idea of proactivity is not that great because the substantial old workforce would not be doing that good by taking limited initiative towards development which suggest lower work participation, performance and flexibility. In the author's view, employees who are good at taking initiative towards development may not be in favor of an organization because they are interested in their careers and this might motivate them to leave that organization for career development and hence the organization could face turnover of high-productive employees. Losing such individuals would have a very bad impact on the organization in terms of recruiting and developing new employees which would cost the organization capital and time resources. Similarly, proactive staff sometimes can be difficult to manage because they like to take initiative and try many different things. Proactive employees are self-starting, future oriented, and bring changes either in oneself or in situation such as bringing improvement in work and processes. An example of proactive behavior is given below which a quotation from energy is selling call centre (Grant & Ashford, 2008).

"On a few occasions if there's something that is not working or is causing a duplication of work then I challenged it. One particular incident is that there was a process not so long back where we'd send out a letter to a customer, then also leave a message on their phone. So what we did — we evaluated that - so to leave a message first then, if there's no response, send a letter rather than doing both at the same time. I know it's only a little thing, but it saves a lot of time" (Bindle and Parker, 2010, P.1).

Kim and Seoul observed that Japanese workers have wide range of skills, can perform variety of tasks, have less strict job demarcations, and take initiative in solving problems by themselves in unusual circumstances without other workers' help than the US workers. For instance, operators not only do their normal operations but also perform the unusual tasks such as finding and repairing abnormalities, adjusting machines and equipment without other's technicians' help in case of machines' malfunctioning or adjustment problem (Kim & Seoul, 2003). On the other hand, in authors view, there is a cost associated with having proactive employees that is to give them sufficient knowledge and skills about the business because it has greater influence on an individual's proactivity. Chan proved that those proactive employees who lack situational judgment get negative evaluation from their supervisors which results in lower employee well-being (Chan, 2006). The author implies that their performance would be affected and would not likely to contribute more to the organizational performance. Parker et al. found that proactive employees performed well and got good rates from their

supervisors (Parker, Collins, and Grant, 2008). Further, Greenglas and Fiksenbauni found the proactive employees have lower levels of absenteeism (Greenglass & Fiksenbaum, 2009). On the other hand, Seibert et al found that employees who voiced many concerns were not that progressive in their salary promotion and career progression as compare to those who voiced few concerns (Seibert, Kraimer & Crant, 2001). According to Bindle and Parker situational factors such as working in de-motivating teams and psychological unsafe feelings have negative impacts on an individual to take the risk to be proactive. Similarly, job design, leadership and climate-related variables have very strong influence on an individual proactivity. The challenge for the organization would be to offer employees with job autonomy, personal control, voice, a high Level of trust relationship between leaders, and support (Bindle & Parker, 2010).

In the ever changing and competitive environment, organizations face severe challenges from its competitors, technology, and the changing and more demanding nature of customers. If organizations do not meet their customers' expectations, the likelihood is that customers will switch to competitors and hence the business will start losing sales and eventually will demise. So, organizations need employees who have better understanding of customers' dealing, tastes, needs, and have skills and experience to deliver quality service to customers in such a fashion that not only win customers but also make them loyal customers and volunteer-walking- advertisers of the company (Farner, Luthans, & Sommer, 2001). The change in the business concept about customers and products has beautifully been drawn in the following sentences.

"The chant of the industrial revolution was that of the manufacturer who said, 'This is what I make, won 't you please buy it'. The call of information age is the consumer asking. 'This is what I want, won 't you please make it'" (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010).

In the past, customers were plenty in the growing economy and markets and there were fewer companies to offer products and services. But currently companies face new marketing realities, that is, changing demographics, more-sophisticated competitors, saturated markets and industries that mean that there are fewer customers in the market (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010). Similarly, in today's competitive age, customers are more demanding and knowledgeable than before. They evaluate the service they receive based on service clues: functional clues such as technical quality of the offering; mechanistic clues such as the sensory representation of the service; and humanistic clues such as behavior and appearance of the service provider. Humanistic clues suggest that a service provider's choice of words, tone of voice, and level of enthusiasm, body language and appropriateness of dress all form part of the customer's experience (Solnet, 2006). An example of customer-focused company is Ford. In the words of one Ford executive "if we are not customer driven, our cars won't be either" (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010).

In the past, external customers were considered the only customer of an organization but in the late 1980's a new service management concept of internal customers, employees, emerged. The idea is that the whole organization must serve those who serve others (Farner, Luthans & Sommer, 2001). Because if internal customers, employees, are not served well then how can it be expected of them to serve the external customers. Employees work on the principle of "you scratch my back and I will scratch yours" (Improving customer service, 2009, P.1). For instance, UPS incorporated the

concept of internal customer by spending a great deal of time evaluating internal employee satisfaction which contributed to its success. Similarly, Haytt Hotels also found the concept as a significant factor in their success (Farner, Luthans & Sommer, 2001). In author's view, If employees are forced to be customer focused, it will not be that effective because first of all employees should be satisfied by their jobs (security), work environment (safety), promotion opportunities, and training and career development opportunities etc. But in today's fast changing world, internal customers are forced to achieve targets and provide more than what company offers them that might lead to dissatisfaction of internal customers as a result they may fail to satisfy customers (Farner, Luthans & Sommer, 2001). According to Kotler and Armstrong, a satisfied customer tells other three about his good experience, whereas a dissatisfied customer tells ten others about his bad experience (Kotler & Armstrong 2010). Similarly, job insecurity will adversely affect employees' performance as they may fear that their job might be outsourced or finished or combined with other similar jobs. Interaction between a company's service-employees and its customers is very important as customers remember it. Therefore, those employees who feel uncomfortable in dealing with customers or lack training, expertise and skills to meet customers' expectations can cause customers to experience unpleasant memories of a service (Solnet, 2006). Interestingly, some companies outsource their customer service department to other countries which is though cost effective strategy but often results in dissatisfied customers due to poor customer service which is caused by language and culture differences, and low level of skills, experience, and expertise. Some examples of outsourced customer services are Three Mobile and Barclays Bank. However, customer-focused staff learns about customers' desires and wants, gather new products and service ideas, and test proposed product improvements. Proctor & Gamble, Disney, Wal-Mart, Marriot, Dell Computer, 3M and L.L. Bean are some of customer-driven companies. One good example of customer focused company is 3M which is clear from one of its executive's statement, "Our goal is to lead customers where they want to go before they know where they want to go" (Kotler & Armstrong 2010, p.13).

3. Conclusion

In the past, customers were plenty in the growing economy and markets and there were fewer companies to offer products and services. But currently companies face new marketing realistic, that is, changing demographics, more-sophisticated competitors, saturated markets and industries that mean that there are fewer customers in the market. Therefore, organizations need employees who have better understanding of customers' dealing, tastes, needs, and have skills and experience to deliver quality service to customers in such a fashion that not only win customers but also make them loyal customers and volunteer-walking-advertisers of the company.

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