

## **Human resource management applications in the developing world: Empowering employees**

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### **Abstract**

This manuscript illustrates how the human resource management concept of employee empowerment likely has benefits in both developed and developing economies. Studies in the hospitality sector and the manufacturing sector in Canada, India, and Turkey show that, in general, empowering supervisory behaviors, such as transformational leadership, increase feelings of psychological empowerment of employees, both in turn having positive associations with valued individual work outcomes. Practical implications of these findings are offered.

### **Keywords**

Developing countries, Employee empowerment, Human resource management.

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## **Introduction**

I am delighted to make a contribution to this journal. Relatively little research conducted in Iran has been available to the rest of the world. This journal will present Iranian research to readers around the world. It is important that research evidence reported in one part of the world is examined in Iran and elsewhere to determine generalizability and potential limiting conditions. My hope is that Iranian researchers would enter into collaboration with colleagues elsewhere, and vice versa. For example, an Iranian woman, Serena G. Sohrab, received her PhD in Organizational Studies at my school and in collaboration with my colleague, Rekha Karambayya, was the lead author on the outstanding chapter on Women in Management in Iran (Sohrab & Karambayya, 2017) in *Women in Management Worldwide: Signs of Progress* (Burke & Richardsen, 2017). Readers of their chapter will learn a lot about the experiences of professional and managerial women in Iran. Sohrab is now teaching at a Canadian business school.

Individuals spend at least half of each day working. Work may create positive as well as negative experiences, these experiences affecting not only the individuals' satisfaction and wellbeing but also their contributions to individual and organizational performance. Most individuals at work search for meaning in their efforts; they want to make a meaningful contribution reflected in satisfaction, pride, and self-esteem.

In this short contribution, I will review my research and that of others in both developed and developing countries that address worker's wellbeing and organizational performance. This involves human resource management practices of managers that increase feelings of psychological empowerment of their employees. While changing supervisory behaviors and organizational cultures and structures to increase employee feelings of psychological empowerment is necessary, the concept of psychological empowerment is a human resource management concept relevant to both developing and developed countries.

## **Literature review**

The importance of employee empowerment was first observed in service and hospitality sectors (Zemke & Schaefer, 1989; Bowen & Lawler, 1992). Employee empowerment involves two levels of factors: the organizational context-culture and structure, macro level human resource management policies and practices, and the individual level - the person who exhibits empowerment in their jobs, micro level feelings of psychological empowerment. Fortunately, well validated measures at both levels exist; for the macro level, Arnold, Arad, Rhoades and Drasgow (2000) and, at the micro level, Spreitzer (1996).

I will begin by reviewing some of our work in this area. First, in a study of 266 frontline service employees from five-star hotels in Turkey, we investigated the association of organizational empowerment practices (e.g., employees have a say in defining their own job responsibilities, and on changing hotel policies), feelings of psychological empowerment (my job is meaningful, I have job autonomy, I am confident in my abilities to do my job), and four work outcomes: job satisfaction, affective commitment, intent to quit, and quality of service provided to customers and clients. Psychological empowerment predicted three of the four work outcomes not intent to quit, which was very low in the sample. Organizational empowerment practices also predicted several of these work outcomes (Burke et al., 2015a).

We replicated and extended this study in a sample of 242 frontline employees in eight five-star hotels in Turkey. Work outcomes included two additional work outcomes, work engagement, and employee engaging voice behaviors. Supervisory empowerment behaviors predicted employee feelings of psychological empowerment. Supervisory empowerment behaviors and employee feelings of psychological empowerment predicted all but one work outcome. Thus, benefits of empowerment were present in two separate studies in the hospitality sector, a sector that has emphasized service quality cultures as a way of satisfying customers (Burke et al., 2016).

Second, we extended our research on empowerment to employees in the manufacturing sector. Data were collected from 261 employees working in the textile and furniture sector in Turkey. We used the same measures here as in the two hospitality employee studies mentioned above. Supervisory empowerment behaviors increased feelings of psychological empowerment of employees, and both supervisory empowering behaviors and employee feelings of psychological empowerment increased employee standings on most work outcomes. Thus, benefits of employee empowerment were present in a second set of industries. (Burke et al., 2015b)

Third, Gill et al. (2010) studied the effects of transformational leader behavior and employee desire for empowerment in both Canada and India. Their work extends evidence on potential benefits of psychological empowerment to a developed and a developing country. Data were collected from 230 Canadian and 243 Indian frontline employees in the hospitality sector. Leaders exhibiting higher levels of transformational leadership were associated with higher levels of employee desire for empowerment. It is important to note that levels of both perceived leader transformational leadership and employee desire for empowerment were higher in Canada than in India, suggesting an important role of national culture and perhaps levels of management and industrial development. The human resource management concept of empowering employees then seems to have positive effects in both developing and developed countries.

Employee empowerment is likely to be a better fit in some jobs and industrial sectors than in others; it may not have universal benefits. Thus, it is not surprising that empowerment has been implemented more widely in the hospitality sector, jobs in which employees have direct contact with customers, and some freedom to behave in various ways. Interestingly, empowerment was found to have benefits in our study of employees in the textile and manufacturing sector. Managers must ensure that empowerment concepts are a good fit for their jobs.

There are obvious practical implications that follow. First, senior

executives need to make employee empowerment a high priority human resource management goal. In addition, managers and supervisors need to increase their own levels of empowerment. Gill et al. (2010) suggest training managers in the exercise of transformational leadership. But bringing about cultural change will be challenging. Managers and supervisors will require training in psychologically empowering attitudes and behaviors, employee participation in decision-making must be increased, delegating more activities and control as appropriate to employees, sharing more information with employees, coaching and mentoring employees, and increasing employee self-efficacy through staff training initiatives. Managers and supervisors should delegate more authority to staff, increase their participation in decision-making, appreciate and value all staff, be a role model, offer staff increasingly more challenging responsibilities, ask staff for help in solving work solicit ideas from staff more generally, give more freedom to staff, increase expectations of staff, more fully use the abilities of staff, and increase these abilities over time.

### **Footnotes**

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