Antecedents of Quality of Work Life Orientation: An Empirical Investigation in the Malaysian Public Sector Organizations

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ANTECEDENTS OF QUALITY OF WORK LIFE ORIENTATION: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION IN THE MALAYSIAN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATION

Abstract

This study aims to investigate the effect of social capital and leadership behaviour on the quality of work life orientation in the Malaysian Public Sector organisations. Survey questionnaires were gathered from 500 Malaysian public sector organizations. Result of the study found three out of four dimensions of social capital namely, relational, network ties and communication as significant contributors of QWL orientation. The empirical evidence also supports relation-oriented leadership behaviour as an important antecedent of QWL orientation.

Keywords: Malaysian Public sector, quality of work life, social capital, leadership behaviour

PAPER TEXT: Research paper

INTRODUCTION

Since its introduction three decades ago, Quality of Work Life (hereafter abbreviated to the QWL) has gained much acceptance and undergone a number of changes and evolution (Nadler and Lawler 1983). QWL is seen as a panacea for many organizational problems, and improvement in QWL can contribute to organizational efficiency and positive behavioural responses (Hackman and Suttle 1977; Saklani 2004). Improvement in QWL has many desirable effects. For instance, organizations that enhanced QWL leads to improved employee satisfaction and fulfilment, increased job involvement, reduced absenteeism, lower turnover, and improved better utilization of human resources, improved employee-supervisor relationship, increased productivity and strengthened a organizations’ competitiveness (Steer and Porter 1983; Guest 1979; Efraty and Sirgy, 1990; Igbaria et al. 1994, Sirgy et al 2001; May and Lau 1999). Perceptions of QWL are also positively and significantly related to organizational commitment (Anuradha and Pandey, 1995).

QWL has also been viewed in a variety of ways including as a process for achieving organizational goal, an approach favouring greater employer-employee cohesion, a set of organizational interventions, a movement and as a type of working life felt by employees (Nadler and Lawler 1983; Wyatt and Wah 2001). Thus, the term has been well recognized as a dynamic multidimensional construct (May and Lau 1999) and encompasses a wide range of organizational phenomena (Davis and Chens 1975; Walton 1974; Loscocco and Roschelle 1991). The key concepts captured and discussed in the existing literature
include job security, better reward systems, higher pay, opportunity for growth, participative groups and increased organizational productivity, among others.

Our paper focuses on the first perspective of QWL that view QWL as “a process by which an organization responds to employee needs by developing mechanisms to allow them to share fully in making the decisions that design their lives at work” (Robbins, 1989:207). The basic objectives of an effective QWL program are improved working conditions (mainly from an employee’s perspective) and greater organizational effectiveness (mainly from an employer’s perspective).

Several published works have addressed the constructs that make up the QWL domain and key elements of QWL programs (Kalra and Ghosh, 1984; Shamir and Salomon, 1985; Loscocco and Roschelle 1991). Others such as Winter et al (2000) viewed QWL as an attitudinal response to the prevailing work environment and identified five work environment domains that include role stress, job characteristics, and supervisory, structural and sectoral characteristics to directly and indirectly shape employees’ experiences, attitudes and behaviour. While aspects of jobs and work environment have long been considered to be important influence of QWL, recent organizational research have begin to give much greater attention to aspects of the quality social relations and a leadership role of a supportive style that help in developing organizational and employee competitiveness (Requena 2003; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998; Sirgy et al. 2001). Thus, we must also look at how these two antecedents exert both direct and indirect effect on QWL orientation and partly to contribute towards appreciating the importance of the assessment of QWL specifically in the Malaysian public sector organizations.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

As one of the pioneer of QWL, Walton (1975) proposed eight major dimensions relating to the QWL. They are adequate and fair compensation, safe and healthy working conditions, opportunity to use and develop human capacities, continued growth and security, social integration, constitutionalism, work life and social relevance of work. Moskal (1989) identify three basic ingredients namely; evidence that management concern with workers well-being, some level of trust between management and workers and follow-up mechanism, for the successful of QWL. May and Lau (1999) on the other hand, operationalize QWL as the favourable conditions and environments of a workplace that support and promote employee satisfaction by providing them with rewards, job security and growth opportunities. Their findings provide empirical evidence that links elements of QWL and overall employee satisfaction to the overall financial performance of the firm. Mullen (1991) tests the hypothesis that QWL is an important construct that influences productivity and related trends. The results suggest that the amenities, particularly
environmental quality, may be instrumental in explaining the differential magnitude of the productivity slowdown across urban areas.

Based on characteristic of QWL dimensions proposed by Walton (1975) a total of 40 questions gathered as scales measuring such factors as prevailing working conditions, management support, practices at workplace, job and competence development, relationship at work and work and family balance. These factors are grouped into work setting issues, challenge of work, the job itself, work-home life interaction and feeling about work (Villeneuve et al 1995).

**Antecedents to QWL**

Quality of life at work does not merely come from the job itself. There are other factors involved. Elements relating to better or worse social relationship at work will undoubtedly determine one’s quality of work life. This draws attention, among other things (e.g. co-worker and management support, teamwork, communication) to the roles played by social capital. As a set of informal norms and values, social capital includes aspects such as trust in others, engagement with organization social integration and social relationships. Utilizing Requena’s (2003) conceptualization of social capital as the theoretical basis, social capital refers as the set of cooperative relations between social members that facilitate solutions to collective problems. The construct can be measured using five dimensions: trust, social relation, engagement, and communication. Trust is define as trust with others, social relation refers to work relation, engagement refers to commitment to the organization and communication refers to communication linkages among members. Recent research indicates that social capital act as a mechanism for individuals to work together more effectively and efficiently which can benefit both the organization (e.g. creating value for stakeholders) and its members (e.g. enhancing employee skill) (Leana and Van Buren III 1999). The network of social relationships (Gant et al 2002) that a worker maintains with others in the workplace, trust towards higher management and co-workers, engagement to the team and organization, and possibility of influence and channels for communication affect workforce achievement and further enhance the quality of life at work (Requena, 2000). As a result, we propose the following hypothesis:

**H1:** Organization with high level of social capital elements is positively associated with QWL orientation

Based on the important role of leaders to organization, it is not surprising that leadership behaviour has been identified as one of the significant factor in developing QWL orientation in an organization. Leadership is defined broadly as an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real
changes that reflect their mutual purpose (Rost 1991 p.102). Successful leaders tend to create a climate within the work environment where they are able to assist employees to set and achieve individual, team and ultimately organizational objectives (Perryer and Jordan, 2005). Using Bass and Avolio’s (1995) Multifactor-Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ Form 5X) items to measure leadership behaviour, factor analysis, with principal components extraction identified two types of leadership behaviours. These are the relation-oriented (transformational) and task-oriented (transactional) behaviours. Generally, relation-oriented leadership behaviour instils followers with the personal desire to achieve goals. Task-oriented leadership behaviour, on the other hand, refers to leaders who obtain commitment from their subordinates for the achievement of goals through a promise of rewards or agreed upon exchanges and by taking corrective actions for inadequate performance (Bass 1985; Bass and Avolio 1994). Leaders affect their subordinates directly through their interactions and also through work relations. Studies in this genre of leadership have shown that relation-oriented leadership is positively related to employee satisfaction and to those in-role behaviours which constitute job performance (Bass and Avolio 1994). This type of leadership has also been linked to outcomes such as leadership effectiveness, innovativeness, quality improvement and both subjective and objective ratings of performance (Bass 1995). In fact, quality work environment requires leadership that goes beyond the more task-oriented style that are more intellectually stimulating, inspirational and charismatic (Avolio et al 1999). Thus, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Relation-oriented leadership behaviour is more positively associated with the QWL orientation

H3: Task-oriented leadership behaviour is negatively associated with the QWL orientation

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

From a review of the literature on QWL studies, workplace and organizational research (Walton 1975; Lowe 2000) a research framework as shown in Figure 1 is developed. The framework showed the position of the antecedent and the five QWL orientation dimensions.
METHODOLOGY

A quantitative approach using a survey questionnaire as the data collection methodology was chosen as the research design for this study. The empirical data obtained would enable the study between antecedents and QWL orientation. Consequently, relationship-based statistical measures were employed.

Population and Sample

A mail survey was carried out and 203 useable questionnaires were returned indicating 41% response rate from an eligible sample of 500 organizations. Responses to questionnaire were examined weekly over a ten week period. There were no significant differences found between the responses in the final weeks and the earlier ones, thus establishing a strong case for absence of response bias. The respondents consist of civil servant carrying managerial roles in the Administrative and Management Service/Human Resource Management Division in their organizations.

Measurement Instruments
All constructs were measured using a six-point semantic differential-liked scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree”. The scale contains a series of bipolar items for the various properties of the construct. The QWL orientation and social capital measures derived and adapted from earlier QWL and social capital studies respectively (Cook 1981; Requena 2003). The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire items were used to determine the leadership behaviour (Bass and Avolio 1995).

The measure of QWL orientation used 40 items in the questionnaire. After principal component analysis process, no items were reduced and five dimensions were identified to explain the underlying dimensions of QWL orientation. Factor1 (work setting issues) represent the work environment including the social and interpersonal aspects of the work. Factor2 (challenge of work) deals with the composition of work an individual perform at work. Factor3 (the job itself) reflect the work practice setting and the impact of work experiences. Factor4 (work-home life interaction) emphasizes the interface between the life experience of employee in their workplace and in the home. Factor5 (feeling about work) refers to employee perception towards his/her job. The five dimensions were consistent with the components highlighted by Villeneuve et al (1995). The Cronbach alpha (α) of the QWL orientation dimensions are as follows: F1 = 0.920; F2 = 0.882; F3 = 0.730; F4 = 0.684; F5 = 0.644. As for social capital, after factor analyzes the original number of 20 items was retained, however, four underlying dimensions were revealed instead of five. The dimensions were renamed as relational, network ties, engagement, and communication. Cronbach alpha for social capital dimensions was 0.915 with specific dimensions as follows: Relational = 0.918; Network ties = 0.810; Engagement = 0.659; Communication = 0.603. Overall cronbach alpha for leadership behaviour was 0.975 with each dimension of relation-oriented behaviour = 0.970 and task-oriented behaviour = 0.908.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A majority of the respondents (52.2 percent) held executive posts or higher. These are the directors and deputy directors of the Human Resource Management or the Administrative and Management Services Division of the agencies. The balance 47.8% was from the lower management level. More than half of the respondents (61.6 %) had served the government for more than ten years while 19.7 percent had served the government for three years or less. About 12.8 % of the respondents had been in the public service organization between four to six years. These figures show that a majority of the respondents had served the government for many years and this justifies their evaluation towards the QWL orientation in the organization concerned. A majority of the (50 %) responded organizations were from the State
Government offices, followed by the Departments at the Federal level (23.6%) and Statutory Bodies (21.7%). All the 28 Ministries responded to the survey including six Federal Government Agencies.

**Correlation Analysis of Variables of the Study**

Correlation analysis was run on the data using the SPSS version 14. The association between the five QWL orientation dimensions employed in this study are presented in Table 1. The results show that the highest correlation value is between work setting issues and job itself. The cut-off value for highly correlated factors is 0.7 as suggested by Bryman and Cramer (2001). There was also a strong, negative correlation between work/home life interaction and feeling about work with high levels of work/home life interaction associated with lower levels of feeling about work. This indicates that when more employees have a balance work and home life interaction, the less negative feeling they have about their work.

**Table 1 Correlation Analysis between QWL Orientation Dimensions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Work setting issues</th>
<th>Challenge of work</th>
<th>Job itself</th>
<th>Work/home life interaction</th>
<th>Feeling about work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work setting issues</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge of work</td>
<td>.350**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job itself</td>
<td>.726**</td>
<td>.503**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work/home life interaction</td>
<td>.310**</td>
<td>.103</td>
<td>.424**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling about work</td>
<td>-.246**</td>
<td>-.110</td>
<td>-.387**</td>
<td>-.515**</td>
<td>1.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2 Correlation Analysis of Variables**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Relational</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Network ties</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Engagement</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.61**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Communication</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Relation-oriented</td>
<td>.74**</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Task-oriented</td>
<td>.62**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>.49**</td>
<td>.48**</td>
<td>.87**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Work setting issues</td>
<td>.86**</td>
<td>.64**</td>
<td>.52**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.76**</td>
<td>.66**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Challenge of work</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.51**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>.43**</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Job itself</td>
<td>.673*</td>
<td>.57**</td>
<td>.47**</td>
<td>.53**</td>
<td>.67**</td>
<td>.54**</td>
<td>.73**</td>
<td>.50**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The associations between dependent and independent variables show that almost all social capital and leadership dimensions are significantly correlated with the QWL orientation dimensions and the QWL orientation summated value (see Table 2).

**Relationship between Social Capital, Leadership Behaviour and QWL Orientation**

How well do social capital and leadership behaviour dimensions influence QWL orientation and which one of the dimensions is the most influential was determined by performing multiple regressions. First, multiple regression using the enter method was conducted to determine the contributions of each dimension. Later, multiple regressions was rerun using stepwise method to eliminate the insignificant factors, thus producing the significant determinants of QWL orientation, the results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Factors Influencing QWL Orientation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Dimensions</th>
<th>Model 1: Enter Method</th>
<th>Model 2: Stepwise Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relational</td>
<td>0.412 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.417 (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network Ties</td>
<td>0.215 (0.000)</td>
<td>0.227 (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>0.030 (0.539)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>0.123 (0.009)</td>
<td>0.125 (0.007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation-oriented</td>
<td>0.280 (0.001)</td>
<td>0.235 (0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task-oriented</td>
<td>-0.056 (0.441)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.742</td>
<td>0.861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>0.734</td>
<td>0.735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F Statistics</td>
<td>93.900 (0.000)</td>
<td>141.414 (0.000)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Earlier figures are standardized regression weight ($\beta$) and figures in brackets are significant values.

The result indicates that 74 percent of the variance in QWL orientation was explained by Model 1 (Adjusted $R^2 = 73$ percent). Relational, Network Ties and Communication are dimensions of social capital found to be significant predictors of QWL orientation. Meanwhile, the relation-oriented behaviour
is more prevalent than task oriented behaviour in explaining QWL orientation. This is confirmed by Model 2 with Relational, Network ties and Relation-oriented at 0.000 significant levels respectively, while Communication at p<0.01. Engagement and Task-oriented behaviour are insignificant contributors to QWL orientation.

Overall, the two constructs of social capital and leadership behaviours support the explanation of QWL orientation. Both model 1 and 2 are significant with F statistics at 93.900 and 141.414 respectively.

H1 was supported indicating a positive relationship between social capital and QWL orientation dimensions. The outcome suggests that good inter-personal relationship and job relationship among organizational members would create a healthy work environment that enhances the likelihood of satisfaction and performance. The findings are consistent with the study by Requena (2003). This is an indication that social capital is an important factor that contributed to the quality of work life experience of the workforce in the Malaysian public service organization. Furthermore, inter-personal relationships within the organizations are a common culture of the Malaysian public sector environment.

H2 and H3 were also supported. The results imply that relation-oriented behaviour is more prevalent than the task-oriented behaviour. The outcome may be due to employees being more comfortable towards managers that build strong relationship with his/her subordinates. Any support from the management may help employees to become involved in their job and thus enhances in the quality of life at work.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that the significant relationship between the four dimensions of social capital and two dimensions of leadership behaviour investigated and QWL orientation evidently indicate the importance of the dimensions in ensuring quality of working life. The empirical evidence also supports the impact of social capital and leadership behaviour that act as the antecedent in influencing the QWL orientation in the Malaysian public service organizations. Studies on this issue provide a strong indication to public managers on the importance of social capital that may give organization a sustainable edge, managing collective action and developing high level of intellectual capital (Leana and Van Buren 1999). The findings also suggest that leader behaviour has similar effect in both public and private sector organizations. It is not sufficient for public sector managers to be merely supportive, more importantly; managers must be able to make appropriate responses to the full range of employee behaviours in the organization.
This study has its own limitations. Besides investigating social capital and leadership behaviour, other factors such as technological advancement, resource constraints and environmental instability influencing QWL orientation may also need to be examined. As the study deployed a quantitative method; future effort should combine it with the qualitative approach for a more rigorous data of QWL orientation and perceptions.

References


