Person-Job Fit Perception: The Influence on Work Adjustment of Academe Newcomers

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ABSTRACT

A survey has been conducted to examine the relationship between person-job fit perception and work adjustment. Sample consisted of 167 new academics from three public universities in Malaysia. The Person-Job Fit Perception Scale was used to measure the person-job fit perception and the Work Adjustment Scale was used to measure work adjustment. Descriptive analysis showed high levels of person-job fit perception and work adjustment among the subjects. Correlation analysis proved positive and significant relationship between person-job fit perception and work adjustment. Meaning, new academics with higher level of perception-job fit perception perceived better work adjustment process than those who possessed lower level of person-job fit perception. Partial correlation analysis highlighted the influence of work experience and other demographic factors such as age, gender, and department on the relationship. Based on the findings, recommendations were made to both new academics and university managements. Among them are to engage new academics into industrial practices, to review current induction courses, adoption of proactive actions by new academics in building up their own job-related knowledge and skills, and last but not the least, is to have personal sessions between department heads and their new subordinates as to provide feedbacks on their current performances.

Keywords: person-job fit perception, work adjustment, new academics

INTRODUCTION

To a certain extent, every newcomer must adjust to his or her job responsibilities and work environment. In explaining the work adjustment process, individuals are seen to dynamically and continuously working towards maintaining his or her suitability to the work environment. Similar to any new employees, new academics need to adjust to functional, hierarchical and inclusionary changes (Schein, 1971). The ropes of academia such as research, supervision, publication, consultancy, community service and administrative tasks have to be well understood and performed in order to excel in the academe. New academics must also learn the skills to fit themselves into the formal as well as informal communication network.

A research by Sohail, Rajadurai and Nor Azlin (2003) revealing a group of new academics’ dissatisfaction with their inability to meet with teaching and administrative workloads, recent critiques on academia’s lack of efficiency in producing innovative researches and a serious call to the Ministry of Higher Education for re-attempts on public universities’ curriculum review have implied a need to look into Malaysian new academics’ work adjustment level. An inquiry has to be made in order to identify how far new academics’ evaluations on their ability, knowledge, skills and work experience levels could influence their work adjustment. As future performance of employees could be forecast by looking at their early work experiences (Berlew & Hall, 1966), it is a safe remark to say that current work adjustment of Malaysian new academics would then hold a long-term impact on the future of the nation’s academia performance. So, a survey has been conducted to determine the work adjustment and person-job fit perception levels of new academics in several Malaysian public universities. The relationship between person-job fit perception and work adjustment among these new academics was also examined.

The study is based on the Model of New Academics Work Adjustment. The theoretical framework is derived from the underlining principles of Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis and Lofquist, 1984) and the Person-Environment (P-E) Perspective which emphasized on the correspondence of individuals with the job demands and rewards in their work environment. However, instead of looking into the physical interactions, these perspectives
concentrated more on the psychological and subjective aspects of such correspondence. Hence, the Model of New Academics Work Adjustment proposed the influence of new academics’ person-job fit perceptions on their ability to adjust to the job demands and rewards in the work environment. Those who think that they are qualified and fit as academic professionals would experience better work adjustment. This is because new academics who feel qualified and fit to the job would usually have higher confidence in tasks implementations. The job is perceived to provide more opportunities for them to practice the knowledge and skills that they have. They would enjoy and be more willing to carry out the job responsibilities. Hence, there is less pressure and uncertainties. On contrary, new academics who perceive that they should have better amount of knowledge, skills, training and abilities would experience tougher work adjustment periods. They would be less confident; more pressured with uncertainties and less adjusted to the work requirements and environment. This is illustrated by the diagram below.

Diagram 1   Model of New Academics Work Adjustment

LITERATURE REVIEW

Person-Job Fit Perception

The fit perception involves a cognitive process, in which an individual compares his needs, aspirations and abilities to the work environment (Cable & Judge, 1997). Usually formed during individual’s work experience, such perception is influenced by several sources such as job characteristics, organizational characteristics and the individual’s interactions with other staffs within the organization (Rynes, Bretz & Gerhart, 1991). Initially, no serious attention was paid to this concept in the studies of organizational behavior (Ahmed, 1981). It however has been subsequently accepted when researches found that individuals who could fit into their jobs are more able to solve various work-related work behavior issues (Forbes & Barret, 1978). Though earlier conception of person-job fit perception covered several aspects such as individual’s readiness to carry out job demands; the sense of how well individual’s abilities and skills are fully utilized in current job; and how much the job is perceived by individual to provide the opportunity in practicing his or her best skills, Kristof (1996) has later simplified it as the evaluation of congruence between an employee’s abilities and his or her job demands.

Saks and Ashforth (2002) measured the concept as the perception of suitability between an individual’s knowledge, skills and abilities with his or her job requirements; of job’s ability to fulfill an individual’s needs; suitability of the job; and last but not the least, individual’s perception on the freedom in carrying out one’s job. Quite close to the definition, Cable and DeRue (2002) have focused on three levels of fitness or suitability in their effort to explain this concept. First is the fitness between job demands and individual’s personal skills. Second is the fitness between individual’s ability and training with the job requirements. And third is the fitness between individual’s personal skills and educational level with his or her job demands. Again, all these definitions have highlighted the concept as a subjective evaluation related to one’s job competency and work effectiveness. Even though it is a subjective concept, acknowledgment has been made in accepting an individual’s self-report on his or her level of capability (Artwater, Ostroff, Yammarino & Fleenov, 1998).

Recent studies have shown the importance of person-job fit perception to newcomer’s competency. Carr, Pearson, Vest and Boyar (2006) have found that the level such perception mediates the relationship between previous work experience and their length of service in the new organization. This study has supported earlier researches which have reported positive relationships between fit-perception to competency (Judge & Cable, 1997; Kristof, 1996), commitment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and efficiency (Schuler, 1980). A correct form of fit perception helps a new
employee to uphold right status of mind and strategies when caught with uncertainties at work. It makes the employee more comfortable and confident in meeting new job requirements and organizational objectives (Kristof, 1996). Usually a more experienced and capable employee are more able to adopt suitable strategies as to perform effectively compared to less experienced employees (Schuler, 1980). They are usually less stressful compared to those who posses lower level of abilities. In contrast, those who are over qualified or over trained might less interested or feel too comfortable with their job. Either way, this could lessen an employee’s level of commitment (Cable & DeRue, 2002). Up to this date, the significance of this concept has been acknowledged in the organizational studies. It is believed that those who fit with their jobs would be more successful in their career journey (Cable & Judge, 1997).

Work Adjustment

Work adjustment has been defined as a continuous and dynamic process by which a worker seeks to achieve and maintain correspondence with a work environment. It is indicated by individual’s job satisfaction as well as job performance (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). Work adjustment can be seen from the length of time or tenure on one’s job. A competent individual would be in-control and able to pull up new ideas as well as energy in facing unexpected hurdles (London & Stumpf, 1986). Thus, such individual has the capability to adjust to any new situations. Put in another way, an individual who is well-adjusted to the job demands and environment at the work place will be happier and serve a longer service for the organization, compared to those who feel uncomfortable with their adjustment process. A smooth work adjustment exist when there are balances between the job or work environment with one’s characteristics such as values, planning capabilities, and explorative as well as reflective abilities on one’s experiences.

Dawis and Lofquist (1984) further advocated two types of adjustment that individuals usually adopt in establishing a harmonic relationship with the work environment. In the first reactive mode of adjustment, the newcomer acts more like a sailor who ensures that he or she is equipped with required skills and knowledge in order to keep the boat sailing to the safe, directed destination. Such newcomer tends to upgrade all the needed skills and knowledge to reduce the imbalances that could create an uncomfortable work adjustment process. Whereas, an active newcomer acts more like the captain of a ship in the sense that he or she tends to be more decisive and firm on his or her actions. In reducing the imbalances, such person tries to fit jobs as well as work requirements into his or her own needs and aspirations. However, Pratzner and Ashley (1984) proposed a combination of both adjustment modes as the best alternative for a newcomer to adapt to a new workplace. In other words, it is best for a new employee to make some reflections the situation in which he or she is in before deciding on the active or reactive mode of actions.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Data Collection

The sample consisted new academics from three public universities in Malaysia. Of the 337 distributed questionnaires, 167 (49.5%) were returned. The relatively poor return rate can perhaps be attributed to the fact that several new academics were busy and the questionnaires were returned too late to be included in the study. Seventy-six of the respondents were male and 91 were female. All of them were appointed between 2003 and 2005. From the total number, 82.9% were classified as new academics with several years of work experience. Only 19.8% of them were with no work experience at all. The mean and mode for the respondents’ age was 33.74 (s.d = 5.134) and 32. The youngest was 25 years old and the oldest was 54.

Instruments

As part of a larger survey, the instruments of work adjustment and person-job fit perception were included in a 10-page questionnaire. A cover letter informed the nature, significance and the objective of the study. Confidentiality of their information was emphasized.

a. As the dependent variable of this study, work adjustment was defined as new academics’ subjective evaluation on their ability to adjust to job demands, performance standard and rewards in the work place. It was measured using a work adjustment scale adapted from the Work Adjustment Scale developed by Black (1988) and friends (Black
& Stephen, 1989; Gregerson & Black, 1992). It consists three items. Conducted factor analysis confirmed one dimension and subscale. The KMO (.697) and Bartlett (.000) values indicated the validity of the factor analysis (Field, 2005). The alpha cronbach of this scale is .781.

b. As the independent variable of this study, person-job fit perception was defined as subjective evaluation of new academics on the suitability of their knowledge, skills and ability to the job responsibilities. It was measured using the Person-Job Fit Scale (Saks & Ashforth, 2002). It consists four items. Conducted factor analysis also confirmed one dimension and subscale of the scale. The KMO (.797) and Bartlett (.000) values indicated the validity of the factor analysis (Field, 2005). The alpha cronbach of this scale is .794.

c. Demographic data such as age, gender and duration of work experience before serving the public universities as academics was also measured.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results of the descriptive analysis showed that most of the new academics were equipped with at least one year of work experience (80.2%). Only 19.8% of these new academics were not having any experience of working in any organizations (Table 1). As job, organizational characteristics and interactions in one’s previous work experience contribute to the shaping of individual’s person-job fit perception (Rynes, Bretz & Gerhart, 1991), previous work experience of most subjects may explain why majority of them (135 new academics) possessed high level of person-job fit perception. New academics’ beliefs in their ability to adjust to new job demands and work environment might be initiated by their confidence formed throughout the past work experience. Twenty-eight of them exhibited moderate level of person-job fit perception. Only 4 of them were with low level of person-job fit perception. Most of the subjects (113) also exhibited high level of work adjustment. Only 16 of them were classified as new academics with low level of work adjustment. The rest (38) exhibited moderate level of work adjustment. The percentages are as shown in Table 2. Hence, the results of this study indicated that most of the new academics perceived and believed that they are well-adjusted to academia job demands such as teaching, publishing, supervising students’ projects and administration despite the ‘tugs of war’ moments that they have to undergo in the process of adapting themselves to new job demands and work environment (Louis, 1980).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work Experience</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2 years</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between 2 to 5 years</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five years and above</td>
<td>43.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N</th>
<th>High</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work Adjustment</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>67.7%</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person-Job Fit Perception</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
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The correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between person-job fit perception and work adjustment of the new academics. A significant relationship was found between the two variables ($r = .144, p < .05$). This means new academics who believe that their knowledge, skills and training match with the job demands perceive that they could easily adjust to their job responsibilities. On the other hand, those who do not think that their current level of knowledge, skills and abilities are at par with academia requirements feel that they had encountered tougher period of work adjustment. Result of partial correlation analysis again suggested the essence of work experience. The new academics’ work experience, age, gender and departments were found to influence the person-job fit and work adjustment relationship ($r (161) = .151, p < 0.05$).
The fact that previous work experience is crucial in shaping the right fit perception and work adjustment of new academics signaled two important interventions that could be adopted by managements of the three public universities. First is to allow new academics to have several months of industrial practices in organizations, where their core businesses are related to the academics’ areas of specializations. The experience gained during the industrial practice will not only help new academics to learn the practical aspects related to their field of disciplines, it also serve as a maturing platform as they deal with work-life situations at the organizations. The practical experiences are actually bonuses that could aid new academics in their teachings. By relating to their own industrial practical experiences, new academics could deliver their instructional materials and lectures more meaningfully. Networks established during the industrial practices also would provide wider channels for new academics to market their expertise to the industries and gain consultancy projects which are useful for university, organizational as well as community benefits.

Second is to provide more comprehensive induction course at the beginning of new academics’ services. University managements need to prepare new academics with relevant teaching, administrative, research, supervision and publishing knowledge and skills at the early stage of their career.

The showcased importance of person-job fit perception upon the work adjustment of new academics indicate that new academics should be more self-initiated to seek for career development opportunities as to enhance the job-related skills such as teaching, research and supervision. Besides being reactive, they should engage themselves to various in-house as well as external career development training programs. New academics should not solely rely on the organizations to upgrade all the skills, knowledge and competencies required to perform as excellent academics. Heads of departments should also spend more time with their new subordinates to discuss on their career path. This will enable the new ones to see whether or not their current skills, knowledge and expertise are in line with organizational expectations. This could then avoid the formation of under-qualified perception among them. Besides that, the awareness on required knowledge and skills for future roles will help them to prepare for the upcoming responsibilities. The management such as heads of departments and deans are also encouraged to clearly specify the key performance indicator and provide continuous feedbacks to new academics on their level of performance. This could be done either verbally or even better in documentation form. Continuous feedbacks on their status of performance could actually increase their level of confidence and develop more positive person-job fit perception from time to time.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above discussion, it is very obvious that the findings of this study have supported the principles of Work Adjustment Theory (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) and Person-Environment (P-E) Perspective. Work adjustment will be purported when a harmonious fit of an individual and work environment is perceived. An employee who feels that he or she fits to the new job is usually happier with the job. The positive evaluation of such fit could create higher level of self-confidence, professionalism and initiatives in one’s job delivery (Cable & Gilovich, 1998). Looking at the result, it is believed that both new academics and their organizations fairly play important roles to ensure smooth work adjustment experience. As new academics are responsible to plan and be more strategic in their career development, university managements shoulder equal accountability in providing sufficient development resources and tools for their new employees.

REFERENCES


