WORK EMPOWERMENT AS AN ANTECEDENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT IN THE HONG KONG QUANTITY SURVEYING PROFESSION

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ABSTRACT

There is a widespread belief that empowerment of members of the workforce is a universal desirable. The rationale relates to problems of ‘command and control’ within larger and diverse organisations as well as the expectation that empowerment leads to greater commitment by employees to the organisation and, thereby, results in enhanced performance. This paper reports a pilot study of the relationship between empowerment and organisational commitment amongst quantity surveyors in four different types of construction industry organisations in Hong Kong. Organisational commitment comprises dimensions of affectiveness and continuance. Although analyses demonstrate that perceived empowerment does correlate with organisational commitment, further, more detailed study on affective and continuance commitment is recommended.

Keywords: empowerment; organisational commitment; quantity surveyors

1. INTRODUCTION

In this era of rapid change, organisations keep readjusting/adapting to the environment in order to maintain their effectiveness and competitiveness. It is believed that motivating and empowering employees can enhance their productivity and performance (e.g., Schein, 1980; Vroom 1964). The motivational aspect of empowerment (Liu and Fang, 2006) and the effects of individuals’ commitment on performance in construction projects are investigated by Liu and Walker (1998), Dainty, Bryman, Price, Greasley, Soetanto and King (2005), Leung, Chong, Ng and Cheung (2004) and Peansupap and Walker (2006).

The Classical School, such as Taylor or Fayol (see Walker, 2002), believes that rules and procedures are essential for mechanistic control in an organization. For an effective organization, top-down management is vital. However, as firms grow in size and complexity, together with technological advancements, executives no longer solely manage operational issues, but begin to delegate their scope of control and setting of performance targets for subordinates. In a project organization, construction professionals work in a socio-technical system. People are an important factor and the Human Relations School, such as McGregor or Barnard (see Walker, 2002), shifts emphasis to training and co-operation where organisations are social/cooperative systems and upward communication is encouraged.

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Research in motivated behaviours illustrates the importance of human resource planning and work empowerment is a resultant concept developed from these perspectives (e.g. Umiker, 1992; Wellins, Byham and Wilson, 1991). It is postulated that individuals who are motivated would be more committed to their tasks and, hence, perform better. Committed individuals are also less likely to leave their organisations. This study focuses on the individuals’ perceptions (quantity surveyors in this sample of study) of the extent of work empowerment and their organisational commitment. The objectives are to investigate:

1) the perception of work empowerment of quantity surveyors;
2) if perceived work empowerment is an antecedent of commitment by quantity surveyors

2. MOTIVATION AND EMPOWERMENT

To understand how people behave/operate in organisations, it is necessary to understand organisation structures. The most prominent thought is that structure empowers what it designates (Child, 1984; Sewell, 1998). First of all, structures can be seen as rules, which are “generalisable procedures applied in the reproduction of social life” (Giddens, 1984:21), yet they are operating at different levels of depth. Also, structures can be regarded as resources, which are things that can serve as a source of power in social interactions. Structures, at the same time, constrain and empower the agents acting within them. The latter aspect of empowerment is the focus of this study.

Position power is determined by organisational structure and how that structure is made active by delegation. The delegation process, therefore, involves empowerment through considerations of what is delegated and the associated responsibility. An organisation’s operations may be categorized as decisions and routines. If decision-making is delegated, then so is position power; if authority to follow routines is delegated, the position power of the agent and of the target remain unaltered (Barnes, 1986). Kanter (1983) argues that the more productive forms of organisational power increase with the persons’ sharing of power and responsibilities with subordinates. In processes like the realization of construction projects, power structuring is dynamic and so, the shifting multi-goal coalition which results reflects the changing power structure of the main actors (Walker and Newcombe 2000).

Contrary to the Machiavellian approach which encourages a leader to increase and sustain a strong power base, modern management literature suggests the idea of power sharing – the practice of empowerment (e.g. Kanter 1983). Empowerment is the act of strengthening an individual’s beliefs in his/her sense of effectiveness – a process of changing the internal beliefs of people (Conger and Kanungo 1988) or self efficacy (see Bandura 1986 on social cognitive theory for self efficacy) which may lead to increased motivation, productivity and effectiveness (Umiker 1992, Pfeiffer and Dunlap 1990, Conger and Kanungo 1988). Whetten and Cameron (1984) regard empowerment as the process of motivation through enhancement of self efficacy, the power to produce effects. Therefore, people who have power are more likely to achieve effectiveness.
Bureaucratic environments are known to create conditions of powerlessness (Block 1987). Authoritarian management styles can strip away subordinates’ discretion and, in turn, a sense of power (Conger 1989), i.e., rendering subordinates a sense of powerlessness. The sense of powerlessness maximises feelings of inadequacy and lower self-confidence which, then, lessen motivation and effectiveness (Conger 1989).

3. WORK EMPOWERMENT AND COMMITMENT

Conger and Kanungo (1988) examine work empowerment as a relational construct and as a motivational construct. As a relational construct, work empowerment concerns influences of managerial practices on employee participation. Empowerment occurs when power of the superior is relinquished to subordinates, and with it authority and responsibility. The subordinates experience a sense of ownership and control over their jobs (Wellins et al, 1991). Sullivan (1994) suggests that a working environment encouraging participation, mentoring and training has to be created for joint decision making. In essence, empowerment is similar to the concept of delegation; however, empowerment gives continuous authority in contrast to temporary authority.

When reviewing work empowerment as a motivational construct, it refers to the perception of employees on their power, autonomy and control. Employees feel energized (Thomas and Velthouse, 1990) and a sense of control of their career (Ripley and Ripley, 1992) if they are empowered. In such sense, power sustains self-determination (Deci, Connell and Ryan, 1989), self-worth (Nielson, 1986) and a belief in self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

Thomas and Velthouse (1990) suggested that, as well as self-efficacy, a sense of impact, meaningfulness and choice are feelings enhanced on successful implementation of empowerment. Vogt and Murrell (1990) maintain that self-efficacy must be realised and internalised by the employees, otherwise efforts by the management to empower employees will not be of use. Work empowerment is, therefore, multi-dimensional in nature, involving delegation of power by managers and how individuals perceive and internalise such power. Menon (1995) defines empowerment as ‘a cognitive state of perceived control, perceived competence and goal internationalisation’ (1995 pp.30).

In this research, a multi-dimensional approach towards work empowerment is taken, following Kanter’s framework (1977). Under the four dimensional (Access to Opportunity, Information, Resources and Support) framework of Kanter (1977), the practice of work empowerment has been put forward in different terms by other researchers. Ripley and Ripley’s (1992) suggestions on the activities to be undertaken in an organisation are almost identical to what have been put forward by Conger and Kanungo (1988) for providing self-efficacy. The dimensions include providing leadership, training, recognition, resources allocation, customer focus and teamwork; to achieve goal internationalisation of the employees. Vogt and Murrell (1990) provide six dimensions of empowerment, including education, leading, mentoring, providing, structuring, and a matrix of all; Kirkman and Rosen’s (1999) study of team empowerment dimensions comprise external team leader behaviour, production/
service responsibilities, team-based human resources policies and social structure (as described by Spreitzer, 1996).

Empowered individuals have control over opportunities, information, support and resources and will improve organisational effectiveness by being motivated and by empowering others in sharing the source of power. McClelland (1975) identifies three needs for an individual, namely achievement, power and affiliation. Schein (1980) believes the most important factor in determining an individual’s motivation is the psychological contract, defined as the set of expectations between an employee and some implicit components of an organisation, i.e. pay, dignity, opportunities. In return, the organisation demands loyalty and commitment.

Kanter (1968) and Sheldon (1971) claim that organisational commitment concerns an individual’s affective emotion to the group, as well as their involvement (Mowday, Porter and Steers, 1982). Some researchers look into the concept of commitment from a cost perspective and regard it as a side bet (Becker 1960), i.e. investment of something that is valuable to the employees such as time, effort and money. To Kanter (1968), commitment to an organisation also relates to the profit from participating, and the cost of leaving the organisation, such as loss of prestige and stability of a working environment. On the other hand, Marsh and Mannari (1977) focus on the moral responsibility one attaches to the organisation as a result of commitment.

Meyer and Allen (1991) categorise organisational commitment into three components: affective, continuance, and normative but normative commitment is not well supported as a form of organisational commitment (Morrow, 1993). Affective commitment involves the employee’s emotional attachment, identification with and involvement in the organisation, similar to Mowday et al’s (1982) definition of attitudinal commitment. Continuance commitment involves the employee’s costs associated with leaving the organisation, similar to behavioural commitment. Normative commitment is associated with the employee’s feelings of obligation to stay in the organisation. Employees who experience affective commitment stay in the organisation because they want to stay; those influenced by continuance commitment stay because they need to stay and those influenced by normative commitment feel they ought to stay.

Mowday et al (1982) believe that there is a cyclical relationship between affective and continuance commitment, with one reinforcing the other. However, others believe that they are independent factors, such that employees who are bound to an organisation may not be highly committed to the organisation attitudinally, and vice versa. Organisational commitment also depends on the perception of employees (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison and Sowa, 1986). Steers (1997) shows that if the employee finds the organisation to be more supportive, a higher level of organisational commitment will result.

Allen and Meyer (1990) examine the antecedents of different types of commitment, establishing positive relationships with: job challenge, role clarity, goal clarity, goal difficulty, management receptiveness, peer cohesion, organisation dependability, equity, personal importance, feedback, participation, skills, education, relocate, self-investment, pension, community, alternatives, and commitment norm. These 19
variables fall into the labels of work empowerment; opportunity, information, support and resources.

Commitment reflects the relative strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in that organisation (Steers, 1997). Many studies show that high commitment is beneficial to the organisation, although low commitment can be a source of individual creativity and innovation that may be beneficial for the organisation. High commitment facilitates loyalty so a stable workforce can be sustained despite external environment changes. However, high commitment may limit opportunities for mobility, suppressing creativity and innovation (Suliman and Iles, 1999). Generally, previous findings have shown that organisations benefit from a committed workforce because committed employees tend to be absent less often, to make positive contributions and to stay with the organisation (e.g. DeCotiis and Summers, 1987).

Hence, it is postulated that the individual’s perceived extent of work empowerment may increase/decrease the sense of organisational commitment and positively/negatively affect organisational effectiveness.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN

This paper reports a study of perceived work empowerment and organisational commitment of quantity surveyors (QS) employed in different types of organisations. The case study approach is adopted where four organisations are selected from QS consultancy firms, construction firms, government departments and real estate developers --- these being the major types of organization employing QS in Hong Kong (Rowlinson and Walker, 1994). The number of QS employed in the four organisations are 110 in a QS consultancy, 60 in a construction company, 110 in a government department, and 70 in a real estate developer; giving a total of 350 respondents in the sample.

Two sets of questionnaires, based on previous literature, are used. The first set is used to collect information on the perception of the respondents on their job-related empowerment. The second set is used to obtain information on their perception of organisational commitment. The questionnaire is structured into three sections, (1) demographic information, (2) work empowerment, (3) organizational commitment.

**Demographic Information**

Certain demographic variables are included: age, tenure/work experience, education level, gender, nationality, and professional qualification status.

**Conditions of Work Environment Questionnaire (CWEQ)**

This questionnaire was first developed by Chandler (1986) to measure the work empowerment of the nursing profession in Canada. Further improvements on the constructs have been made by the Western Ontario University Research Programme. An acceptable reliability has been established ranging from 0.66 to 0.92 across different studies (Laschinger and Shamian, 1994; Wilson and Laschinger, 1994). A five-point Likert scale is used ranging from 1 to 5. The higher the perception of work empowerment, the higher the score is. Some items are added to the questionnaire.
according to Spreitzer’s (1995) measurement of information as a dimension of empowerment. The new questionnaire has a total of 33 items under four guiding questions: How much of each kind of opportunity do you have in your present job? How much access to information do you have in your present job? How much access to support do you have in your present job? How much access to resources do you have in your present job? The alpha coefficients for the four groups of guiding questions range from 0.79 to 0.93.

**Organisational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ)**

This questionnaire originated from Allen and Meyer’s (1990) scale of measurement of organisational commitment – which is regarded as a multi-dimensional construct. After gradual development and improvement after various tests for statistical significance (Meyer and Allen, 1991), the questionnaire adopted for this research is the latest version of Allen and Meyer (2000). The 5-point scale is labelled from Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4) to Strongly Agree (5).

**5. RESULTS**

There are 152 returned questionnaires from a total of 350 in the sample of four selected organisations, giving a response rate of 43.4%. Valid number of questionnaires is 136. The score for perceived work empowerment is obtained by adding up the subscales of the four dimensions (opportunity, information, resource, support), with a possible range from 4 to 20 and then dividing by 4. The higher the score, the higher is the perception of job-related empowerment. The descriptive statistics results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 Descriptive statistics results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of work empowerment</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to opportunity</td>
<td>5.090</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>3.053</td>
<td>3.517</td>
<td>2.810</td>
<td>2.800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to information</td>
<td>2.125</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>2.920</td>
<td>3.131</td>
<td>3.031</td>
<td>3.375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to resource</td>
<td>2.680</td>
<td>0.050</td>
<td>3.000</td>
<td>3.212</td>
<td>2.871</td>
<td>2.860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to support</td>
<td>1.278</td>
<td>0.285</td>
<td>2.750</td>
<td>2.851</td>
<td>2.577</td>
<td>2.686</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived work empowerment</td>
<td>2.989</td>
<td>0.033</td>
<td>2.931</td>
<td>3.136</td>
<td>2.820</td>
<td>2.930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(average score)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>64</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A=QS consultancy; B=contractor; C=government department; D=developer

The contractor organisation has the highest score in all the four work empowerment dimensions in Table 1, giving an average score of 3.13. Organisations A and D, (the QS consultancy and the developer) obtain the same score of 2.93. The government department (Organisation C) obtains the lowest average score of 2.82 in the sample. It seems that the QS in private organizations generally perceive a higher level of work empowerment in comparison with the government department. However, it is difficult to judge subjectively whether the scores in this sample are high as comparables in the construction industry are not available. The mean scores of the nursing profession in Canada are relatively higher. For example, in the research by Laschinger and Shamian (1994), the results of the sample in a group of staff nurses for opportunity, information, support and resources are 2.97, 2.98, 2.77 and 2.96.
ANOVA result shows that the F-ratios of all the five items in Table 1 are larger than 1, i.e., the sample means vary more than expected if the null hypothesis is true. Hence, the first step to reject the null hypothesis is established. From the significance of the F-value, it is evident that the contractor’s QS (Organisation B) feel more empowered because of access to opportunity and resources than their counterparts in other organisations. The lowest F ratio is 1.278 (Access to Resources) and the highest is 5.09 (Access to Opportunity). Perceived work empowerment is significantly different (sig. 0.033) for the four organisations. However, only two dimensions out of four (Access to Opportunities, and Access to Support) in the work empowerment construct are significantly different at 5% level of significance.

The results of the regression analysis is summarised in Table 2. To eliminate the problem of multicollinearity, the variables of age, rank and education are dropped in the multiple regression model in order to give a more statistically significant result.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictors</th>
<th>Organizational commitment</th>
<th>β</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>ΔR²</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work empowerment</td>
<td></td>
<td>.267</td>
<td>3.052</td>
<td>.003*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.066</td>
<td>-.633</td>
<td>.528</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional qualification dummy</td>
<td></td>
<td>.141</td>
<td>1.237</td>
<td>.218</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender dummy</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.019</td>
<td>-.218</td>
<td>.828</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationality dummy</td>
<td></td>
<td>.028</td>
<td>.295</td>
<td>.768</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QS Consultancy dummy</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.303</td>
<td>-2.1</td>
<td>.036*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contractor dummy</td>
<td></td>
<td>-.041</td>
<td>-.277</td>
<td>.782</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developer dummy</td>
<td></td>
<td>.005</td>
<td>.045</td>
<td>.964</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The value of the adjusted R-squared is 12.1%, which means that organisational commitment can be partially explained by the antecedents included. As an antecedent, work empowerment is attributable to organisational commitment with the coefficient of 0.267 and the t-statistic is large (3.052) and significant (p<0.05), i.e., when the perception of work empowerment increases, organisational commitment increases accordingly.

The only statistically significant variable at p<0.05 is the consultancy dummy with a negative coefficient of -0.303. That means the QS consultancy firm has a lower organisational commitment as compared to other organisations in the study. The rest of the demographic variables are found to be statistically insignificant as antecedents of organisational commitment for the Quantity Surveyors. Tenure and Gender are negatively related to organisational commitment, which supports the findings of Mathieu and Sajac (1990) and Cohen (1993) but such findings are not statistically significant at 5%. Furthermore, Professional Qualification and Nationality are positively, but not significantly, related to organisational commitment.

The adjusted R² of 12 % means that work empowerment is, but not a very strong, predictor of commitment. There are two possible reasons identified: firstly, the model constructed is not comprehensive enough to incorporate all possible antecedents of commitment, where the major focus of the authors is on the impact of work empowerment on organisational commitment. Secondly, this study is exploratory and the sample is not large enough.
Though the perceptions of individuals vary in different situations, the adjusted $R^2$ of the study give similar results compared to some previous studies. For example, in the study of Taormina (1999) on the effects of socialisation and demographics, the adjusted $R^2$ figures range from 4% to 38%. In Tao et al. (1998)'s study of the effects of demographic variables and organisational climates on organisational commitment, less satisfactory results on affective commitment with $R^2$ (result of adjusted $R^2$ not available) of 18.3% and on continuance commitment with of $R^2$ of 3.2% are obtained.

6. CONCLUSION

Commitment reflects the relative strength of a person’s identification with and involvement in that organisation. Work empowerment enhances self efficacy and, through motivation and commitment, leads to increased performance and effectiveness. In this study, it is found that when the perception of work empowerment increases, organisational commitment increases accordingly.

However, organizational commitment has two dimensions, affective commitment and continuance commitment. Further analyses have to be performed to examine the relationship of work empowerment with continuance commitment and affective commitment respectively. Although organisational commitment (overall) is related to work empowerment, there is a possibility that only one dimension of organisational commitment, say affective commitment, is significantly related to work empowerment.

It is suggested that a detailed conceptual model of work empowerment – motivation – commitment – effectiveness be tested by means of structural equations modelling based on larger scale data collection. The present regression analysis provides a basis to support the relationship of commitment and work empowerment, but further model development is required to take account of other possible antecedents of effectiveness.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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