



Determinants of Knowledge Worker Performance in Public Sector: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract. Malaysian government has given a very high importance in developing the knowledge and skills among public service officers who are knowledge workers since human capital has been the key towards high performance achievement. However, there are many issues on unsatisfactory performance in public sector which were flagged by numerous audit reports and complaints received by Public Complaints Bureau. This paper fills the gap by examining the comprehensive literature in order to understand the relationship between knowledge productivity and knowledge worker performance. The aim of this paper is to identify knowledge productivity practices contributing to knowledge worker performance in public sector and to develop a conceptual framework supporting their relationship. The literatures reveals that there is a positive relationship between job related factors, human related factors, organizational commitment and knowledge worker performance. If empirically supported, this conceptual framework offers a new perspective on understanding knowledge productivity, organizational commitment and knowledge worker performance. This study also assists federal government to focus on factors related to knowledge productivity in order to further improve knowledge worker performance in public sector.

Keywords: Knowledge Productivity · Knowledge Worker · Knowledge Worker Performance · Public Sector · Human-related Factors · Job-related Factors

1 Introduction

The study of public sector performance in Malaysia is very critical due to various challenges in the public service markets which are dynamic and competitive (Malaysia Productivity Corporation, 2019). In view to that, Malaysian government has given importance in developing the knowledge and skills among public service officers since public sector workforce has been the key towards high performance [1] enshrined not only in 11th Malaysian Plan but also in the 12th Malaysian Plan. There are many plans and programs introduced by Malaysian government in order to develop knowledge and skills among public service officers in Malaysia to ensure a continuity of commitment and an effective performance among public sector officers.

Year	Number of Complaints Received
2016	6,288
2017	5,386
2018	6,387
2019	9,177
2020	8,727

Fig. 1. Number of Complaint Received by PCB

Nevertheless, despite all the efforts taken by the Malaysian Government, the Malaysian Economic Monitor Report in June 2019 by World Bank, reported that Malaysian Government performance has been largely stagnant and lags behind with huge gap in overall performance among other OECD countries. Similarly, the Public Complaint Bureau (PCB) has also highlighted issues pertaining public sector performance. Number of complaints received by PCB from year 2016 to 2020 related to the public service performance is still high and did not show much improvement as stated in the Fig. 1.

These findings had disappointed the publics as a taxpayer with high expectations from the Malaysian government and has further made the government to be criticized by the public. Therefore, there is a high need and motivation to study on public sector officer's performance.

The term knowledge workers was first introduced by Drucker [2] which is defined as employee who works with intangible resources, have high level of knowledge, innovative, autonomous and professional skills [3, 4]. Improving and enhancing the skills and knowledge of public sector officers are extremely important because it also increases their ability to make better decision, work efficiently and effectively; hence resulting in more productive employees.

The scope of this study focuses on knowledge-workers performance among Administrative and Diplomatic Officers (ADOs) who are from grade 41 and above; and works with the Malaysian Federal Government at managerial and top management level. ADOs are from the Administrative and Diplomatic (ADO) service scheme whereby their main roles are to plan, formulate and implement policies in relation to various ministries.

Based on their responsibilities, skills and knowledge, ADOs are also known as premier officers who hold critical position in public sector [2]. There are several service schemes in Malaysian public sector, however ADO service scheme is crucial and important because ADOs are responsible in assisting government on formulating and implementing public policies. Therefore, ADOs covers the overall function of the public sector in Malaysian government which makes them an important role in administration of public sector.

To further assist in fostering public sector performance, commitment among public sector employees/knowledge workers in public sector is necessary [5, 6]. Focusing on organizational commitment in public sector may link with high job performance, demonstrates improved results in organization and high job satisfaction [5, 7]. Due to the dynamism and robustness of each sector, public and private sector commitments differ. Employees may experience the hangover stage more quickly in the public sector than in the private sector because of the more stable work environment [8–11]. Hence,

organizational commitment is very critical in public sector in order to maintain the level of work motivation and attachment in public sector in the long run.

There are many researchers who had studied on issues related with public sector performance in Malaysia and most of them had highlighted similar issues by Auditor General Report and Public Complain Bureau [1, 12–16]. However, the approach taken by the researchers to overcome these issues were different and there was very little attention given to study on knowledge workers performance in public sector using the dimensions of knowledge productivity.

The researchers highlighted the issues using the approach from the perspective of human capital [1, 12], service delivery [12], organizational justice and organizational citizenship behaviour [13] but not the dimensions of knowledge productivity. Therefore, a new approach such as knowledge productivity which consist of both human and job-related factors is needed among knowledge workers in Malaysian Federal Government in order to address these issues.

Based on this background, this study attempts to understand the relationship between knowledge productivity determinants and knowledge worker performance using the organizational commitment as a mediating role in the context of Malaysian government. This study proposes a conceptual model whereby four (4) individual level determinants from human-related factors namely knowledge-oriented leadership and knowledge sharing; and job-related factors which are job innovation and job crafting. This model was inspired by Drucker's Knowledge Worker Productivity Theory [2] serves as the contributing factors of the relationship between knowledge productivity and knowledge worker performance.

The aim of this paper is to examine the relationship between knowledge productivity determinants and knowledge worker performance among Malaysian Public Sector officers. Next, this research focuses on the relationship between knowledge productivity determinants and organizational commitment. Lastly, this study also seeks to obtain an understanding the relationship between organizational commitment and knowledge worker performance.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Knowledge Productivity

Knowledge productivity refers to ability of an employee improving knowledge-based production process in an organization. It determines on how knowledge workers achieve organizations objectives and goals in an efficient and effective way based on their ability, skills and knowledge [17, 18]. Hence knowledge workers needed factors to improve their productivity which can convert the increased productivity into better performance in an organization.

According to Drucker, there are six major factors that can impact knowledge worker's productivity and performance which are task definition, job related autonomy, continuous innovation, continuous learning, quality and treating knowledge worker as an asset. In order to develop a deeper understanding between the relationship between knowledge productivity dimensions and knowledge worker performance; these predictors were divided into 2 categories which are job related factors and human related factors.

Human related factors are human or individual characteristics which influence their behaviour and work. A prominent example of human related factors are leadership styles, management practices and information handling [19]. On the other hand, job related factors referring to practices used by employer to understand the job or work role such as job characteristics or job design [20, 21].

This study focuses on knowledge-oriented leadership and knowledge sharing practices as human-related factors; and job innovation and job crafting as job-related factors.

2.2 Knowledge Worker Performance

Knowledge worker performance is referring to how good an employee is in performing and accomplishing his/her tasks and activities in an organization based on knowledge and skills he/she has [18, 22–24]. Performance depends on the capability of an individual in handling problems and managing task to achieve organization's objectives [25, 26].

There are two dimensions in Knowledge Worker Performance which are task performance and contextual performance [25–27]. Task performance or in-role performance is referring to the employee's task-related ability and efficiency as described in their official job description and directly influences the organization's goal [25, 26].

Whereas contextual performance; also known as extra-role performance refers to employee's effort to perform certain behaviors in organizational environment which is beyond task performance [25]. In other words, those efforts are not associated to their job functions and do not contribute towards the organizational goals directly [26–28].

Many past studies had addressed the impact of Knowledge Management Practices, Human Resource Practices, Human Capital and Employee Engagement on employee performance [25, 29–35], however these studies showed mixed findings due to several reasons. Firstly, previous studies shows that Human Resource practices, Human Resource Planning and Human Capital were not a significant predictor of individual and organizational level performance [29, 34, 35]. Next, these studies did not analyze the data from knowledge workers [30] but it was from various levels of employees in organization including supporting staff [5, 36–38]. In fact, a number of academics have suggested that future studies look into additional aspects that affect the performance of knowledge workers in the public sector [39–41]. These justifications and recommendations strengthen the argument for the significance of research on knowledge worker performance.

2.3 Knowledge-Oriented Leadership

Knowledge-Oriented Leadership is defined as an attitude or approach in creating and sharing of new knowledge which brings a shift in thinking and able to achieve a collective outcome in an organization [24].

Sahibzada, claimed that Knowledge-Oriented Leadership can increase knowledge worker satisfaction, organizational commitment and improve knowledge worker's performance in terms of task efficiency, job autonomy and timeliness. As a responsible leader, knowledge-oriented leaders will ensure the needs and satisfaction of employees

in organization are taken care which includes simplifying their tasks for an effective performance.

Knowledge leaders support employees with proper supervision, empowers them via job autonomy and provide a good understanding on task definition. Obtaining guidance and assistance from leaders makes employees feels satisfied and motivated, hence contribute towards higher organizational performance. Sahibzada had empirically proven that knowledge-oriented leadership has a strong relationship with organizational performance.

Numerous researchers had shared their understanding on knowledge-oriented leadership whereby it can fulfil an employee's psychological needs which stimulates positive emotions [42, 43]. These will affect employee's commitment especially emotional attachments towards their organization.

Based on the above past studies, it is therefore likely that these hypotheses are developed:

H1: Knowledge-Oriented Leadership Positively Related to Knowledge Worker Performance.

H2: Knowledge-Oriented Leadership Positively Related to Organizational Commitment.

2.4 Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing is referring to the level of employee's willingness and readiness to share knowledge with each other [31, 44]. Few examples of knowledge sharing activities that can take place in organizations are sharing of information after training and meeting, sharing of documents related with policies, and solving problems in organization [45].

The exchanging of knowledge from one person to another in an organization may add value to the knowledge owned and it probes employees to think rationally which may result in innovation and eventually improves employee performance [46]. Sharing of knowledge also means making relevant knowledge available at the right time to the right person [47, 48] which may affect employees in various ways. It enhances learning capabilities and allows employees to grow and capable in accepting and making changes which accommodate them with ability to solve various organizational issues.

Research done in an Indian software company explores on knowledge sharing as the predictor of affective commitment among generation Y employees [49]. This cross sectional study empirically shows that knowledge sharing has a positive effect on affective commitment [49].

Furthermore, Razzaq studied on the effect of knowledge management practices towards employee performance using organizational commitment as a mediator among knowledge workers (nurses, nutritionist and doctors) from Punjab Health Department. Components of knowledge management practices in this research consists of knowledge sharing, knowledge codification, knowledge retention and knowledge creation. The study revealed that knowledge management practices have a positive effect towards organizational commitment. In other words, knowledge sharing foster organizational commitment.

A similar research were done and it reveals that knowledge sharing positively effects job satisfaction [25, 50]. Even though this result does not directly represents the relationship between knowledge sharing and organizational commitment; job satisfaction has a strong relationship with organizational commitment [51]. Currivan studied on causal relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment and found that there is a positive influence among both variables. Hence employees who have high job satisfaction, eventually have high organizational commitment.

Therefore, the following hypothesis are derived:

H3: Knowledge Sharing Positively Related to Knowledge Worker Performance.

H4: Knowledge Sharing Positively Related to Organizational Commitment.

2.5 Job Crafting

Job crafting involves the intention of knowledge worker independently making changes to a task given in order to improve the task [52, 53]. The focus of job crafting is letting the employees to shape their own job is a starting point from previous approaches of the job design factors [54]. Job crafting involves three (3) changes which are related with how workers perceive their job, how workers change the content of a job and the worker's interaction with others at work (relational) [29].

Empirical studies shows that job crafting offers positive outcomes which are highly related with contributing to a positive work behavior, improves knowledge workers well-being and motivation. Job crafting also has been associated with a positive outcome like improved organizational commitment among employees [55] and promotes good health, work effectiveness and employee performance [52, 53, 56–58].

Moreover, Wang suggested few important practical facts on how job crafting may positively affect organizational commitment based on his studies among employees in a joint venture company in China. First, organization should encourage employees to perform job crafting in order for them to be more attached to their work and produce positive and impactful result. Second, job crafting activities assists poor performers and insecure job holders to develop organizational commitment through job crafting.

Based on the above insights, this study assumes that:

H5: Job Crafting positively Related to Knowledge Worker Performance.

H6: Job Crafting positively Related to Organizational Commitment.

2.6 Job Innovation

Innovation is not only new or a novel idea but it is a new practice as well; for example modifying or replacing a procedures, processes or services [59, 60] are few examples of innovation in organization. An innovative employee should have the capability to build up and transform ideas and adds value to the current knowledge in order to produce new processes, procedures, services or products [61].

According to Audenaert and Shujahat, continuous innovations are part of formal work and responsibility. A condition where innovation is part of job requirement may

assist in emerging of innovative behaviors among employees. These scholars also further highlighted that organization that focuses on innovation as job requirement are more likely to produce a creative employee who makes a good decision. Innovative environment in an organization is very crucial for overcoming issues in public sector such as budget constraints [62] and increasing demand for a better quality for service and products [46, 63]. Hence, there is a very high need for government officers to be more efficient and effective to satisfy public needs and wants through an innovating mind [62].

Wibowo also reveals a significant relationship between innovation capability and job performance. These positively affected relationships have a number of practical implications towards an organization especially in public sector. Innovation in organization triggers better values for service and products delivered by government which adds value to the society well-being. These are done through redesigning and changing the work system and skill improvement which results in new procedures, up-to-date policies and management methods [31].

According to Drucker continuous innovation has to be incorporated in employee's job. Demircioglu had described job required innovation foster motivational effect and positive work outcome. It allows employees to display innovative behaviors in organization [64] which enhances their motivation and self efficacy [65].

Thus, this study assumes that:

H7: Job related innovation positively Related to Knowledge Worker Performance.

H8: Job related innovation positively Related to Organizational Commitment.

2.7 Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment refers to attachment, bond or involvement an employee has for his/her organization [25, 66]. Commitment in an organization can also relate to the emotional and mental behavioural of an employee and the level of engagement he/she shows towards the members of the organization and the organization itself [67, 68]. Commitment towards an organization is described as psychological connection between an employee and organization that makes an employee to stay longer, becomes more involved and improves organizational performance [30, 69]. It is also associated with positive outcomes such as high job performance, low turnover, high job satisfaction [6], improved motivation and organization citizenship behaviour [70].

According to Meyer and Allen, affective, continuance and normative commitment are the three (3) major components of organizational commitment [71]. Affective commitment refers to the desire of an employee to remain in the organization through a positive work environment and experience [25, 72, 73]. It occurs when an employee has passion towards the organization and decides to stay [30].

Continuance commitment refers to the attachment of an employee towards an organization due to satisfied need or as a perceived cost [71, 74]. In other words, employee weighs whether to stay or leave an organization based on better compensation offered elsewhere [29].

Whereas, normative commitment indicates moral or ethical obligation an employee shows towards his/her organization [30]. An employee demonstrates normative commitment when he/she has a feeling of responsibility towards the organization [71–73].

There is a consensus among researchers that organizational commitment and job performance has a significant relationship [71–73]. This has been further proven through findings by Jahanbakhshian that low level of commitment among managers and experts in the field of R&D and Knowledge Management has significantly reduced the level of performance. Similar findings were discovered by Sungu based on research conducted among sales representatives in large insurance company in East and Central Africa. These research shows that there is a clear correlation between action and employee performance in organization and organizational commitment.

Therefore, the following is hypothesized:

H9: Organizational Commitment is positively related to Knowledge Worker Performance.

3 Theories

This proposed framework is underpinned by Drucker's Knowledge Worker Productivity Theory and Job Design Theory. The integration of these theories helps to comprehend the impact of human-related and job-related factors on knowledge workers performance particularly among ADOs in Malaysian Federal Government.

3.1 Drucker's Knowledge Worker Productivity Theory

Drucker's Theory reveals six characteristics of knowledge-work practices that could increase productivity and performance which are task definition, job required autonomy, continuous learning, continuous innovation, treating knowledge worker as an asset and quality of output. These practices reflect the unique nature of knowledge intensive work in contrast to manual work. Drucker beliefs that management principles and practices that improve productivity of knowledge workers may not be effective for manual workers. Drucker stresses that employee's high level of productivity and performance is an outcome of employee's positive behaviour and their commitment towards their organization; hence Drucker highlights on the importance of treating knowledge workers as an asset.

However, this theory is unable to provide a comprehensive explanation on how knowledge workers should be treated as an asset. This is further evidenced through research done by [39, 40, 64, 75]. Hence this study bridges the gap by proposing human related factors into the conceptual framework as potential factors that could treat knowledge workers as an asset.

3.2 Job Design Theory

Job Design Theory identifies the job characteristics and its relationship to personal and work outcome which improves the quality of work performance and motivation. According to Job Design Theory, job characteristics are very crucial to solve organizational

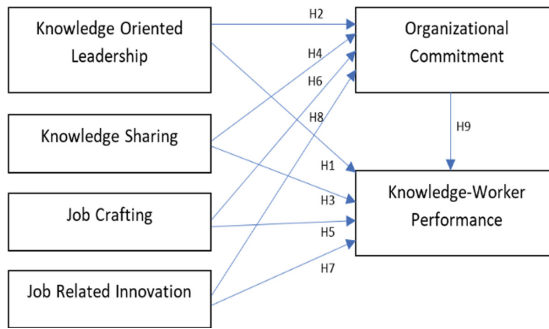


Fig. 2. Proposed Conceptual Framework

issues related with poor skill, work overload and low productivity. It allows employees to make changes and modify in the working process and procedures to improve job satisfaction and motivation [76–78].

Shujahat had made some modification on the job design characteristics based on Drucker’s Knowledge Worker’s Productivity Theory. Shujahat researched on four types of idiosyncratic job design practices namely job definition (job crafting and job clarity), job autonomy, job related innovation and lifelong learning which indicates the unique characteristics of knowledge-intensive work. Unlike other job design model introduced by [76]–[79]; the four (4) idiosyncratic job design practices inspired by Shujahat are for knowledge-intensive work and not suitable for manual work practices. Thus, job related innovation and job crafting are incorporated into this proposed conceptual framework.

Based on the theories, this study proposes a conceptual framework which serve as a guide towards understanding the knowledge productivity dimensions and knowledge worker performance (Fig. 2).

4 Analysis Method

This paper proposes a conceptual framework model which combines the two important factors; human-related factors and job-related factors and its mediating variable (organizational commitment) to predict knowledge worker performance in Malaysian public sector. This proposed framework was developed based on an extensive literature review and practical issues in Malaysian public sector. The underpinning theories of Drucker’s Knowledge Worker Productivity and Job Design supports the proposed conceptual framework. This study will be conducted using a quantitative approach and ADOs will be the respondents as these officers’ main task are to focus on planning, structuring, implementing and managing country’s policies and their essential role as knowledge workers in public sector.

5 Contribution

If empirically supported, this conceptual framework offers a new perspective on understanding knowledge productivity, organizational commitment and knowledge worker

performance. This study also assists federal government to pay attention on factors related to knowledge productivity in order to further improve knowledge worker performance in public sector. Furthermore, this study will guide the federal government and knowledge workers to relook at these determinants in order to achieve organizational commitment and improve in public sector overall performance.

6 Conclusion

The proposed framework is generalizable to all the ADOs in the Malaysian government. To increase the performance of knowledge workers, this proposed conceptual framework recommends government to focus on knowledge productivity dimension in increasing public sector knowledge workers' commitment and performance. This proposed conceptual framework has acknowledged the importance of knowledge productivity factors which are knowledge-oriented leadership, knowledge sharing, job crafting and job-related innovation along with organizational commitment which can directly and indirectly contribute in enhancing knowledge workers performance in public sector. These recommended predictors have been formulated to empirically examine the public sector performance based on the details discussed in the background of the study and past literature.

7 Future Research

Based on the suggestions and conclusions, the proposed conceptual framework should be empirically tested by researcher in future, especially in the context of knowledge workers in public sector at the state, municipal or statutory body level. In order to extend the scope and coverage of this study, the mediation effect of organizational commitment between knowledge productivity and knowledge worker performance shall be identified and examined. Furthermore, future research is also needed to examine whether the proposed conceptual framework may generalize across all types of schemes in public sector or even in private organizations.

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