

HIGH-PERFORMANCE WORK SYSTEMS AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN THE MYANMAR FMCG SECTOR

Win Myint Aung (DBA Candidate)

Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) | School of Management

Vimolwan Yukongdi (Supervisor) 

Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) | School of Management

ABSTRACT

High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS) is a set of HR best practices which are commonly adopted in many organizations. The concept was originated as a part of Strategic Human Resource Management and the early adopters were the US multi-national companies. Presently, HPWS practices are widely accepted as good HR practices globally. Many studies have been conducted based on Western countries and there are still limited studies available for Asian markets where Small and Medium businesses play a bigger role in socio-economic context.

This study is aimed to explore the application and effectiveness of HPWS practices in market leading fast moving consumer goods companies in Myanmar which is a newly opened economy embracing changes to join the global economy. The study seeks to investigate the effect of HPWS on employee performance (EP) and the intervening role of employee engagement (EE) as a mediator in this relationship.

INTRODUCTION

High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) is a set of HR best practices which are commonly adopted in many organizations. The concept was originated as a part of Strategic Human Resource Management and the early adopters were the US multi-national companies (El-Ghalayini,2016). Nowadays, many studies have shown that HPWS also created a positive impact to organizations based in several developing countries. (Anitha, 2014; Li et al, 2019; Muduli et al, 2016; Maung, 2020). Many researchers believed that the application of HPWS are based on the context of developed economies which are mostly western countries and there are

still limited studies available for markets in Asia where SMEs play a bigger role in socio-economic context (Andersén et al,2019).

Some studies in Asia also suggested that HPWS does create a positive impact for organizations in developing countries. According to Muduli et al (2016), study in India showed that employee engagement plays as a mediator between HPWS and organizational performance. The result also provides evidence to suggest that when HPWS is aligned with employee engagement (EE), then HPWS can significantly improve organizational performance. (Muduli et al,2016). Similarly, Xial et al concluded that perception of HPWS has a mediating relationship between Chinese cultural factor (guanxi) and employee trust and job satisfaction. Their research was based on employees in Chinese state-owned enterprise in the railway sector. (Xian et al, 2017).

In Malaysia, Abu Bakker (2013) examined the factors which influence and shape employee engagement in the context of the financial sector in Malaysia. Her study suggested that organizations and managers need to understand the changing role of leaders, the introduction of HPWP and the practice of religious belief in the workplace as sources which enhance engagement. (Bakker et al., 2013). In Japan, based on the sample of 56 different companies located in Japan, study by Takeuchi et al (2007) suggested that HPWS generates a high level of collective human capital and encourage a high degree of social exchange within an organization, and that these are positively related to the organization performance.(Takeuchi, Lepak, Wang, & Takeuchi, 2007).

In summary, it is concluded that there is the evidence to support the concept of HPWS and that it does work in the context of developing country in Asia. The researcher will further investigate the concept and application of HPWS in Myanmar.

Based on the literature review , the various definitions of HPWS which can be reviewed in the table below.

Table 1.1 Definitions of HPWS

Authors	Years	Definition
Huselid	1995	HPWS is designed to “improve knowledge, skills and, abilities of a firm’s current and potential employees, increase their motivation, reduce shirking and enhance retention of quality employees while encouraging nonperformers to leave the firm”
Datta, Guthrie and Wright	2005	HPWS as a set of HR practices “designed to enhance employee’s skills, commitment and productivity in such a way that employees become a source of competitive advantage”

Evans and Davis	2005	HPWS as a combined set of HRM practices that are internally consistent (alignment among HRM practices) and externally consistent (alignment with firm strategy).
Ang et al	2013	HPWS as a system of HR practices that are aimed at improving engagement, job satisfaction, affective commitment and intention to leave.
Heffernan and Dundon	2016	HPWS as “including a range of innovative HR practices and work design processes that, when used in certain combinations or bundles, are mutually reinforcing and produce synergistic benefits”

There are several common good HR practices which are considered as the subsets of HPWS and they can be summarized by various researchers in the table below.

Table 1.2 Categories of HR Practices Comprising HPWS

HPWS practices	Descriptions	Example	Reference
Performance Management	Performance appraisals are based on objective, quantifiable results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance agreement/goal setting • Performance monitoring/facilitation • Performance appraisal 	Gruman and Saks, 2011
Training	Extensive/formal programs to develop Skill, Knowledge, & Abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training for current and future skills • Cross functional trainings • Induction programs for new hire 	Evans and Davis, 2005
Selective Recruitment	Extensive procedures to evaluate Skill, Knowledge, & Abilities for job fit and organization fit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selective screening • Value based interview • Personality test 	Evans and Davis, 2005

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical skills and knowledge assessment 	
Competitive Reward	Above-market pay Performance base pay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profit sharing • Employee ownership • Team based pay 	Evans and Davis, 2005
Decentralized decision making	Empowering employees via greater responsibility and access to resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less defined tasks • Authority to make decision • Participatory management 	Evans and Davis, 2005
Flexible working	Opportunity to broaden Skill, Knowledge, & Abilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to perform at one-level-above role • Job rotation and job enrichment 	Evans and Davis, 2005
Communications	Open vertical and horizontal communication channels; access to information and opportunity to raise point of view.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to all levels of operational results • Employee's suggestion systems • Participation in strategy meetings 	Evans and Davis, 2005

In many of human resource management literature, it is demonstrated that there is a clear positive impact of high-performance work systems (HPWS) on organizational performance (Muduli et al, 2016; Shin & Konrad, 2017; Bakar, 2013). In the recent studies, some scholars argue that there are other mediating variables – employee attitude, engagement, infrastructure, strategy – which may influence organizational performance too. Therefore, new generation of studies recommends the inclusion of mediating variables between HPWS and organizational/employee performance. (Muduli et al, 2016; Alfies et al, 2013; Arefin et al, 2019). In the following session, many studies on employee engagement (EE) have suggested that there is a clear linkage between EE and HPWS-performance relationship.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

This study is aimed to explore the application and effectiveness of HPWS practices in Myanmar which is a newly opened economy embracing changes to join

the global economy. This study will be focused on the impact of HPWS practices on EE, employee engagement at work.

Three main objectives of this research are:

1. To obtain a comprehensive understanding in EE, employee engagement at work.
2. To analyze the components of HPWS and their impact on EP, Employee Performance by using EE as a mediator.
3. To provide more practical/integrated HR solutions to businesses in transforming their employees into highly engaged workforce.

Research Questions are:

1. Does HPWS practices (performance management, training and development, selective recruitment, competitive reward, employee communication) positively influence employee engagement?
2. Does employee engagement positively influence employee performance?
3. Does employee engagement mediate the relationship between HPWS practices (performance management, training and development, selective recruitment, competitive reward, employee communication) and employee performance?

GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

According to the currently available literature, some forms of HPWS are being applied in large and medium sized companies operating in Myanmar. Company leaders and HR practitioners are paying more and more attention in understanding on what drives the performance and are making more investment in building strong institutional foundation which can strengthen employee engagement and performance.

In the recent years, many Myanmar organizations choose to adopt several good HR practices which were found successful with their multinational counterparts. However, selection of HR practices was mostly based on random view and introduction was done on ad hoc manner. It is concluded that there is a need for systematic investigation which covers the unique nature of organizational capabilities, the standardization of HR interventions and their impacts on desirable outcomes. However, despite the positive reports on the effects of HPWS, there are only very limited research papers available for Myanmar regarding the impact of HPWS on firm performance at the moment.

Based on her recent study with bank industry in Mandalay, Myanmar, Maung noted that HPWS has a positive relationship on job satisfaction and also that job

satisfaction has a mediating relationship between HPWS and employee performance. (Maung, 2020). However, scope of HPWS (Independent variable) is poorly defined as a combination of three components – training, performance appraisal and communication while leaving other important HR practices, recruitment and reward out of the scope. Besides, mediator used in her study was job satisfaction which failed to provide statistically significant relationship with employee performance according to many previous studies by well-known researchers (Fisher, 2018; Little & Little, 2006; Saks 2006). Hence, future researchers may be using other alternative mediators which will better resonate with HPWS-performance relationship.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

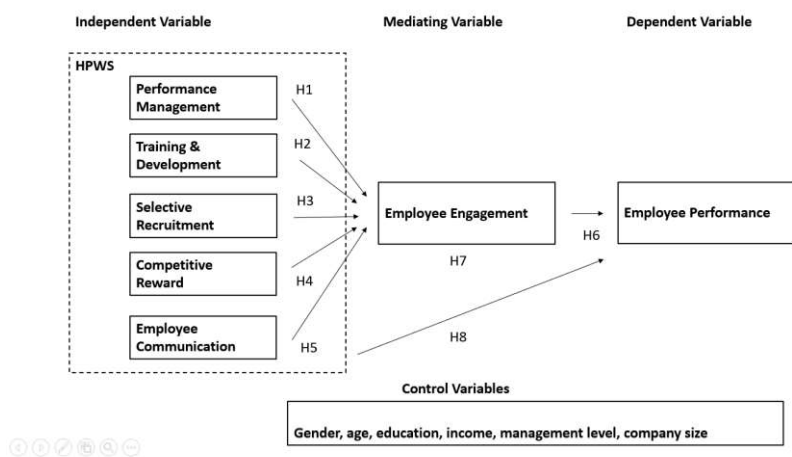


Figure 1. Conceptual Model and Variables

The hypothesis of the study are -

H1: Performance Management has a positive influence on Employee Engagement

H2: Training & Development has a positive influence on Employee Engagement

H3: Selective Recruitment has a positive influence on Employee Engagement

H4: Competitive Reward has a positive influence on Employee Engagement

H5: Employee Communication has a positive influence on Employee Engagement

H6: Employee Engagement has a positive influence on employee performance

H7: Employee Engagement mediates the relationship between HPWS and employee performance

H8: HPWS has a positive influence on employee performance

SPSS-AMOS statistical software is one of the most widely used statistics programs in the world. It provides a researcher with sophisticated techniques to analyze the effects and relationships among many independent variables and dependent variables in various combinations all at once and instantly. (Martin & Bridgmon, 2012)

STUDY DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH

This study will be focused on FMG sector which is one of the most fastest growing industries within last 5 years (Otto, 2020). About 400 employees from 10 FMCG companies of various sizes will be invited to participate in the survey.

This study will be conducted mainly with a quantitative approach but there will be some qualitative discussions with respective HR managers for better preparation and administration processes. A pilot test will be conducted to validate the research questions. Once finalized, the question items are designed to examine how a number of concepts relate with one another. A number of hypotheses are used to be able to better understand these relations. For example, how HPWS is related to EP of employees. Then the question arises, is the effect of HPWS on employee engagement into EP positive or negative? How EE mediates the effect of HPWS on EP?

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Pilot test has been conducted with 45 participants recently.

Case Processing Summary

		N	%
Cases	Valid	45	100.0
	Excluded ^a	0	.0
	Total	45	100.0

a. Listwise deletion based on all variables in the procedure.

Reliability Test

The internal consistency among the variables was checked with the Cronbach's alpha. The alpha values of more than 0.70 were regarded as the acceptable reliability level (Maung, 2020).

Table 2.1

Con-struct	Scales	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items	Number of question-naire items
HPWS	Performance Scale	0.683	0.688	5
HPWS	Training Scale	0.734	0.735	5
HPWS	Recruitment Scale	0.709	0.746	5
HPWS	Reward Scale	0.501	0.482	5
HPWS	Communication Scale	0.860	0.857	5
EE	Engagement Scale	0.770	0.802	9
EP	Task Performance Scale	0.586	0.587	5
EP	Contextual Performance Scale	0.865	0.868	8
EP	Counter-productive Work Behavior Scale	0.902	0.903	5

According to Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items shown in table 1.1, reliability coefficients for 3 scales – performance scale, reward scale and task performance scale – are slightly lower than 0.70. Apart from them, the values of all other scales are above 0.70 and considered strong.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

As shown in table 1.2, except Reward scale at a value of 0.489, KMO values for all other scales are above 0.6 and are considered strong for sampling adequacy.

As P values are significant (less than 0.05) for all factors, we can reject the null hypothesis and conclude that factors are related to each other.

Table 2.2

KM O & Bartlett's test	Perfor- man- ce	Trai- ning	Re- cruit- ment	Re- war- d	Com- ms	En- gage- ment	Task Per- for- man- ce	Con- tex- tual Per- for- man- ce	Cou- nter- pro- duc- tive Wor- k Be- hav- ior
KM O	0.696	0.688	0.768	0.489	0.779	0.698	0.795	0.840	0.816
Ap- prox- imat- e Chi Squa- re	34.7	47.12	68.16	20.36	115.50	233.25	95.06	164.34	154.01
Df	10	10	10	10	10	36	10	28	10
Sig	.000	.000	.000	.026	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000

Component Matrix

Collected data are tested for Component matrix and results are shown in table 2.3

Table 2.3

Questions	Component 1	Component 2	Component 3	Component 4	Component 5	Component 6	Component 7	Component 8	Component 9
PM1	0.683								
PM2	0.765								
PM3	0.672								
PM4	0.694								
PM5	0.511								
TD1		0.77							
TD2		0.77							
TD3		0.627							
TD4		0.661							
TD5		0.651							
SR1			0.483						
SR2			0.413						
SR3			0.855						
SR4			0.881						
SR5			0.852						
CR1				0.535					
CR2				0.384					
CR3				0.402					
CR4				0.605					
CR5				0.872					
EC1					0.732				
EC2					0.609				
EC3					0.879				
EC4					0.879				
EC5					0.88				
EE1						0.445			
EE2						0.763			
EE3						0.779			
EE4						0.373			
EE5						0.397			
EE6						0.147			
EE7						0.749			
EE8						0.914			
EE9						0.868			
TP1							0.776		
TP2							0.808		
TP3							0.818		
TP4							0.815		
TP5							0.772		
CP1								0.607	
CP2								0.717	
CP3								0.814	
CP4								0.771	
CP5								0.807	
CP6								0.837	
CP7								0.695	
CP8								0.501	
CWB1									0.687
CWB2									0.892
CWB3									0.87
CWB4									0.866
CWB5									0.923

Apart from Component 4 (Reward) and Component 6 (Engagement), the rest components are strongly related at the variable level and they can form as a factor. Items loaded more than 0.4 is considered strong (Pallant, 2020).

As full-scale survey is planned to launch on May-23, questionnaire items under two problematic components – Reward and Engagement scales – are being reviewed and will be revised for next stage.

ORIGINALITY/VALUE

This study aimed to fill the abovementioned research gaps and contribute to current theories on HPWS-performance relationship in three ways. Firstly, HPWS needs to be considered in the institutional context as each organization has a

unique nature of capability, knowledge and need for change. Previous studies in Myanmar called for further investigation in broadening the scope of HPWS in different industries outside of banking (Maung, 2020) and understanding the nature of EE in large organizations (Meesangphrao, 2016).

Secondly, the mediating role of EE between the HPWS-performance relationship is something new in existing theories. There are many studies available for HPWS-Performance by using several other mediators – employee attitude, job satisfaction, collective human capital, etc (Takeuchi et al 2017; Wahid & Hyams-Ssekasi 2018; Maung, 2020).

Finally, this study will help to broaden the understanding of widely used term, Employee Engagement which has various meanings and applications from both academic and professional aspects. Many previous studies show the significant knowledge-gaps in understanding theoretical aspect of EE whereby several variations were constantly evolved in popular journals mainly due to the organizational need for practicality and commercial purpose. (Saks, 2006; Little & Little, 2006)

However, there are some limitations that are not reflected in this study. It is recommended that these areas be considered in future research and investigation.

- The study has a geographic limitation as the survey will be conducted in three market leading FMCG companies based in Yangon region.
- The results found in one particular industry – FMCG retail operation in this case - may not necessarily reflect the generalizability in other industries.
- Apart from HPWS, there may be other factors which influence the employee engagement indirectly. They are personal factors – such as education, age, cultural influence – and organizational factors – such as corporate governance, policies and leadership capabilities of key executives. Studies in Malaysia (Bakker, 2014) and China (Xian et al, 2017) found that cultural factors – such as Islamic religious believe and Guanxi (Trust) – played an important role in influencing positive employee attitude which in turns impact organizational performance.
- Myanmar recently experienced high level of political instabilities as a result of political change in February 2021. It will have a considerable impact on the country's economic outlook, social and technological changes. These factors may impose some setbacks on further developments of the companies under this study.
- Impact of Covid-19 has created some changes in working conditions, job requirements and work relationship for employees at all levels.

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