

Faculty: A success factor in improving quality of distance learning

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Abstract

The quality of the output (students) of any educational institution depends on many factors like curriculum, technology, infrastructure, assessment, students and its faculty. The most important of all these factors is faculty. If faculty members are satisfied, motivated and committed then students' learning is going to be much better. No matter how advanced technology and infrastructure may be, how well designed the curriculum is and how delicate the assessment mechanism is, faculty is a variable that supersedes all. Teaching, whether in conventional or distance learning, is the single variable that can be a decisive factor in students' learning. Teaching in distance mode, where there is no or very little teacher-student interaction may become a boring, routine and unattractive job. Too much research is being conducted on factors like technology and media, whereas the faculty of distance education remains a neglected area. In this study, the Job Characteristic Model developed by Hackman and Oldham (1976) has been used as the theoretical basis and the Job Diagnostic Survey has been used to collect data from teachers of distance learning and traditional universities by using an online link which was sent via email to all the faculty members. The purpose of the study was to gather empirical data about faculty satisfaction in both modes of teaching (traditional and distance learning), compare both modes and explore which factors are considered to be more important by the faculty members. The results show that faculty members in distance education and traditional education systems differ in their perceptions towards their jobs. Higher mean scores have been recorded for skill variety, task identity, autonomy, feedback from work, experienced meaningfulness, job security and growth satisfaction by faculty of the traditional education system as compared to distance education faculty.

Introduction

“Job satisfaction is a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experience” (Locke, 1976). Job satisfaction is the key to retaining an adequate and qualified workforce, which is a prerequisite for a successful organisation. Retention of qualified employees is sometimes difficult to realise when conditions, such as a good economic situation, a tight labour market and an ageing workforce, tend to increase the turnover of the workforce (Saane, Sluiter, & Dresen, 2003). Luthans (1995) found that job satisfaction could function as a buffer against conditions favouring a high turnover, because a small

but significant relationship exists between a low level of job satisfaction and turnover. Job satisfaction has been shown to have a negative relationship with absenteeism and occupational stress (Luthans, 1995). For these reasons, attention paid to the job satisfaction of employees may prevent staff shortages in future and may even cut costs. Job satisfaction results in high commitment, high productivity, low absenteeism and turnover, but more importantly, it can change an employee's thinking towards his/her organisation.

Job satisfaction involves a person's positive (or negative) feelings about his or her job. Shimmin (1980) defined job satisfaction as satisfaction with work and quality of working life. Ellickson and Logsdon (2002) argued that the drive to understand and explain job satisfaction has been motivated by utilitarian reasons (like increased productivity and organisational commitment, lower absenteeism and turnover, and ultimately organisational effectiveness) as well as humanitarian reasons. Ellickson and Logsdon infer that satisfied workers also tend to engage in Organisational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB) while dissatisfied employees exhibit counter-productive behaviours like withdrawal, burnout, and workplace aggression.

Moorhead and Griffin (2001) viewed job satisfaction as the extent to which a person is gratified or fulfilled by his or her work. A satisfied employee will be absent less often, make positive contributions and stay with the organisation. In contrast, a dissatisfied employee may be absent more often, may experience stress that disrupts co-workers and may continually look for another job. It has been found in the literature that a high level of job satisfaction motivates employees to accept extra role responsibilities. Only satisfied and committed workers will be helpful in the achievement of organisational goals; that is why employee satisfaction has become an important issue for today's management.

The job satisfaction of teachers has always been a complex thing. In particular, the teachers at higher education institutes view things differently. In traditional classroom teaching, teachers look for students' intellect, course contents and facilities provided by the institution. If we examine job satisfaction from the perspective of distance teaching, it becomes even more important and complex as faculty members of distance learning institutions have very few opportunities to interact with students face to face. Bolliger and Wasilik (2009) found three factors affecting distance (online) teachers' satisfaction; namely student-, instructor- and institution-related factors. This study was conducted on teachers who had taught at least one online course, yet no study was found that focused on teachers who were teaching in purely distance learning institutions using online systems or any other medium.

The quality of the output (students) of any educational institution may depend on many factors like curriculum, technology, infrastructure, assessment, students and its faculty. The most important of all these factors is faculty. If faculty members are satisfied, motivated and committed then students' learning is going to be much better. No matter how advanced technology and infrastructure may be, how well designed the curriculum is and how delicate the assessment mechanism is, faculty is a variable that supersedes all. Teaching, whether in conventional or distance learning, is the most important variable that can be a decisive factor in students' learning. Teaching in distance mode, where there is no or very little teacher-student

interaction, may become a boring, routine and unattractive job. If teachers are dissatisfied and de-motivated and have low self-esteem, can they be successful in imparting quality education? Faculty is the most important factor in learning, as stated by Williams (2006):

Faculty is the pivotal resource around which the process and outcomes of post-secondary education revolves. They often determine curriculum content, student performance standards, and the quality of students' preparation for careers. Faculty members perform research and development work upon which this nation's technological and economic advancement depends. Through their public service activities, they make valuable contributions to society. For these reasons, it is essential to understand who they are, what they do, and whether, how, and why they are changing (NCES, 1999, p. 5).

Too much research has been conducted on factors like technology and media, whereas the faculty of distance education remains a neglected area. Dillon and Walsh (1992) found in their review that only 24 studies out of 225 were related to faculty, which shows the lack of focus on faculty in research studies. Phipps and Merisotis (1999) also found that very few researches have been directed to address the faculty in distance learning; they emphasised on the need to conduct specific research to understand faculty issues in depth. Dillon and Walsh (1992) concluded that institutions did not support distance education and teachers in distance education perceived that distance education was not rewarded. Teaching in distance education is much more demanding as students do not have direct interaction with their teachers; their expectations are very high and are often not met. High student expectations, absence of classroom teaching and lack of intrinsic rewards (sense of accomplishment, perceived meaningfulness and live feedback from students, etc) often lead to dissatisfaction, low motivation and low self-esteem. According to Omoregie (1997), the quality of distance education is also influenced by the attitude of the teachers and many factors affect their attitude.

Objectives of the study

This study focuses on the measurement of the job satisfaction of distance learning faculty members and teachers of traditional universities by using the Job Characteristic Model (JCM). Faculty for distance learning in this study means teachers who are in contact with distant students and providing them teaching support in a subject. Faculty for traditional classrooms is the teachers teaching students in classrooms and performing all traditional activities. The purpose of this study is to gather empirical data about faculty satisfaction in both modes of teaching (traditional and distance learning), compare both modes and explore which factors of job design are considered to be more important by the faculty members.

Model

Traditionally, nature of work, pay, co-workers, supervisors and working conditions have been considered to be the core dimensions of job satisfaction (Luthans, 1995) and these dimensions have been used to measure the job satisfaction of employees. In this study, the Job Characteristic Model (JCM) proposed by Hackman and Oldham (1976) has been used as the theoretical basis.

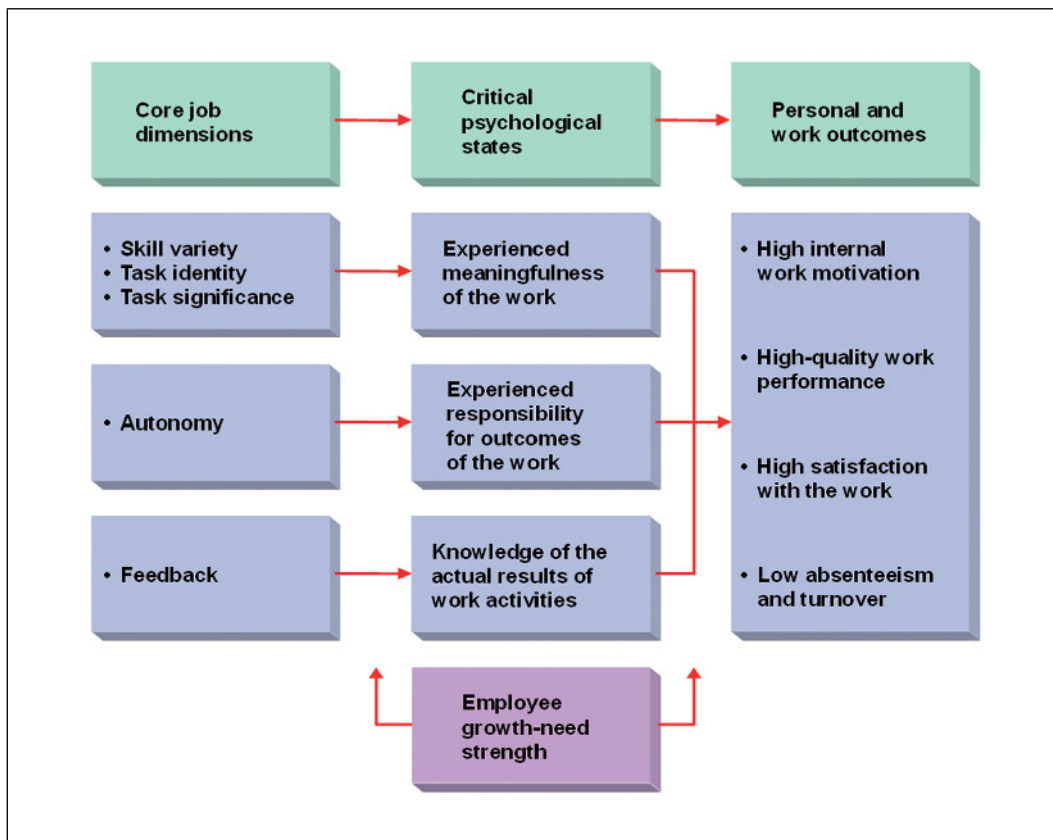


Figure 1 Job Characteristic Model

Source: Hackman & Oldham, 1976

According to the model, five core dimensions (skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback) lead a person to critical psychological states (experienced meaningfulness, responsibility and knowledge of actual results) and as a result there are certain outcomes (high work motivation, high quality performance, high satisfaction, and low absenteeism and turnover), whereas employees' growth-need strength works as a moderating variable (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). JCM provides a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics present in a job, their impact on the psychology of the incumbent and his/her performance. JCM has been used as the primary model in studies measuring the job satisfaction of distance learning teachers as well as teachers in the traditional education system,

and the model fits both types of teachers well. Marom, Gorodiesky, Haim and Godder (2006) found that the nature of the job of tutors in distance learning institutes can influence their performance. It was also found that perceived job importance and job richness were good predictors of organisational attachment, hence supporting Hackman and Oldham. Teachers in Distance Learning Institutions (DLIs) are often far from students and perform repetitive jobs that lower their skill variety and lead to low satisfaction and work motivation.

Guise (1988) tested Hackman and Oldham's job characteristic model in post-secondary educational settings and found that core job characteristics predicted certain psychological states well and these critical psychological states predicted various personal outcomes except absenteeism. Lawrence (2001) applied JCM to measure the perceptions that community music school teachers held towards their jobs. Lawrence found that music teachers gave the highest ratings to dealing with others and autonomy while they rated feedback and task significance lowest. From critical psychological states, experienced responsibility was rated highest while meaningfulness was seen as lowest by music teachers. In this study, it was found that personal development and colleague relations were considered most important while pay and general satisfaction were considered least important in personal/work outcomes by these teachers (Lawrence, 2001).

Methodology

The population for this study comprised faculty members of distance learning universities and traditional classroom teachers.

The Job Diagnostic Survey (JDS) developed by Hackman and Oldham (1976) has been used with slight modifications as the questionnaire to collect primary data. Response categories have been reduced from seven to five due to the limitation of the online survey which does not permit seven categories. Moreover, having seven categories could have made the survey more complex. Six out of the seven sections of the JDS have been used. An email was sent to about 400 traditional university teachers (in different universities) of Pakistan; an online link was provided in the email and respondents were requested to click the link and participate in the survey. Three hundred teachers of online/distance universities were sent the questionnaire using the online link and 224 responses were received from them, which is a very high response rate. The reason for the high response rate is the amount of time spent by the online teachers on the Internet and their familiarity with web-based surveys. Out of these 224 responses, 214 were considered valid responses. The response rate of conventional faculty was low, with only 70 responses being received.

Results

Reliability analysis of the JDS applied in the study showed very good results. The overall reliability of the scale was very good; it had a Cronbach's alpha of .927. The reliability of subscales used was also satisfactory. The reliability of section one was .708, section two .733, section three .786, section four .880, section five .834 and section six .937.

Scores of skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, feedback from job, feedback from agents, dealing with others, experienced meaningfulness, responsibility, knowledge of results, general satisfaction, internal work motivation, specific satisfactions and individual growth needs have been calculated according to the scoring key provided by Hackman and Oldham (1976) in the JDS. Mean scores have been taken accordingly.

Variable	Mean scores for classroom teaching	Mean scores for distance teaching	Std. deviation for distance teaching	Std. deviation for classroom teaching
Skill variety	3.9608	3.0701	.79038	.71572
Task identity	3.9375	3.5296	.69043	.87109
Task significance	3.9583	3.6745	.75297	.83333
Autonomy	4.0980	3.0360	.86041	.58648
Feedback from job	4.0833	3.3271	.76545	.61464
Feedback from agents	3.4706	3.6262	.74250	.92089
Feedback from others	3.7843	3.3801	.91353	1.02022
Dealing with others	3.4706	3.6262	.74250	.92089
Meaningfulness	4.0536	3.5245	.71473	.51121
Responsibility	3.8021	3.7715	.52899	.56181
Knowledge of results	3.4688	3.3551	.56558	.53131
General satisfaction	3.5200	3.2244	.65888	.41266
Internal work motivation	3.8690	3.7009	.50518	.76844
Satisfaction from pay	3.5313	3.9883	.68412	.67004
Satisfaction from job security	3.7188	2.9860	.96648	.63163
Social satisfaction	3.8125	3.7072	.63412	.86039
Supervisor satisfaction	3.8125	3.6526	.84310	1.00347
Growth satisfaction	4.0833	3.2290	.77681	.61721
Individual growth need	3.9792	3.9688	.86055	1.07475

Table 1 Comparison of mean scores

Table 1 shows the comparison of mean scores of the variables for distance education teachers and classroom teachers. Apparently, most of the scores are clustered around 3 or tend to reach 4. Since 214 responses were recorded from distance education faculty and only 70 responses were received from traditional classroom faculty, to have a more subtle and in-depth insight of the responses received from distance education faculty, subscales were collapsed from five categories to two categories; categories 1–3 were labelled as low and 4–5 were labelled as high scores. **Table 2** shows the results of the data reduction according to the frequency percentages.

Variable	Low score	High score
Skill variety	52%	48%
Task significance	25%	75%
Autonomy	54%	46%
Feedback from job	42%	58%
Feedback from agents	25%	75%
Dealing with others	25%	75%
Experienced meaningfulness	28%	72%
Experienced responsibility	10%	90%
Knowledge of results	34%	66%
General satisfaction	42%	58%
Internal work motivation	12%	88%
Feedback from others	37%	63%
Pay satisfaction	10%	90%
Job security	58%	42%
Social satisfaction	16%	84%
Supervisor satisfaction	22%	78%
Growth satisfaction	42%	58%
Individual growth need	20%	80%

Table 2 Percentage scores

Some major variables are discussed below.

Skill variety

Table 1 shows that traditional classroom teachers perceive their job as more diverse and versatile (Mean: 3.9608) as compared to distance teachers (Mean: 3.0701). Obviously, classroom teaching requires diverse skills.

Table 2 shows that the majority of respondents (52%) feel that they do not use a variety of skills and that their job is monotonous and routine.

Task identity

Again, the classroom teachers' mean scores are slightly higher than the distance teachers' scores.

Task significance

The mean scores for both types of teachers are quite close and according to **Table 2**, 75% of the respondents from distance education have scored high on task significance; they feel the job they are doing is worth doing.

Autonomy

Autonomy has yielded a low score for distance faculty (Mean: 3.0360), 54% of the respondents have scored low on this dimension. This means that faculty members feel that they are not being provided with enough decision-making opportunities in curriculum development, teaching a course of their choice, or developing assessment/evaluation tools. On the other hand, classroom teachers have recorded a high mean value (4.0980), which is much higher than their distance learning counterparts.

Feedback from job

Teaching in a classroom provides instant feedback to the teacher about his or her performance in a particular lecture and as expected classroom teachers have a higher mean value (4.0833) as compared to distance teachers (Mean: 3.3271). Fifty-eight per cent of distance teachers have scored higher in this dimension.

Feedback from agents

According to Hackman and Oldham (1976), feedback from agents refers to performance feedback provided by peers or seniors. The mean score of distance faculty is slightly higher (3.6262) than that of other faculty members (3.4706). Seventy-five per cent of the distance teachers have rated this dimension higher, which shows that reasonably good feedback is provided by peers and seniors in a distance education faculty.

Experienced meaningfulness

Traditional faculty's mean score (4.0536) is higher than the score of distance faculty (3.5245) but most of them have scored higher (72%), which is a positive sign for distance education.

Experienced responsibility

Though mean scores of both types of faculty are similar, yet most of the distance teachers (90%) feel that they have more responsibility as teachers.

Pay satisfaction

Satisfaction from pay has obtained the highest score of 3.9883 in distance faculty, which shows that distance teachers are paid adequately. Ninety per cent of them have rated it higher. The other type of faculty has a mean score of 3.5313, which is less than that of the distance faculty.

Job security

Job security has the lowest mean value of 2.986 for distance faculty, while traditional faculty members have a higher mean score of 3.7188.

Growth satisfaction

The mean score of classroom teachers is higher at 4.0833 as compared to their counterparts in distance education (3.2290).

Conclusion

Faculty members in distance education and traditional education systems differ in their perceptions towards their jobs. Higher mean scores have been recorded for skill variety, task identity, autonomy, feedback from work, experienced meaningfulness, job security and growth satisfaction by faculty of the traditional education system as compared to distance education faculty. The mean scores for dealing with others and satisfaction from pay were higher for distance faculty members.

The mean scores of both types of faculty were not much different in the categories of responsibility, internal work motivation, social satisfaction, and individual growth needs.

Recommendations

Teachers in distance education should be given more autonomy and variety in their jobs so that their higher-order needs are met. Universities should also provide opportunities for distance education faculty members to interact with students.

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