

## New Zealand study shows both gender and national culture influence impact of high-performance work systems (HPWS)

A new study from New Zealand has established that both gender and national culture play important roles in determining the impact of high-performance work systems (HPWS) on performance. For men, ability was found to be the best predictor of job performance, whereas for women it was opportunity.

“Gender and job performance: linking the high performance work system with the ability-motivation-opportunity framework”, was written by Fiona Edgar, Nancy M. Blaker and Andre M. Everett, from the Department of Management, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. The authors felt New Zealand was a good place for their study because it has established progressive HPWS work practices, such as autonomy, egalitarianism, participation and empowerment.

The researchers based their study on the principles of attribution theory. It states that individuals tend to attribute what’s happening to them to either external factors, such as their working environment, or internal factors such as their own talent. Also of relevance are other studies showing that employees with an internal focus report higher job satisfaction and performance.

Other researchers have also shown that males tend to attribute success, or failure, to internal characteristics, and women look to external causes. Males, it has been suggested, are “more self-congratulatory” because of their sense of “heightened legitimate entitlement”. Meanwhile, women tend to be more modest about assessing their abilities. At the same time as seeing opportunities as important, they experience far fewer of them. In summary, males may overstate their abilities whereas women may tend to underrate theirs.

Considering the above gender findings, the authors proposed the following hypothesis for men: H1a. The main predictor of job performance for male employees will be ability. H1b. For male employees, ability will mediate the relationship between HPWS and job performance. And they offered the following hypothesis for women: H2a. The main predictor of job performance for female employees will be opportunity. H2b. For female employees, opportunity will mediate the relationship between HPWS and job performance.

The authors also considered the influence of national culture. The Global Leadership and Organizational behaviour Effectiveness (GLOBE) project suggests that national culture values influence leadership expectations. Studies suggest individualist cultures like New Zealand’s are especially likely to see practices that foster knowledge, or information sharing. The New Zealand working context is influenced, the authors say, by egalitarianism, has high employment rates and many small-to-medium enterprises. As a result, there tends to be a high level of job security, a relaxed atmosphere and friendly relations between staff and management.

However, New Zealand is considered a “masculine society”, which can have a negative impact on women’s opportunities, especially regarding pay and the glass ceiling. The

number of females in top managerial positions has been described as “woeful”. In 2018, the World Economic Forum report said average female earnings were only 70pc of male earnings. There was a gap of close to 12pc for the same jobs.

The authors collected data from a purposive sample of service sector organizations in New Zealand. In total, 14 organizations agreed to participate. Managers distributed the survey by email. The measures included 12 items to measure HPWS practices, such as “I have a great deal of autonomy”, “I have good job security”, “I am rewarded well”, and “training is provided”.

The authors framed their research using the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) framework. This required them to test employees’ skills (ability), attitudes (motivation) and behaviours (opportunity). Ability was measured using four items, including “I am not confident I can always perform well”, or “when faced with difficult tasks, I am certain I will accomplish them”. Motivation was measured with seven items, such as “I am enthusiastic about my job” and “I always put forward my best efforts”. Opportunity was measured using nine items, such as “there is too much work”, “the amount of work is fair”, “I regularly accomplish my goals”.

All four of the hypotheses were supported showing that ability was the main predictor for males and external factors were the main predictor for women. In addition, the study found a mediating role existed for ability for males and opportunity for females in the HPWS-job performance relationship.

The authors said the main contribution of the research was to show the relevance of context in studies of employees. The findings were consistent with existing studies of performance indicators for men and women. The authors said the research could contribute to understanding why motivation, as an AMO element, does not feature much in studies. In addition, highlighting the role of national culture helped to explain the formation of gendered behaviour. The authors felt it was reasonable to speculate that the results were impacted by New Zealand’s national culture.

The study also contributed to HRM literature. Firstly, it revealed how the influence of context has been undervalued. Secondly, the role of gender offered a potential explanation for why empirical research previously didn’t fully support AMO’s conceptual framework. Including gender as a factor can help to dispel the “one size fits all” ideas that are common in HRM research design, they said.

There were also implications for HR policy and practice. First, HRM practices should be reassessed to make them equally effective for both genders. Aiming for gender neutrality could reduce the persistent wage gap in New Zealand. Ensuring direct and unambiguous feedback for all employees would be one good move, the authors argued. Finally, they called for more context-specific research. Further work examining the influence of gender, as well as other demographics, was desirable.

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