HR Practices and Deviant Behavior at Work: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract. The study sought to explore the influence of HR practices on deviant workplace behavior amongst 372 manufacturing employees in the northern region of Malaysia. Results show that all dimensions of HR practices i.e. job description; employment security, internal career opportunities, and result-oriented appraisal were negatively related to deviant behavior at work. The implication of the study is discussed.

Keywords: HR Practices, Deviant Behaviour, Negative Behaviours, Organizational Effectiveness, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Deviant workplace behaviour refers to voluntary behaviour that violates significant organizational norms and, in so doing, thus is perceived as threatening the well-being of the organization or its members [1]. Examples of such behaviour are coming in late to work without prior permission, stealing company's property, and harassing others at work. Due to the nature of its negativity, the topic has gradually gained attention both of academics and practitioners. In effect, studies on the issue are steadily increasing with emphasis given on examining the contributing factors. However, upon review of the literatures, little is known of the role of human resource (HR) practices on deviant workplace behaviour, despite the extant evidence on the effect of such practices on shaping employee attitudes and behaviour such as organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and job performance [2], [3], [4], [5].

To date, an attempt was made to link HR practices with deviant behaviour [6]. Using data from a nationally representative survey of over 300 U.S. work establishments, Arthur found empirical support that organizations with HR systems characterized by greater use of internal labor markets and less team autonomy are associated with lower frequencies of reported interpersonal deviance behaviors. Whilst his work is able to shed some insight into the role of HR practices on deviant behavior, it was carried out at the organizational level of analysis, and focused on a specific form of deviant behavior only. Such a limited focus is unfortunate as employees are said to engage in various forms of deviant behaviour at work and studies are needed to examine why they engage in such negative behaviours [1], [7]. A study at the individual level of analysis is warranted as deviant behaviours are committed by individuals within the organization, and it is apt to understand how the HR practices implemented could shape their perception on this issue.

Given the paucity of existing research on the role of HR practices in shaping workplace deviance, the present study aimed to explore the issue further.

2. Method

2.1. Study Sample and Procedure

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To achieve the research objective stated earlier, a survey was carried out amongst manufacturing employees of various occupational levels in manufacturing companies in the northern region of Malaysia. Questionnaires were distributed with the assistance of human resource departments. Because this technique of distributing the questionnaires could compromise the honest opinions of the participants, the researchers guaranteed their anonymity. They were also told that the completed questionnaires should be sealed in an accompanying envelope before returning to the human resource department for collection, and that their responses would be aggregated. The survey took approximately 20 minutes to complete.

All in all, 400 self-reported questionnaires were distributed to the employees. After two months of data collection from October 2010 until November 2010, 372 completed questionnaires were returned either by mail or by personal collection, yielding a good response rate of 93%. All returned questionnaires were valid for final data analysis.

The participants of the study were mainly made up of male (74.7%), married (62.5%), of Malay origin (90.8%), and had high school diploma or certificate (82.8%). Most of them were non-executive employees (73.1%). The mean age was 30.79 years, and the mean length of service was 6.97 years.

2.2. Measures

Deviant workplace behaviour was measured using the Workplace Deviance Questionnaire developed by Bennett and Robinson [1]. The 17-item instrument has been widely employed in previous studies (e.g. [8], [9]), and have reported reliabilities ranging from .74 to .94 [10]. Deviant workplace behaviour is categorised into two groups: interpersonal deviance and organizational deviance. Interpersonal deviance is characterized by norm-violating behaviours directed at co-workers, while organizational deviance refers to those counter normative behaviours aimed specifically at the organization itself [11]. Out of 17 items, seven measured interpersonal deviance, and the remaining items organizational deviance. Participants were asked to indicate, while in the job, how often they know of any of their workmates, who, for example, "Made fun of someone (other workmates, guests, etc.) while at work," "Took property from work without permission," "Came in late to work without permission," and "Dragged out work in order to get overtime." The variable was measured on five-point scale, ranging from '1' "never," to '5' "all the time."

HR practices were measured using an instrument containing 23 items [12]. All items employed a five-point scale ranging from '1' "strongly disagree" to '5' "strongly agree". Participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement (or disagreement) with regards to the human resource practices in their organization on items such as "Employees in this job will normally go through training programs every few years," "Performance appraisals are based on objective, quantifiable results" and "Job security is almost guaranteed to employees in this job."

3. Results

Before testing the effect of HR practices on workplace deviance, a factor analysis with principle component analysis employing an orthogonal varimax rotation was carried out to ascertain the validity of the measures. To identify and interpret factors, the criteria that each item should load .50 or greater on one factor and .35 or lower on the other factor were used [13]. Based on the analysis, a four factor solution that explain 67.9% variance in HR practices was found. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was .841 whereas the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi2 = 1544.494$, $p < .01$), indicating sufficient intercorrelations for the factor analysis. The four factors found are job description, employment security, result-oriented appraisal, and internal career opportunities. Each factor was treated as distinct variables to be considered as inputs for correlation analysis later.

Next, factor analysis with varimax rotation was run to validate the dimensionality of deviant workplace behavior. Unexpectedly, a single factor solution explaining 68.7% variance was found. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was .832 whereas the Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi2 = 1055.942$, $p < .01$), indicating sufficient intercorrelations for the factor analysis. Because the items that were loaded on a single factor reflect deviance targeted at individuals, this factor was re-labelled interpersonal deviance, which was later considered in the regression analysis.

Table 1 presents the means, internal reliability value (Cronbach α), and the correlations of the variables. The Cronbach's alphas obtained for the measures were .84 for job description, .67 employment security, .86 appraisal, .63 internal career opportunities, and .89 workplace deviances. Based on the table, it appears that in general participants reported that human resource practices are being well practiced in their organizations, as indicated by the high mean values. As expected, employees were reported to engage in workplace deviance infrequently in the surveyed organizations.

TABLE 1 MEANS, RELIABILITY AND CORRELATIONS (N = 372)

Variables	Mean	1	2	3	4	5	Cronbach's α
1. Job description	3.52	-					.84
2. Employment security	3.29	.432**	-				.67
3. Result oriented appraisal	3.48	.447**	.338**	-			.86
4. Internal career opportunities	3.32	.448**	.389**	.352**	-		.63
5. Workplace deviance	2.23	-.226**	-.156**	-.103*	-.130*	-	.89

* Significant at $p < .05$; ** Significant at $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 1, all dimensions of HR practices showed significant negative correlations with workplace deviance, even though the strength of the associations is rather weak [14].

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to examine the relationship between HR practices and workplace deviance because little is known of whether HR practices play a role in shaping employees' deviant responses at work. Based on correlation analyses run, the present study has provided empirical support for such relationship. As expected, HR practices are negatively related to workplace deviance. When employees perceive that the organization is not implementing HR practices favourably, they tend to engage in deviant behaviour at work such as by making fun of someone (other workmates, guests, etc.), saying something hurtful, making an ethnic, religious or racial remark, cursing someone, and playing a mean prank on someone. The finding is consistent with previous study that found the effect of HR system on interpersonal deviance at the organization level [6].

Specifically, the present study found that job description, employment security, result-oriented appraisal, and internal career opportunities are negatively related to workplace deviance. When the employees have duties that are clearly defined and have up-to-date job description, they are less likely to engage in deviant behaviours at work because they know what to do and how to do so. It was reported that when employees were not clear of their role at work, they would feel stressed and may engage in deviant behaviour at work [15]. Whilst work stress has been found to be a precursor to workplace deviance, more studies need to be conducted to confirm its effect.

As expected, employment security was found to relate negatively to deviant behaviour. Employment security is an important facet of quality of life for many employees [16]. When people feel that their job is secure, they will be more committed and motivated to work [1], and less likely to engage in deviant behaviour. Conversely, those who feel that their job is insecure would tend to be angry and frustrated [17]. To vent anger, they may divert their negative emotions toward other people. Despite the plausible role of emotional responses to job insecurity, more studies need to be carried out to validate it.

Unfavourable appraisal system and lack of internal career opportunities could also increase the likelihood of employees engaging in workplace deviance behaviour. Appraisal system is one of the most problematic HR practices as it is replete with human subjectivity and discretion, despite attempts to minimize such biases. As a result, employees may perceive to be unfairly assessed and when this happens they may retaliate by engaging deviant behaviour at work [18]. When the appraisal process is seen as being unfair, the distribution of reward such as promotion will also be seen as unfair [19]. Whilst the explanation for the relationship between HR practices and deviant behaviour is likely, more research is needed to validate it. Furthermore, considering the emotional process such as anger or frustration into the equation may help understand the whole relationship better and hence extend the existing literature on workplace deviance.

The findings of the present study suggest that managers need to make sure that HR practices are implemented in such a way that they would not result in unintended, undesirable behavioural consequences at work. Attitude surveys, for example, could be used to gauge to what extent the HR practices are perceived to be fair and favourable. To further extend the literature, more studies need to be carried out to understand the issue better by investigating other factors, such as individual, contextual and job-related, that may contribute to workplace deviance.

The unidimensionality found of workplace deviance also warrants further research into the re-examination of the scale and the issue further. If indeed similar findings could be replicated, issues arise as to why interpersonal deviance only is exhibited at work and not organizational deviance. Such investigation is important as it has important implications to developing a conducive work environment.

One of the limitations of the present study is generalizability. As the participants of the present study were from manufacturing organizations, the findings may not be generalized to a much broader population in other organizational contexts due to the different cultures and values. Furthermore, because this study is correlational in nature, causal relationships between the variables are difficult to ascertain. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, the present study has been able to provide initial understanding on the issue of workplace deviance and the determining role of HR practices.

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