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The Learning Value of the Job as a Driver of Employee Commitment and Job Satisfaction in Public Organisations

Abstract

The transformation of Poland's public organisations poses new challenges for their employees. Growing social expectations regarding the quality of social services increase the importance of employees' development and commitment. This requires that special attention be paid to the learning value of the job, which not only enhances employees' commitment to the organisation but also positively influences their development and job satisfaction. This paper attempts to answer the question: what is the extent of the learning value of jobs in organisations in the public sector and is the learning value of the job connected with organisational commitment of employees and their job satisfaction? Empirical research is used in service to answering these questions.

Keywords: learning value of the job, organisational commitment, public organisations, job satisfaction.

1. Introduction

Changes in the Polish public sector pose new challenges for its employees. Society's growing expectations regarding the quality of public services increases the importance of employees' development and commitment. Employee competences and commitment are connected with the value of organisational human capital, which influences the potential of public organisations to develop. Poland's transformation continues to move forward, which establishes new requirements regarding employees' skills and knowledge. Many employees look for new ways to develop. However, the financial resources Poland's public organisations have at their disposal are limited, which may bring down job satisfaction and employee commitment. In turn, lack of commitment, competences and satisfaction can be a serious barrier to further changes in public organisations. In this context some researchers emphasise the significance of the learning value of the job as an employee development method and its positive impact on employees' commitment and job satisfaction.

This paper seeks to answer the questions: what are the levels of the learning value of a job and employees' job satisfaction in public organisations? What is the educational value of the job connected with organisational commitment of employees and their job satisfaction? We will answer these questions by presenting a short review of the literature and the results of empirical research on the learning value of the job and job satisfaction as well as relationships between the learning value of the job, job satisfaction and organisational commitment of those employed in Poland's public sector.

2. Theoretical Background and Development of the Hypotheses

2.1. Changes in Poland's Public Organisations

Public organisations are open systems that are strongly dependent on external events because their main goal is reacting to emerging social needs (Boyne 2002). Public organisations are unstable due to their politicisation. Moreover, they are often the subject of public interests and political turmoil. In the face of new challenges many traditional methods and practices used in administration have become ineffective. The traditional model of administration based on bureaucratic rationality was done away with in many European countries at the end of the 1970s and replaced with an approach called new public management. However, in Poland these changes began along with the process of political and economic transformation in the late 1980s.

Before 1989 the system of Polish administration was strongly centralised, hierarchical, and directed by political issues. This rendered rational social policy impossible, at both the national and local levels. It hindered the choice and realisation of proper social goals (Kulesza 2000). However, after the political transformation strong emphasis was placed on reforming public administration systems and structures, and work on numerous reforms began in 1989. The most important one for Polish administration took place in 1990, restoring local self-government after 40 years. However, in 1998 a fundamental reform of public administration was passed. It came into force on the 1st of January 1999, introducing a three-stage territorial division. Its main goal was to exempt central government from the management of local affairs, which paved the way to subsequent changes being made in other areas. By delegating power to the local authorities, the reforms were aimed at the enhancement of home-rule, local activities and rapprochement between the authorities and people.

The transformation of Polish administration was accompanied by changes in other public organisations and their management systems. Public organisations began to borrow methods and techniques of professional management from the private sector. Changing political and economic conditions gave rise to a growing focus on the results and effectiveness in Polish public organisations. New public management questioned the traditional model of public management based on public administration and introduced market mechanisms and management methods oriented at managerial control in the public sector. However, the specificity of the public sector and criticism of this managerial approach resulted in replacing solutions proposed by new public management with a new approach based on the use of mechanisms typical for the idea of public governance. In public services today the importance of customer orientation is emphasised, while there is also strong pressure on public organisations to achieve results. Many Polish public organisations have transformed from being hierarchical, centralised, resistant and unwilling to take risks to more flexible, client-oriented organisations that concentrate on the organisational environment while promoting risk and development.

2.2. The Learning Value of the Job

Continuous changes and instability result in the search for new methods of developing public sector employees. Today employees more and more often perceive the possibility to develop as a key factor in the decision to remain in the public sector, because continuous learning becomes necessary to maintain and enhance their employability. In this context many researchers point to the importance of the learning value of the job because the job content is one of the key factors which influences employees' perception of their work

environment. Some believe that even task-based learning leads to better results than other traditional forms of training (Murakami *et al.* 2009). Therefore, public organisations willing to keep and develop employees may partly replace expensive training by redesigning jobs to increase their learning value. The learning value of a job concerns “the extent to which occupational knowledge and skills can be used and expanded in one’s job position” (Van der Heijden & Bakker 2011, p. 234). It also depends on the particularities of the job, and the aims and challenges it provides as well as the skills required to properly execute one’s responsibilities (Van der Heijden & Bakker 2011, p. 234).

The job should provide employees with the opportunity to learn and improve their skills. Complex work content, diverse tasks and autonomy encourage learning and employee development. Proper job redesign may not just lead to increased motivation and job satisfaction but to the enhancement of employee’s learning and commitment. The learning value of the job may be increased by job enrichment, job enlargement and job rotation. These give employees the opportunity to develop new skills, to enrich their experience and fully use their work potential. They also enhance an employee’s position on the internal and external labour market because they increase the functional flexibility of the employee and his employability. Horizontal movement leads to similar effects while allowing workers to pick up skills and individual social capital. The literature on the subject indicates that changes in job content may benefit both employees and the organisation in a variety of ways. However, they may bring the expected results only if they are accepted by employees.

In practice, many employees reluctantly accept these changes, and their resistance only grows if the changes are imposed from the top down, which may even lead to many negative consequences – for example, the destabilisation of work processes and a decrease in work performance, motivation or employee satisfaction, to name a few. The problem of frequency of job movements should also be thoroughly considered. It depends on the kind of the new job, the pace at which the employee develops his or her competences and the employee’s self-confidence. However, too long spent in the same job may result in a narrowing perspective, limited exposure to new experiences and learning. The optimal time to hold the same position is a few years for employees specialists. On the other hand, changes made too often do not allow employees to gain the proper experience and develop competences in the specific job domain (Van der Heijden 2001).

In the case of managers this time can be shorter because their jobs are not characterised by a high level of knowledge specialisation (Van der Heijden 2001). It is important that workers today more and more often consider their career in the context of a profession rather than in a specific organisation. Therefore, changes in job content or horizontal movements give them the chance to learn and to extend

their competences. Execution of the same tasks for a long time limits employee development and leads to decreased commitment and job satisfaction.

Empirical research shows that job complexity and the variety of tasks and experiences are positively related to employees' competences and their employability (Kohn & Schooler 1982, Juhdi *et al.* 2010). Moreover, the diversity of a job has a positive influence on employee proactivity (Brousseau 1978). Survey research in Dutch enterprises revealed that a job's learning value is closely tied to employees' expertise and flexibility (Van der Heijden 2006). It was also found that the learning value lifts employee initiative and proactivity (Fay & Kamps 2006). Interviews conducted with students who work proved that new job experiences not only enrich their knowledge and skills but also change the values, opinions and work attitudes of young employees (Murakami *et al.* 2009).

2.3. The Organisational Commitment of Employees in Public Organisations

A precursor of studies of organisational commitment was Becker (1960), who singled out two kinds: calculative commitment and attitudinal commitment. Mowday, Steers and Porter (1979, p. 226), continuing Becker's work, stressed the significance of an emotional element of organisational commitment, defining it as the power of an employee's ties and his or her identification with the organisation. Buchanan (1974) emphasised the emotional aspect of organisational commitment. In his opinion, organisational commitment is the emotional attachment of an employee to organisational goals and values as well as his role regarding these goals and values (Buchanan 1974, p. 533).

This subject arouses great interest among Polish researchers, too. According to Juchnowicz (2010, p. 58), organisational commitment is an employee's identification with an organisation, its aims and values, his wish to be a member of the organisation and readiness to spare no effort to help it. Similarly, Spik and Klinecicz (2008, p. 480–488) defined organisational commitment as individual attachment of the employee to the organisation and his or her identification with it.

In the last decade, Allen and Meyer's (1990) model has become very popular and has been successfully used in a great deal of empirical research. It includes three dimensions, i.e. (Allen & Meyer 1990, pp. 2–3):

- affective commitment, which reflects an employee's emotional attachment to the organisation;
- continuance commitment, which concerns employee-perceived costs connected with leaving the organisation;
- normative commitment, which reflects the employee's loyalty towards the organisation, and which is based on a feeling of obligation to stay with it.

It has been proven that organisational commitment provides various benefits both to the organisation and its employees. It is positively related to employee performance, job satisfaction and career success (Sager & Johnston 1989, Riketta 2002). Moreover, it has been found that organisational commitment is positively connected with the innovative behaviours of employees and organisational learning which are important factors in contemporary public organisations' success (Jafri 2010, Rose, Kumar & Pak 2009).

Organisational commitment of employees depends on a variety of organisational factors, e.g. perceived organisational support, procedural justice, a system of rewards, and the employee's participation in the decision-making processes (Allen & Meyer 1990, Meyer & Smith 2000). Job characteristics are also significant predictors of commitment (Flynn & Tannenbaum 1993, Mathieu & Zajac 1990). However, empirical research suggests that such organisational features as extended hierarchical structures or bureaucratic culture negatively affect the organisational commitment of employees in the public sector (Rowlinson 2001). Moreover, strict supervision, narrow autonomy and numerous procedural limitations characteristic of jobs in many public organisations may also negatively influence employee commitment.

2.4. Job Satisfaction

Despite the fact that job satisfaction has been the subject of researchers' interest since the human relations movement, there is no final definition of this notion and it is still understood in a variety of ways by theoreticians and management practitioners. These problems stem from the complex nature of the notion of job satisfaction.

Locke's classical definition (1976, p. 1304) presents job satisfaction as "a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one's job or job experiences". It encompasses both emotional and cognitive elements. A simple definition of job satisfaction is proposed by Agho, Price and Mueller (1992). In their opinions job satisfaction reflects "the extent to which employees like their work" (1992, p. 185). Similarly, according to the popular Spector's definition, job satisfaction refers to people's feelings about their job and its various aspects and it can be considered to be both a total feeling of an employee to his or her job or a set of attitudes an employee has to various aspects of his or her job (Spector 1997, p. 2). Job satisfaction is defined somewhat differently by Aziri (2011, p. 78), who states that it is a feeling that results from the perception that the job satisfies the employee's material and psychological needs. This definition emphasises the connection between job satisfaction and employee motivation.

Job satisfaction depends on organisational characteristics, situational factors and personality traits (Agho, Price & Mueller 1992, Judge, Heller & Mount 2002). It is related to autonomy, the degree of task routinisation, compensation, work conditions, social relationships, supervision, levels of employee aspiration and needs achievement (Rue & Byars 2003, Eichar & Thompson 1986). Other researchers indicate that demographic characteristics including gender, tenure, and education may also affect job satisfaction (Łaguna 2012, Zalewska 2009). It has been found that employee job satisfaction benefits organisations and employees alike, and is considered to be one of the most significant factors that account for employee behaviours. Because it is related to employee motivation, it influences work performance.

2.5. Development of the Hypotheses

The idea of the learning value of a job clearly refers to Hackman and Oldham's (1976) job characteristics theory, which holds that job characteristics influence employees' motivation, satisfaction and performance. Research carried out in public and private organisations in the US showed that precisely defined but challenging tasks enhance employees' organisational commitment (Flynn & Tannenbaum 1993). According to Rue and Byars (2003), job design and perceived long-term opportunities are two of the main factors influencing job satisfaction. Today the possibility to learn on the job is just such a chance for many employees. It was also found that organisational commitment also improves job satisfaction (Rose, Kumar & Pak 2009). Some believe that job satisfaction mediates the relationships between organisational factors and employees' commitment to an organisation (Rue & Byars 2003, Aziri 2011). The results of previous research carried out in Polish organisations indicate that job satisfaction is positively related to the evaluation of chances which creates participation in trainings (Łaguna 2012). However, a high level of formalisation and control, restricted autonomy and numerous procedures specific to many public organisations can limit the learning value of jobs. Moreover, these features can also negatively influence employees' job satisfaction. Considering these findings, the following hypotheses have been posed:

Hypothesis 1: Employees in public organisations report that their jobs have a low learning value.

Hypothesis 2: Employees in public organisations report low job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3: A job's learning value is positively correlated to employees' job satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4: The learning value of the job is positively correlated to employees' organisational commitment.

3. Research Methodology – Sample, Measures and Data Collection

At the end of 2012, we conducted empirical research to test the four hypotheses¹. The data were gathered by means of questionnaires. The sample consisted of 318 employees of public organisations operating in southern Poland. Most of the respondents were women (85.8%). The sample structure by “educational qualification” of the respondents is as follows: 41.8% of the participants held a Master’s degree, 45.0% a Bachelor’s and 10.7% of the participants had secondary education. The respondents with other educational qualification constituted 2.5% of the sample. As for age, 20.8% were 18 to 26, 26.4% were 27–34, 22.6% were 35–43, 24.2% were 44 to 53, and 6% of respondents were 54 and above. 44% of the respondents were employed in public administration, 21.4% in education and 16.7% in public healthcare institutions. The share of respondents employed in organisations conducting other kinds of activity did not exceed 5% (in total 17.9%).

Organisational commitment was measured with Allen and Meyer’s scale (1990), which consisted of eighteen items scored on a 7-grade Likert’s scale (from 1 – strongly disagree, to 7 – strongly agree). Cronbach α for the subscale of affective commitment was 0.87, for the subscale of continuance commitment 0.81, and for the subscale of normative commitment 0.89. Cronbach α for the whole scale was 0.92. The learning value of the job was measured with 5 items adopted from Van der Heijden (2006) with responses ranging from 1 – strongly disagree, to 7 – strongly agree. Cronbach α for the sample was 0.91. Job satisfaction was measured with 6 items based on Agho, Price and Mueller’s scale (1992), which was scored on a 7-grade Likert’s scale. Cronbach α for this sample was 0.88.

Three essential pieces of information about the respondents were used as control variables: gender (coded: 1 – male, 2 – female), age, and educational attainment (coded: 1 – primary education, 2 – high school, 3 – Bachelor’s degree, 4 – Master’s degree, 5 – doctorate or PhD). This information was obtained with single items. Many studies have determined that these variables are significantly related to employee commitment and job satisfaction; thus they can also influence the relationships being examined here.

4. Results and Implications

Data was processed by means of SPSS 20.0. The results showed that in general the surveyed employees rated the learning value of their job highly, i.e. the mean

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score was 4.95 points on the 7-point scale (median 5.10), even if the ratings were diverse (standard deviation 1.34) – Table 1. The employees also gave their level of job satisfaction high ratings – the mean score was 4.71 (median 4.83). Therefore, the results did not confirm the first and second hypotheses (H1, H2).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Learning Value of the Job and Job Satisfaction

Variables	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Learning value of the job	4.95	5.10	5.00	1.34	1.00	7.00
Job satisfaction	4.71	4.83	5.00	1.22	1.00	7.00

Source: the authors' own elaboration.

Table 2. Intercorrelations of the Examined Variables ($N = 318$)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age								
2. Education	-0.002							
3. Affective commitment	0.006	0.064						
4. Continuance commitment	0.123*	-0.140*	0.420**					
5. Normative commitment	-0.047	0.014	0.712**	0.486**				
6. Organisational commitment (overall)	0.028	-0.022	0.855**	0.750**	0.892**			
7. Learning value of the job	0.126*	0.063	0.430**	0.102	0.327**	0.347**		
8. Job satisfaction	0.11	0.029	0.687**	0.310**	0.579**	0.634**	0.517**	

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Source: the authors' own elaboration.

We next examined the relationships between the learning value of the jobs, employees' job satisfaction and their organisational commitment (Table 2). The results of Pearson's correlation analysis showed that there is a significant relationship between employees' general level of organisational commitment and the learning value of their job (0.347, $p < 0.01$). At the same time, both normative and affective commitment were strongly correlated to the learning value of the job (respectively 0.327, $p < 0.01$ and 0.430, $p < 0.01$). Only continuance commitment was not significantly correlated with the learning value of the job. Moreover, strong relationships were found between the learning value of a job and job

satisfaction (0.517, $p < 0.01$) as well as between the general level of organisational commitment and job satisfaction (0.634, $p < 0.01$).

The results were therefore in line with hypotheses 3 and 4. However, to verify these hypotheses the examined relationships needed to be tested over and above the contribution of the control variables (Bozionelos 2003, p. 56), so we also tested them with regression analysis (Table 3).

Table 3. Summary of Hierarchical Regression Models Testing the Relationship between Learning Value of the Job, Job Satisfaction and Organisational Commitment

Predictors	Dependent variable	
	job satisfaction	organisational commitment
	beta/beta in	beta/beta in
Step 1		
Gender	0.045	-0.039
Education	0.025	-0.018
Age	0.112*	0.026
Step 2		
Learning value of the job	0.510***	0.355***
<i>t</i> -value	10.435	6.642
<i>R</i>	0.519	0.355
<i>R</i> ²	0.269	0.126
ΔR^2	0.254	0.115
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	0.260	0.123
–	<i>F</i> (4, 313) = 28.818***	<i>F</i> (4, 313) = 11.280***

Note: *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Source: the authors' own elaboration.

Hypothesis 3 was tested with hierarchical regressions that utilised job satisfaction as the criterion. In the first step, control variables (i.e. gender, age, level of educational attained) were forcibly entered as one block into the estimated regression model but only age made a marginally significant contribution to the total amount of variance accounted for in scores on job satisfaction (Table 3). In the second step, scores on learning value of the job were entered into the model. Analysis revealed that the learning value of the job made a significant contribution to the total amount of variance accounted for in scores on job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.510$, $t = 10.44$, $p < 0.001$). There is therefore no reason to reject hypothesis 3.

In order to check whether the learning value of the job is positively correlated to organisational commitment, i.e. to test hypothesis 4, the same procedure was used (Table 3). Organisational commitment was utilised as the criterion. Age,

gender and educational level were forcibly entered as controls into the regression in the first step but they did not make a significant contribution to the total amount of variance accounted for in scores on organisational commitment. In the second step scores on learning value of the job were entered into the regression model. The learning value of the job also made a significant contribution to the total amount of variance accounted for in scores on organisational commitment ($\beta = 0.355$, $t = 6.64$, $p < 0.001$), hence there is no reason to reject hypothesis 4.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Despite the first and second formulated hypotheses the research showed that the employees examined rated highly both the learning values of their jobs and their job satisfaction; hence the first and second hypotheses were rejected. These findings suggest that changes in Poland's public sector have led to a greater awareness of the importance of proper work design for employees' development, commitment and satisfaction. The conducted analysis also proved that the learning value of the job was positively connected with the general level of employees' organisational commitment and job satisfaction, hence the results provide no reason to reject the third and fourth hypotheses. It was also found that the strongest relationship was between affective commitment and the learning value of the job. These findings also indicate that employees of public organisations want to develop and learn at their jobs, as doing so can give them satisfaction and enhance their organisational commitment. Note that the learning value of the job was not significantly correlated only with continuance commitment. This suggests that the increase in the learning value of the job can enhance employees' loyalty and emotional attachment to an organisation. However, it has a limited impact on those employees who stay in their organisations more due to fear of leaving than to loyalty. Additionally, strong relationships between employees' commitment and their job satisfaction were found. This indicates that it is more likely that employees who are more satisfied with their jobs are also more committed to the organisation.

The limitations of the study must still be discussed. For now, we would emphasise that the sample was not representative and the study's findings cannot be generalised. Future studies should be widened to encompass public organisations throughout the entire country. Moreover, the effects of the learning value of the job – e.g. its impact on employees' performance – still need to be examined. Future studies could also lead to additional investigations of the relationships between the learning value of the job and individual career paths as well as between the learning value of the job and work experience. The changes in employment relationships in the public sector and growing job insecurity clearly indicate that new opportunities for learning should be provided in Polish public organisations to enhance employees'

employability. Future research should also investigate the influence of a job's learning value on the employability of employees in public organisations.

However, it should be also stressed that this research is one of the first attempts to link the learning value of a job with employees' organisational commitment and their job satisfaction in transforming the country's public organisations. By providing insight into the relationships between the learning value of the job, organisational commitment and job satisfaction the study has been intended to contribute to theory building on HRM in the Polish public sector. It shows how HRM practices can enhance employees' commitment and job satisfaction (Fleetwood & Hesketh 2010, p. 18).

To conclude, increasing the learning value of the job may benefit both employees and public organisations. Undoubtedly, job satisfaction and organisational commitment are important factors determining the quality of working life in the public sector. Despite the numerous problems and pathologies that still exist, the transformation of Poland's administration system is already a historical fact (Kulesza 2000, p. 79). However, nowadays employees of public organisations also look for opportunities to develop professionally and organisations should support them in these aspirations. It should be stressed that employees' commitment and their competences have become a vital factor in the success of Polish public organisations. It is therefore a new challenge for HRM in public organisations to create a job environment that enhances employee learning, which in turn may increase their organisational commitment and job satisfaction.

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Wartość uczenia się wykonywanej pracy jako czynnik zaangażowania pracowników i satysfakcji z pracy w organizacjach publicznych

Transformacja polskich organizacji publicznych stawia nowe wyzwania przed ich pracownikami. Rosnące oczekiwania społeczne co do jakości usług publicznych powodują wzrost znaczenia rozwoju pracowników i budowania ich zaangażowania. Sytuacja ta wymaga zwrócenia szczególnej uwagi na wartość uczenia się wykonywanej pracy, która nie tylko wzmacnia zaangażowanie organizacyjne pracowników, lecz także wpływa pozytywnie na ich rozwój i satysfakcję z pracy. W artykule podjęto próbę odpowiedzi na pytanie, jaki jest poziom wartości uczenia się wykonywanej pracy w organizacjach publicznych oraz czy wartość ta jest powiązana z zaangażowaniem organizacyjnym pracowników i ich satysfakcją z pracy. Cel ten został osiągnięty poprzez zaprezentowanie wyników badań empirycznych.

Słowa kluczowe: wartość uczenia się wykonywanej pracy, zaangażowanie organizacyjne, organizacje publiczne, satysfakcja z pracy.