



WWJMRD 2021; 7(10): 79-85
www.wwjmr.com
International Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal
Refereed Journal
Indexed Journal
Impact Factor SJIF 2017:
5.182 2018: 5.51, (ISI) 2020-
2021: 1.361
E-ISSN: 2454-6615
DOI: 10.17605/OSF.IO/QZJTH

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Training, Personality Dimensions, and Employees' Work Performance during COVID-19: A Conceptual Paper

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Abstract

Research scholars have argued that the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has led to significant changes in the education industry, leading many institutions with no choice than to migrate their classroom learning systems from face-to-face to online platforms. However, lately, it has been observed that other segments of the institutions need to join the migration plan, such as HR function of training and development of employees. Worse still, this has not been successful in many instances, including the context of this study which is the Sultan Qaboos University in the Sultanate of Oman. Thus, it is imperative that research efforts be channeled into training in this context, as this has been shown to directly relate to employee work performance; however, there is a challenge in ascertaining whether personality dimensions play a role in the outcome of employees' training in delivering the needed work performance. Underpinned by the socio-analytic theory, this conceptual paper argues that the effect of training on employee work performance is explained by the mediating role of personality dimensions. In this paper, training commitment, training needs, training content and delivery approaches and training evaluation are conceptualized as independent variables, personality dimensions are the mediating variable and individual work performance is the dependent variable. Also, supported by the resource-based view theory and human capital theory, the originality of this paper lies in its contribution to the development of improved theoretical, conceptual, and methodological reasoning for existing linkages between training, personality dimensions and employee work performance in higher education institutions. This will add to the extant discussions in the literature.

Keywords: Training, personality dimensions, employee performance, individual work performance, Oman

1. Introduction

It is a truism that the performance of an organization is dependent on employees; this owes to the fact that an organisation's most valuable assets are its workforce (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2014). The objectives of any organization can only be achieved through her employees. It is therefore imperative that employees are armed with the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to ensure that organizations sustain optimum performance to remain competitive and successful (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019). Thus, organizations need a formal approach to update employees' acquisition of job-related knowledge, skills and abilities by organizing training (Aigbogun, Yassin, & Zeeshan, 2013); Pradhan & Jena, 2017). From the perspective of the human capital theory, training is not a consumption, rather it is an investment. It posits that employee work performance influences the performance of an organization. For this reason, it is the duty of organizational leaders to see the importance of training and development's impact on the performance of the employees (Sendawula et al., 2018).

Globally, the most vital influence on the external environment of organizations is the Coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) which has been designated by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a public health emergency of international concern (Aigbogun, 2020; Wolor, 2020). This COVID-19 has churned up milestone challenges for the global higher education community (Bao, 2020; Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, & Glowatz

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2020). Moreover, since the early 2020, many universities have been facing an unprecedented massive exodus from traditional in-class face-to-face education to online education, and they have also extended this online platform to other sections of their operations (Mohammed et al., 2020). However, in Oman, this remains a major challenge because there has been a very slow migration of higher education institutions to the online medium, and this migration has not been implemented in other significant employee endeavours such as training and development (Mohammed et al., 2021). For instance, in the largest tertiary education institution in Oman, Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) reports (e.g. Osman, 2020) show that migration from the traditional face-to-face training to online trainings during the recent movement restrictions due to Covid-19 pandemic has not been successful; these challenges have been conceptualized by research scholars as caused by such issues as; lack of commitment to the online trainings, perceptions of inadequacies of training contents, delivery approaches, and training needs. In order to mitigate these challenges, research efforts are needed to develop models that consider individual differences in behaviour (Risley, 2020) which motivates them to sustain employee work performance in times of crisis (Al Khanbashi & Aigbogun, 2020).

In recent years, a few studies (e.g. Taufek & Mustafa, 2018; Mahardika & Lutrlean, 2020) have concluded that organizations that organize training for employees could improve employee work performance. Despite this fact, only limited studies have explored the zero-order effect of training on performance on the employee level (employee work performance), rather they focus on the organizational level (e.g. Esteban-Lloret et al., 2018; Samwel, 2018; Ohanyere et al., 2021). This creates a challenge of generalization to the individual employee level; thus, questions still exist on the zero-order effect of training dimensions on employee work performance in the higher education sector.

Moreover, previous research has failed to consider the intervening role of individual employee personality dimensions in the relationship between training and employee work performance. Addressing this shortcoming in the literature is important in uncovering individual variations in performance in spite of similar training received. In addition, theories on personality dimensions have provided an understanding on the mechanisms in which personalities of individual employees can act as a mediation on their performance. Previous studies (e.g. Asare, 2018; Desrochers et al., 2019; Verdú-Jover et al., 2020) using personality dimensions as a mediator have yielded significant results, however, empirical validation of this fact in the higher education sector is non-existent, therefore, this study addresses the shortcoming in the literature by carrying out a logical investigation into the mediating role of personality dimensions and its implication on employee work performance in the higher education sector in Oman.

This objective of this paper is to conceptually develop a framework that incorporates the influence of employee training on individual work performance through personality dimensions as mediator in the context of academic and non-academic employees of SQU in the Sultanate of Oman.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Training and Employee Work Performance

According to an earlier study carried out by Hasniza (2009), commitment towards the training programmes helps to improve their assimilation into the organizations culture. This has been proven to increase employee loyalty and identity with the organisation with respect to their responsibilities and duties. As a result, as argued by Martini et al. (2018) it is expected that training commitment of the employees connotes stronger attachment to the organization, producing better motivation and enhanced productivity. Similarly, in research conducted by Jaworski et al. (2018,) the findings also revealed that training significantly and positively influences employee commitment and enhancement of productivity. Thus, based on reciprocity theory (Isoni & Sugden, 2019), training commitment leads to better employee performance. As a result of the discussion, the following is hypothesized:

H₁: There is a significant and positive influence of training commitment on employee work performance of SQU employees

Furthermore, Mahadevan and Yap (2019) argue that a particular training delivery approach may be better suited and more effective for a specific training content compared to others, as every delivery approach is capable and suited to pass across specific knowledge, skills, task and attitudinal information to the trainee. Therefore, the selection of training delivery approach should be based on the training content to be passed across. According to Armstrong and Landers (2018), the training method adopted by trainers or by the organization is key in determining the success in transferring knowledge from one another. This variable is very beneficial especially with regards to task-oriented activities such as handling machinery. Such training approach is important so as to ensure each step or procedure is followed sequentially, as it has been shown that the method employed in the training is vital in empowering the employees to deliver increasingly at their work place. As a result, the following hypotheses is formulated.

H₂: There is a significant and positive influence of training content & delivery approach on employee work performance of SQU employees

Also, for trainings to be more effective, it has been argued by research scholars, that a training needs assessment from the employees' perspective must be carried out (Hasniza, 2009). A product of the training needs assessment is the specification of the training objectives that, in turn, identifies or specifies the skills and tasks to be trained. In the academic environment, Yousif, Ahmed, and Osman (2019) argue that an assessment of training needs is critical to deploying training sessions that directly impact on employees' ability to perform their jobs better. Hence it can be hypothesized that:

H₃: There is a significant and positive influence of training needs on employee work performance of SQU employees

Moreover, in a strategic management model, the evaluation phase helps to determine the outcome of the strategies that have been formulated and implemented (Kraiger, et al., 2020). This rationale, when directly assimilate in the context of training shows that ongoing improvements in the training output is supported by previous training evaluations. Going by the argument of Sung and Choi (2018), the performance of employees who

have undergone training is directly impacted by the evaluations carried out in previous trainings. As a result, the following hypothesis is argued:

H₄: There is a significant and positive influence of training evaluation on employee work performance of SQU employees

2.2 Personality Dimensions and Work Performance

The Big five factors model is studied intensely in various specialties of psychology and these personality dimensions (domains) are regarded as important sources of motivation for the enhancement of performance (Selden & Goodie, 2018) and achievement (Komarraju et al., 2009, 2011). These basic individual traits may also be useful in training initiation. Theoretically, people who are extraverted, are sociable, willing to participate in social interactions, and active, therefore they will be very eager to participate in activities like training, which usually requires interactions between people (Souri, Hosseinpour, & Rahmani, 2018). Also, agreeableness may be linked to participation in training, because it is evident by good cooperation with people. Similarly, conscientiousness may also be essential for training motivation, as individuals who are conscientious, persist through the actualization of organisational goals and vision. Openness to experience may show a positive association with participating in training, new challenges, experiences and activities are presented through training. Neuroticism may be disadvantageous to the actualisation of goals, as it is characterized by poor coping techniques and negative affect (Forestell & Nezlek, 2018; Laguna & Purc, 2016). Personality traits are considered basic personal characteristics that may be favorable to the initiation of the motivational processes of goal pursuit which are integral parts of individual work performance (Forestell & Nezlek, 2018; Chiaburu, Oh, & Marinova, 2018; Al Khanbashi & Aigbogun, 2020).

As a result of the arguments, the following hypothesis is put forward:

H₅: There is a significant and positive influence of personality dimensions on employee work performance of SQU employees

2.3 Training, Personality Dimensions, and Work Performance

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic that has affected every part of the world, including Oman, higher educational institutions aim at increasing employee performance in order to acquire new competences for performing their duties (Gallo & Trompetto, 2020). Employees are mandated to undergo training, however, not all employees who attend the same training programme experience improvement in their performance (Elnaga & Imran, 2013; Dabale, Jagero, & Nyauchi, 2014; Okechukwu, 2017). Thus, determining personality dimensions that are vital to phases prior to initiating action might be useful in understanding the reason some employees are committed to training while others are not, and also, the conditions in which employee work performance are triggered in the work place. Going by this logic, it is hypothesized that:

H₆: Personality dimensions mediate the relationship between training commitment and employee work performance of SQU employees

Specific relationships between particular personality

dimensions and training needs are expected on the basis of the descriptions of the various personality dimensions (Overbeek, 2020). For example, high level of conscientiousness is mostly to be connected with high level of general use of more meticulous training aids and methods as individuals who are conscientious are more persistent and willing, therefore, put more effort in the maintenance of their motivation in attending trainings. Therefore, it is to be expected that personality dimensions mediate the training content & delivery approach and employee performance association, as a result one can hypothesize the following:

H₇: Personality dimensions mediate the relationship between training content & delivery and employee work performance of SQU employees

In addition, just like in Abraham Maslow's prominent theory on five needs driving human behavior with motivation and personality development, it is expected that an adequate assessment of trainings needs of individual employees will yield different results due to varying needs of the employees which in turn affects their overall productivity in terms of performance. Meanwhile, researchers have applied the Big Five personality model to shed light on variables assessing human personality (Montang et al., 2020). A mediating role of personality dimensions would in this case provide deeper explanations as why the relationship between needs assessment and employee performance exists. Hence, the following hypotheses is put forward:

H₈: Personality dimensions mediate the relationship between training needs and employee work performance of SQU employees

Moreover, it can be argued that, in the work place, to enhance individual work performance, high level management must create a workplace with training evaluation which are effective by the presentation of feedback on performance and opportunities for participation, so that employees are more likely to perform at higher levels when previous training attended have been evaluated to provide feedback for future training improvements (Fay & Sonnentag, 2010). However, the scope of evaluation varies according to the individuals who underwent training. This is because training audit largely involves asking feedback from the trainees. Seeing that individual employees differ in terms of their personality, it can be argued that similar experience might be reported in different ways in the training evaluation, and thus affect the future modifications in training and individual employee work performance (Selden & Goodie, 2018). As a result, it can be hypothesized thus:

H₉: Personality dimensions mediate the relationship between training evaluation and employee work performance of SQU employees

3. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Proposition

In this paper, a conceptual framework is proposed that incorporates the mediating effect of personality dimensions in the framework of relationship between individual training indicators and employee work performance, in the context of Sultan Qaboos University, the Sultanate of Oman. As can be observed from the Figure 1, the conceptual framework comprises of four independent variables (training commitment, training needs, training contents and delivery approach, and training evaluation),

one mediating variable (personality dimensions) and one dependent variable (employee work performance). The mediating variable is composed of five dimensions namely: emotional stability, extraversion/ambition, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and intellect/openness to experience. Three dimensions comprise the dependent variable namely: task performance, contextual performance, and counter productive work behaviour. This research framework is underpinned by the human capital theory, resource-based view theory, and socio-analytic theory.

Human capital theory argues that the knowledge, experience and skills of employees are enhanced by subjecting them to advanced education, training and development as well as on the job changes. From the foregoing it can be argued that the capabilities of the employees are upgraded by means of investment in training and developmental programmes for optimum performance.

The resource-based theory supports the argument that human capital and vital resources for the organization to sustain competitive advantage, hence going by the purpose of this study, it is expected that improving the human capital in the form of trainings should have a corresponding positive influence on the individual work performance of the employees.

The socio-analytic theory is premised on the argument that individual differences in career success is contingent on their ability or inability to get along with their peers or groups. The supporting theories explains the conditions that is needed to explain the proposed conceptual framework for this study.

The research implication of this diverse approach is that one cannot rely solely on one theoretical explanation when analyzing phenomena in training, personality dimensions and individual work performance research. It is imperative

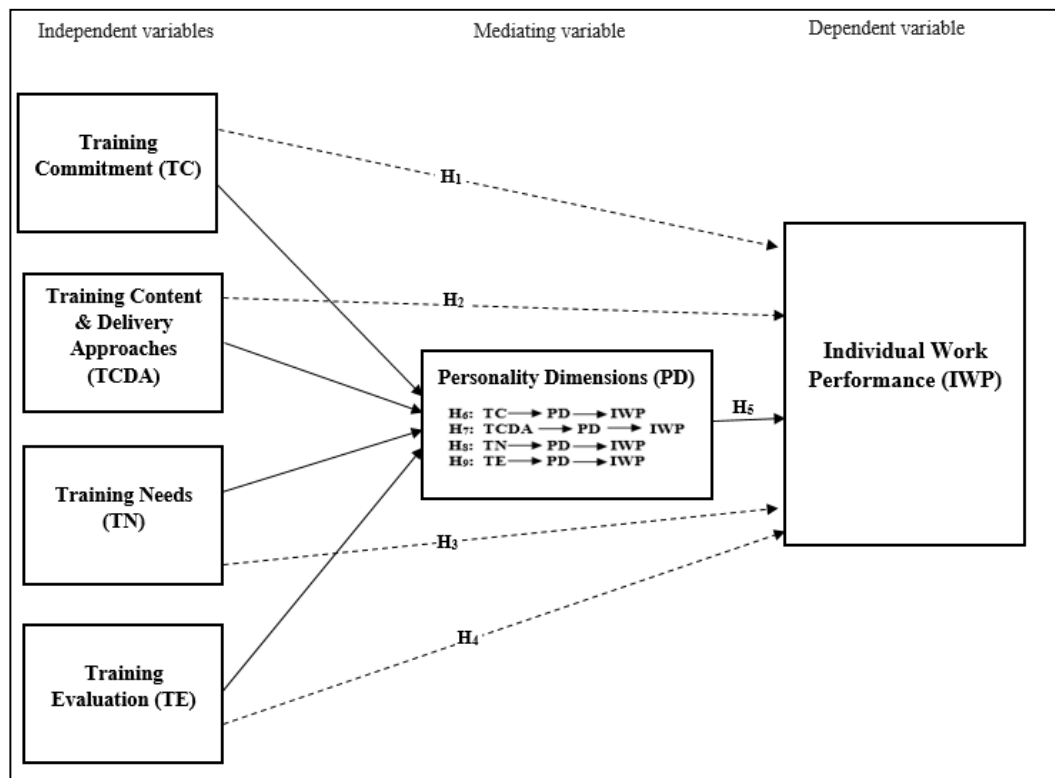


Fig.1: Conceptual Framework illustrating the Research Hypotheses

3.1 Summary of Research Hypotheses

The research hypotheses are summarized in the in Table 1

Table 1: Research Hypotheses

Description		Path Relationship
Direct Effect Hypotheses		
H1	There is a significant and positive influence of training commitment on employee work performance of SQU employees	TC → IWP
H2	There is a significant and positive influence of training content & delivery approach on employee work performance of SQU employees	TCDA → IWP
H3	There is a significant and positive influence of training needs on employee work performance of SQU employees	TN → IWP
H4	There is a significant and positive influence of training evaluation on employee work performance of SQU employees	TE → IWP
H5	There is a significant and positive influence of personality dimensions on employee work performance of SQU employees	PD → IWP
Indirect Effect Hypotheses (Mediation)		
H6	Personality dimensions mediate the relationship between training commitment and employee work performance	TC→PD→IWP

	of SQU employees	
H7	Personality dimensions mediate the relationship between training content & delivery approach and employee work performance of SQU employees	TCDA→PD→IWP
H8	Personality dimensions mediate the relationship between training needs and employee work performance of SQU employees	TN→PD→IWP
H9	Personality dimensions mediate the relationship between training evaluation and employee work performance of SQU employees	TE→PD→IWP

Discussion

The arguments of researchers is that the notion of training is a phenomenon that embodies distinct dimensions. Performance was conceptualized in the literature as individual work performance which reflects the subject performance of employees on an individual level rather than collective performance on the organizational level as this has been argued by researchers as giving a more comprehensive nature of performance. The literature on operationalization of the individual work performance concept was carried out via four indicators namely; (i) task performance (ii) contextual performance and (iii) counter productive work behaviour. The revised method for the measurement of individual work performance was proposed by Koopmans et al. (2014). Conceptualization and operationalization of personality dimensions, the mediating variable, describes the most prominent personality dimensions using five indicators namely: neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and intellect.

Going by these evidence, Brue and Grant (2019) in their book have explained using the tenets of the human capital theory that investment decisions by business organizations to provide on-the-job training to its employees is significant to the productivity and performance of such organizations. Quoting Becker, they asserted that there are two types of training available to employees on the job - general and specific training. On the one hand, general training increases the marginal productivity of the employees not only in their present employment but also in any other employment in which they might engage, and on the other hand, specific training increases marginal productivity only within the firm providing it. Hence, some employee skills are specific to a particular firm or situation (specific capital), whereas others can be broadly applied to various situations or work settings (general capital). Becker pointed out that the theory of human capital helps explain “a wide range of empirical phenomena that have either been given ad hoc interpretations or have baffled investigators” (Brue & Grant, 2019).

In the relationship between training dimensions and employee work performance, previous studies have not considered the influence of personality dimensions, which is a critical construct in the relationship going by the arguments of the socio-analytic theory which asserts that personality, from the employee's view, embodies a person's strategies that they utilize in pursuing acceptance and status and ultimately controlling their behaviour in the work setting. It is also noted that these previous studies were mostly conducted in state-owned enterprises and individual work performance was not a dependent variable in these studies. Hence, this study extends the literature on human resource management in Oman and the Arabian Gulf region by studying training indicators, personality dimensions and individual work performance in the university setting.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper proposes a comprehensive conceptual framework that integrates the mediating impact of personality dimensions into the relationship between training and employee work performance. It is the initial stage of a broader study that evaluates employee training, their personality dimensions and work performance during the COVID-19 pandemic in Oman.

The examination of the nine research hypotheses formulated in this conceptual study is encouraged for future research agenda.

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