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The Influence of Flexible Work Practices On Employee Performance in Public Sector in the Ministry of Interior and Coordination of National Government, Embu County

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Abstract: The study was carried out to investigate the influence of flexible work practices on employee performance in Public sector in the Ministry of Interior and Coordination of National Government, Embu County. Research demonstrates that a critical element of workplace effectiveness is flexibility in work schedules. Flexible work schedules covered in this study include telecommuting, compressed hours, job sharing and flexi-time. Objectives were formulated to determine how job sharing, telecommuting, compressed work week and flexi-time affect the employee performance and the research questions were derived from these objectives. The study was carried out at the Ministry of Interior and Coordination of National Government and a descriptive survey design was adopted. The study targeted all the 50 employees in the Ministry. Data was collected by use of structured questionnaires and interviews; the responses in the questionnaires were tabulated, coded and processed by use of computer Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) that aided data analysis. The study established that the institution did not have flexible work practices policy in place; similarly the study established that respondents did not think that telecommuting and compressed work hours would influence employee performance in the institution. However, despite the fact that the institution did not have a job sharing and flexi-time policy in the organization, job sharing and flexi-time was being used to ‘a large extent’ and it influenced employee performance. The study recommends that, there is need for the institution through its ICT to put in place an ICT framework and infrastructure to support telecommuting arrangements and the institution through its headquarters should put in place a flexi time and job sharing policy.

Keywords: Flexible work practices, employee performance and Organization

INTRODUCTION

The flexible working concept has been discovered and implemented by an increasing number of organizations [1]. With modern techniques such as email and videoconferencing, employees are able to work at preferred times at different locations. Flexible work has become a widely-discussed topic, attracting attention from academics, lobbyists, legislators, journalists and industry bodies alike. Flexible work arrangements of one kind or another are already evident in many workplaces. They include: flexible hours (flexitime) - the ability to choose the start and finish time of the working day within core hours; telework (flex place) - the chance to work from home or another place or several days a week; compressed work weeks - such as working four longer days and taking the fifth day of the week off, or working a nine day fortnight; Part-time - working a few days a week, for instance, three days instead of the traditional five days, or fewer hours per day than the standard employment contract in organization; job-sharing - two people sharing a full-time position, either 2-5 days each in the week or alternating one week [2]. According to Lonnie [3], the economic crisis and the global jobs pact of 2009 have

put working-time issues back on the agenda. At the same time, recent trends such as technological advancements enabling tele working have contributed to the creation of “a 24-hour organizations” where the separation line between work and non-work time is becoming increasingly blurred. This has been coupled with a significant shift away from the normal or standard working week towards non-standard work schedules. Together these trends point to a new context for working-time policy in the twenty-first century [4].

The standard workweek has undergone a large transformation over the past 300 years. It was not uncommon for workers to work 6 days a week for an astonishing 96 hours, roughly 16 hours a day [5]. In the 1800s, the workweek shrunk towards 70 hours per week, and then 60 by the turn of the century [6]. In the 1900s labor unions began to fight toward fewer hours until they achieved a six day, 48 hour week. In 1927, Henry Ford’s workers became the first to achieve a five-day workweek [5]. In 1938, the Fair Labor Standards Act was passed, establishing the 40 hour week for employees meeting certain requirements.

Flexible work practices have been discovered and implemented by many organizations globally for instances USA, UK and Australia to mention a few. Similarly flexible work arrangements have been practiced in Africa.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The study aims at investigating, understand and establish to what extent the following factors influence employee performance in the Public sector: - telecommuting – compressed hours – job sharing – flexi-time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- **Theoretical framework**
- **Contract theory**

The theory of contract is a widely-used collection of approaches for examining interactions between a small number of economic actors [7]. Contract theory has been used to explore a variety of topics in organizational design and behavior, including optimal design of monitoring and incentive mechanisms in teams [8].

The most common model within contract theory is the Principal-Agent model. Principal-Agent theory describes a setting in which a principal (a manager) seeks to elicit costly effort from an agent (a worker), but cannot measure effort directly. As a result of this imperfect measurement, the principal must typically rely on various means to align the interests of the principal and the interests of agents, such as incentive contracts, monitoring, or selection mechanisms [9]. The telecommuting decision processes can be described by a principal-agent model. The manager makes a decision as to whether to allow a worker to work at home. The manager, however, faces two uncertainties: the quality of the worker's efforts and the quantity of the worker's efforts when telecommuting. First, she/he may not be sure of the worker's propensity to engage in non-work activities during work time if allowed to work at home – these may be due to personality, family situation or other factors which may be only partially observable to the principal. Second, she/he may not be able to observe how much effort the agent exerts on work-related tasks. Clearly, the principal can better monitor effort and does not have to contend with alternative non-work activities by her/his employees when they work in the office. However, disallowing telecommuting may not be optimal because it can be less costly to the agent (either explicitly or implicitly) to accomplish the same amount of work with some telecommuting. This, in turn, benefits the firm through increased productivity or decreased employee cost. The manager has two strategies that she/he can use to obtain the optimal level of effort from her/his employees. The first is selection: she/he can choose which workers to “trust” to telecommute. Workers with a low inherent propensity to engage in outside activities can be allowed to work at

home with a relatively low cost in terms of lost productivity. Thus, the manager faces the problem of creating a selection process. The second is measurement and incentives: the manager can provide incentives to workers who telecommute so that they are more likely to engage in work-related activities. The efficacy of these incentives depends on the information the manager has about performance and therefore must be considered jointly with the issue of monitoring and observing of effort.

- **Expectancy theory**

Vroom's [10] expectancy theory holds that individuals are more likely to be motivated to exert effort to perform for valued goals they think they can achieve. “Job sharing work schedule users” are assumed to be more likely to exhibit higher performance because they would have greater resources [11]. Lambert [12] found that employees with access to work-family benefits were more likely to exhibit higher organizational citizenship behaviors.

- **Psychological job control theory**

Researchers [13, 14] have pointed to the importance of having high perceptions of job control and support for individual well-being. The psychological job control theory posits positive relationships between worker job demands and the ability to control how and when one performs a job, such as when and how they carry out tasks. It is assumed that a job with high demands and low control will lead to stress; however, if an individual in the same high demand job perceives high control, she/he will experience lower strain [15]. Employees' use of flextime and compressed work weeks allow workers to have increased control in order to integrate personal role demands with work role demands. Using flex-time as an example, by being able to control work schedule's time of the start/stop, an employee can (re)structure working hours at each end of the day to deal with non work demands, such as baby sitting.

- **Telecommuting**

Sometimes referred to as telework, flexi place, or simply as work-at-home, telecommuting is an arrangement in which employee works at home, in a satellite office, or at a customer's location for part or all of the work week [20]. When they are not in the central office, telecommuters communicate with their co-workers and managers by means of phone, email, and fax. Previous studies have found that organizations view telecommuting as a tool to attract and retain top personnel and valued employees in fields with short labour supply[21]. One of the greatest telecommuting challenges is that employees may feel isolated[22]. There is reduced social networking - teleworking may negatively affect social networking in the workplace by disrupting teamwork.

➤ **Compressed Work Week**

This is an arrangement whereby a standard work week is compacted into fewer than five days by extending the length of the work days[23]. Although the four-day work week usually includes a predetermined day off, flexibility can be increased by enabling employees to choose their day off [24]. Poor, [6] ascertains that the most common compressed work week contains forty hours the 4 days-10 hours schedule with a Monday or Friday off. Employees using compressed schedules have been shown to have reduced levels of work/family conflict compared to other workers [5].

However, compressed work week has its own challenges which include difficult to provide relief staffing arrangements on days when employees are absent due to emergency reasons such illness and this may affect customer service levels;

➤ **Job Sharing**

According to the Society for Human Resource Management, job sharing is defined as, the practice of having two different employees performing the tasks of one full-time position ([16]). The term job sharing was first started in mid-1960s. This option was devised as a way to create more part-time opportunities in positions which could not be reduced in hours or split into two part-time jobs. The job sharing arrangement enables employers to preserve jobs in their full-time form while tapping on the expertise of two or more people [17]. Though job sharing was intended as a means to increase employment flexibility, it also helped to boost employment opportunities in situation of high unemployment. The greatest challenge in job sharing is in providing a suitable partner. Where incompatibility of job sharers arises, the arrangement can fall apart; higher overheads (for instance training cost, workmen compensation, furniture and equipment).

➤ **Flexi-time**

Flexi-time usually refers to a scheduling programmed for full-time employees which allows them to choose their starting and finishing times daily, provided they complete a stipulated number of hours start and/or end the work day earlier (or later) than usual, where workers can set their own starting and stopping times [18].

In most instances, all employees may be required to be present during certain “core hours”, which is usually fixed at a period between the latest permissible starting time and earliest permissible finishing time [19]. One company has core hours between 9:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. The employees then have the choice to start anytime between 6:30 a.m. and 9:00 a.m., and the choice to leave anytime between 3:30 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., provided they work eight hours. Another variation has employees arrive 7:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m., have a minimum one half hour lunch break

between 11:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m., and finish between 3:30 and 6:30 p.m., again provided eight hours are worked[25]. The challenges of flexi time include setting up and maintaining a time-keeping system that may incur additional cost; it places a heavier burden on managers in terms of communication, supervision and scheduling of employees’ working time, some staff may resist its implementation.

METHODOLOGY

This section contains methods that were employed during data collection and analysis.

➤ **Research Design**

This study adopted a descriptive survey design. Ogula, [26] describes a research design as a plan, structure and strategy of investigation to obtain answers to research questions and control variance. The survey research design was used because it enhanced the gathering of information about the employees’ views and attitudes on the study topic and also enabling to get views from a good representation of the population.

➤ **Research Site**

The study was done at the Ministry of Interior and Coordination of National Government in Embu County. Embu town is approximately 120 km East of Nairobi. The Ministry plays a central role in coordinating functions of other public institutions. For many people, contact with government has been with Provincial and District Commissioners, Chiefs and Assistant Chiefs, who are ultimately responsible for the Office of the President. As per the current constitution the department cascades from the Ministry’s headquarters to the grass-root level as follows:- Ministry of Interior and Coordination of National Government - Regional Coordinators – County Commissioners- Deputy County Commissioners – Assistant Deputy Commissioners – Chiefs – Assistant Chiefs.

➤ **Target population**

The target population comprised of fifty (50) employees in the Ministry. The study adopted census sampling technique which is a complete enumeration study of all the items in a given population.

➤ **Data collection**

Questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data. The questions were organized using a 4- four-point likert-type response scale, anchored at 4 - ‘very large extent’ 3 - ‘large extent’, 2 - ‘small extent’ and 1 - ‘very small extent.’

➤ **Reliability and Validity**

To test reliability of the instruments the study adopted test-retest technique. The test-retest is a measure of reliability obtained by administering the same test twice over a period of time to a similar group

of individuals. A few questionnaires were analyzed to ascertain if the methods of analysis selected were appropriate[27]. For this study, a sample of five was sufficient.

To achieve content validity the researcher sought assistance from experts (supervisors) on various sections in the questionnaire as instruments for data collection.

➤ Data analysis methods and procedure

Coding was done to facilitate entry of data into SPSS tool. Data was analyzed by use of descriptive statistics particularly percentages and measures of central tendency.

FINDINGS

- The study established that the institution did not have a telecommuting policy in place with 100% of the respondents attesting this fact. Further the respondents did not think that telecommuting would affect employee performance. This was indicated by the fact that the entire respondents gave a negative response.
- The study further ascertained that the institution did not have a compressed work hours policy in place and neither did it influence employee performance. This was indicated by a large number of employees (68.1%) who stated it influenced performance to 'a very small extent'.
- The study further sought to establish if there was a job sharing policy in the institution and its influence on employee performance. The study found out that job sharing policy was lacking in the institution. However the study revealed that majority of the respondents (57.4%) used job sharing to 'a large extent', and it equally influenced performance.
- The study further established that flexi-time policy was not applicable to all employees as indicated by the majority of respondents (100%) saying no. However, the study established that flexi-time was being used by a large number of respondents indicated by (63.8%)

CONCLUSION

- The study established that the institution did not have a telecommuting policy in place; similarly the study established that respondents did not think that telecommuting would affect employee performance in the institution.
- However, despite the fact that institution did not have a job sharing and flexi time policy in

the organization, job sharing and flexi time was being used to 'a large extent' and it influenced employee performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study made the following recommendation:-

- There is need for the institution through its ICT department to put in place an ICT framework and infrastructure to support telecommuting arrangements.
- The institution through its headquarters should put in place a flexi time and job sharing policy.

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