



Cultural differences in motivation factors influencing the management of foreign laborers in the Korean construction industry

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Abstract

This study was motivated by the view that cultural differences should be taken into account in the management of Korean and foreign workers on construction sites. We identify motivation factors that are influenced by the cultural differences of the laborers, and their effects on productivity. Based on the results of a preliminary survey of field technicians with at least 15 years of work experience, a final set of 27 factors was included in a questionnaire: 5 economic factors, 11 social factors, and 11 psychological factors. Taking cultural differences into account, motivation factors that can have an impact on productivity were determined and broken down by nationality, based on the analysis results. The findings of this research can be used to stimulate social awareness and build an appropriate systemic police. The results can also be used to help develop a management plan based on cultural differences between foreign workers in the construction industry.

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1. Introduction

Among industry groups, construction remains one of the most labor intensive activities, and is more highly dependent on labor than other industrial sectors. However, younger workers tend to avoid the construction sector, as it is considered one of the 3D (difficult, dirty, and dangerous) industries, and as a result, skilled labor is currently provided mostly by older workers. The 3D term has subsequently gained widespread use, particularly regarding labor done by migrant workers (Haque

and Ismail, 2002). For this reason, the construction industry is struggling to satisfy demands for both unskilled and skilled labor. In particular, according to the 2001–2011 Economically Active Population Survey conducted by the Bureau of Statistics in Korea, the average age of construction laborers in Korea was 41.22 years in 2000, and by 2011 it had risen to 48.48 years. Thus, the average age of construction laborers increased by 7.26 years over this eleven year period. The phenomenon is attributed to a decrease in the inflow of young laborers to the construction sector. Against this background, the shortfall in the workforce has led to an increase in the employment of foreign laborers. The expansion and acceleration of the inflow of foreign workers to the construction field were facilitated by the introduction of the “Industrial and Technical Training Program for Foreigners” in 1991 and the “Employment Permit System” in 2004, which legalized the status of foreign workers in the construction sector (Kim and Ha, 2011).

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However, the rapid increase in the number of foreign construction workers has led to problems such as decreased labor productivity, more accidents, and inferior quality or faulty construction due to language barriers and cultural differences between field managers and foreign workers (Go et al., 2009). In addition, beyond the economic realm, there are issues related to the settlement and adjustment of foreign workers, which must be dealt with from either a social or a diplomatic perspective (Kim, 2009; Seymen, 2006). Failure to address these problems may lead to social issues in the future including crime, human rights violations, health problems, disease, immigration issues, and education problems. Specifically, foreign construction workers are often exposed to different cultural settings, and suffer hardships in their new country such as lack of communication with their colleagues and failure to adjust to the work environment (Ascalon et al., 2008; Dong and Liu, 2010; Fontaine, 2007). With this in mind, we reviewed previous studies on foreign laborers and found that most studies focused on productivity and safety management, with little research on cultural differences (Kim, 2009; Song et al., 2011). Thus, there is an urgent need for research to improve the construction productivity of foreign laborers by developing a multidimensional labor management plan that takes into account the laborers' country of origin, based on an understanding of the cultural differences of laborers from different countries.

The scope of this study involves a comparative analysis of the impact of cultural differences and the relative importance of certain factors for productivity. To undertake the study, we identified motivation factors that are influenced by the cultural differences of the laborers, and their effect on productivity. Humans instinctively try to satisfy their needs, and behaviors that satisfy needs are accompanied by a stimulus and an objective. Behaviors are originally goal-oriented; in other words, the behavior is motivated by the aspiration to attain a goal. Participants were recruited from construction sites in Seoul and Gyeonggi-do, and restricted to nationalities that constitute a large proportion of immigrants to Korea, based on Korea Immigration Service records. Either face-to-face or mail interviews were conducted with the selected foreign laborers.

To derive productivity factors that could be influenced by cultural diversity, we reviewed previous studies related to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Alderfer's existence relatedness growth (ERG) needs theory, Herzberg's two-factor theory (motivation–hygiene theory), Murray's needs, and pressure theory. After excluding redundant productivity factors mentioned in related theories and previous studies, 34 productivity factors were derived. Based on the results of a preliminary survey of field technicians with at least 15 years of work experience, a final set of 27 factors was included in our questionnaire: 5 economic factors, 11 social factors, and 11 psychological factors. Items were scored on a five-point Likert scale, and the answers were analyzed to establish the relative importance of each factor. To determine whether the importance of the factors differed by nationality, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) test was conducted to understand the relationships between the various factors. These statistical analyses were performed using SPSS Win Ver.19.0 software.

2. Review of previous studies

We reviewed previous studies by first focusing on studies of foreign workers, and then on studies of the cultural differences between foreign workers. Concerning foreign laborers, Jin et al. (2005) suggested that policy changes should focus on expanding the existing limit on employment permits, extending the permissible employment period, and developing a management plan for foreign workers in terms of documentation of management details based on nationality. Park et al. (2011) sought to establish a management plan after analyzing the workability of domestic construction workers and foreign workers using the available rate (e.g., production work/ancillary production work), obtained by classifying foreign workers as able to work or not able to work. Based on his analysis of the actual state of foreign construction workers working at construction sites, Son (2005) suggested a plan to establish an employment system and political measures, and an efficient employment plan for foreign workers that emphasizes respectful treatment to achieve an attitude change. Lee (1997) provided a plan to improve working conditions through a case analysis based on an understanding of the actual state of foreign workers and working conditions. Sim (2002) proposed that improvement could be achieved by focusing on political and human rights issues through a utilization assessment of industrial trainees and illegal immigrants, and the actual employment conditions of foreign workers. Pyeon (2003) provided a management plan based on an understanding of the current situation and problems in employing foreign workers on construction sites. Most of these studies considered the construction industry as a whole, and focused on solving problems related to the introduction of foreign workers through systematic changes based on an analysis of the current situation regarding foreign workers from an economic, sociocultural, or legal perspective. In other words, most studies in the existing literature have addressed the overall problems arising from the employment of foreign workers. However, research on productivity assessments and the management of foreign workers has been scant.

Studies that consider cultural differences mostly focus on the essential differences and similarities between cultures. Shin et al. (2013) and Kim and Shin (2013) focused on identifying factors that influence improvements in construction productivity, taking into account the characteristics of Chinese and Korean workers. Lee (1997) revealed similarities and differences between these two countries through an analysis of the values of Chinese and Korean workers, and analyzed how differences in values affected job attitudes. He concluded that an effective method of increasing job satisfaction is to maintain welfare, or pay, at a certain level and to raise the importance of labor value through job ethics education. The aforementioned studies are mainly limited to comparisons of Chinese and Korean workers. Further studies of cultural differences have been conducted. Jung and Kim (2012) attempted to understand the multicultural sensitivity of Korean workers who had experienced working with foreign workers, and presented an educational approach to cultivating multicultural sensitivity. Pheng and Leong (2000) examined key concepts in cross-cultural management as well as key functions in construction project management, with a specific reference to China. However,

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