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Examining Happiness: Towards Better Understanding of Performance Improvement

Djoen San Santoso^{a,*}, Hewagamage Eranga Ravihara Kulathunga^a

^a*Asian Institute of Technology, 58 Moo 9, Km. 42, Paholyothin Highway, Pathumthani 12120, Thailand.*

Abstract

It is well accepted that happiness can provide immense motivation for someone to achieve higher performance. Generating happiness in the workplace is one way of empowerment to induce productivity. This empowerment has been widely studied and explored in many industry sectors but only limited studies have been done for construction industry. This research tries to enrich this topic by conducting study to engineers of construction firms. In the study, in addition to happiness, psychological well-being and stress were included to cover better understanding of the subject. For the performance side, two perspectives were considered: a self-performance assessment by the engineers and a performance assessment by engineer's supervisor (project manager). A total of 114 engineers and 21 project managers from 21 construction sites in Sri Lanka were surveyed for the purpose of this research. The result revealed that a significant positive strong relationship between psychological well-being and performance can be identified. The same also applied to happiness and performance, only at a lesser degree. As expected, stress had a negative association with performance; however, the degree was only weak and not statistically significant. The study also found that age, marital status, salary, and construction experience have similar and different roles in defining the level of happiness, psychological well-being, and stress at work. For example, single engineers are significantly happier and perform better in their work than married engineers. Meanwhile, years of experience are significantly associated with performance and stress but not with happiness and psychological well-being. Therefore, it is important to understand how happiness, psychological well-being, and stress levels are differently associated with the socio-economic and experience of engineers. Each factor may relate uniquely in defining the happiness, psychological well-being, and stress at work as different level of engineers has different concerns, and needs different motivational approach to improve their performance.

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* Corresponding author. Tel: +66-2-524 5534; fax: +66-2-524 5525
E-mail address: djoensan@ait.ac.th

1. Introduction

Happiness is a vast topic which has been a foundation for many researches [1,2,3,4]. There are many definitions of happiness, however, the overall idea of happiness is how much you like what you have or do [1,2,5,6]. Therefore, even if two persons have everything equal, the happiness level may be different depending on how much each individual values what s/he has. It is acceptable to say that everyone who is alive pursues happiness. People would do a lot of things for happiness, which highlight the importance of happiness as an immense motivation to higher performance. An individual would motivate to perform well to keep up the happiness s/he already has or to achieve more happiness.

When discussing happiness and performance, it is important to understand their association with stress and psychological well-being. Measuring psychological well-being and stress provide considerable indication about performance [5,7]. Meanwhile, when someone responds to emotional or mental pressure, stress starts to appear [8], which indicate the link between stress and happiness.

In a construction project, the increase or decrease in the project expenditure depends on a set of factors, such as construction materials, equipment, construction techniques, labor force and management skills [9]. Construction engineers, who directly manage most, if not all, of these factors, have important roles in defining the cost of the project. Thus, having productive engineers will minimize the construction cost and also will increase the quality of the project. The question is: how to make engineers in construction industry perform well?

Even though there are many research studies on the relationship between happiness and performance of employees, most studies focus on industries other than construction. Therefore, it is interesting to explore this relationship for construction engineers as construction projects have unique nature than other industries, where each project has different location and may be far from the previous one, which demand mobility or temporary residence of engineers away from their homes to do their job. Construction engineers may need to work in a different environment from the previous assignment and deal with new members of the team in executing the work. These add challenges in their work and life. With the above uniqueness of construction industry, this study tries to enrich the literature by examining the factors that define happiness for construction engineers so proper empowerment approaches can be considered towards improving their performance at work.

2. Literature on happiness, performance, stress and psychological well-being

When the desire is to get higher performance, the first thing that comes up is money. There is more motivation power in money and giving money as a reward will increase workers performance individually [10]. But, is money the only thing which has motivation power? In a survey by Michael [2], half of the workers would like to change their job even if their salary is lower than what they have because it satisfies their needs. He also found that the top two reasons that a worker leaves his job are manager and dissatisfaction with the work content. This indicates that there are other things besides money satisfy worker's needs.

Findings from research studies have shown evidences to support that happiness has considerable relationship with performance [1,2,5,7]. An effect on worker's productivity, creativity, commitment and collegiality can be drawn from happiness [11]. Furthermore, when there is a good mood, which is a proxy for happiness, people will have more positive attitude towards each other's, provide greater helpfulness and generosity, and generate better and more original problem solving [2]. Happiness has specific domains, even though some have been described differently. The factors influencing happiness may vary depending on the scope of the study. Measurement of happiness for a whole country, such as the research on gross national happiness (GNH) index [12], where the measurement has nine domains with 33 indicators, may not be an efficient approach for measuring happiness of employee in certain industry or in a company.

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