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The relationship between emotional intelligence, frontline employee adaptability, job satisfaction and job performance



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ABSTRACT

Adaptable FLE's are an asset for the organization and customer alike as they are an indispensable part of service experience. They are subjected to pressures which are not found on any other positions in the organizations and displaying organizationally desired emotions play an important part in a service encounter. Therefore, the present research examines the relationship between emotional intelligence, frontline employee adaptability and job outcomes (Job Satisfaction and Job Performance). 517 FLE's working in Power utility in India participated through a cross sectional study. The research found a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and frontline employee adaptability. Specifically, all the dimensions of emotional intelligence positively impacted FLE adaptability. In addition, FLE adaptability is found to positively impact Job outcomes. The results and implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Emotional intelligence (EI) is a significant predictor of key organizational outcomes especially in the times of 'affective revolution' in management studies. Although it is generally accepted that emotions are an intrinsic part of the workplace, but still job-related emotions still constitute an under-developed area of study (Bande et al., 2015). Adaptability of employees is also a key factor which is known to impact organizational outcomes like Job satisfaction and Job performance (Cullen et al., 2013). An adaptable employee is an asset for the organization (Chebat and Kollias, 2000) and customer (Ahearne et al., 2005) because it known to impact organization performance (Cullen et al., 2013, 2014; Nesbit and Lam, 2014; Pulakos et al., 2000) and customer satisfaction (Clark, 2000; Keillor et al., 2011). Previous research has developed and tested the general model of employee adaptability (Charbonnier-Voirin and Roussel, 2012; Ployhart and Bliese, 2006; Pulakos et al., 2000; Pulakos et al., 2002). Frontline employees (FLE's) are critical to organization success (Kafetsios and Zampetakis, 2008) and these employees are subjected to pressures which are not found in other positions (Kao et al., 2014). Thus, the general model of employee adaptability cannot be used to explain frontline employee adaptability. Many researchers have conceptualized employee adaptability to be multidimensional phenomenon (Charbonnier-Voirin and Roussel, 2012; Pulakos et al., 2000; Sony and Nandakumar, 2014). In order to measure FLE adaptability, a scale is also developed by Sony and Nandakumar (2015). FLE due

to their proximity to customers are often subjected to emotional distress and previous research has categorized that handling emotions are critical to their success (Shih-Tse Wang, 2014). Emotional intelligence has been propounded as a major contributing factor for the performance of employees and it contribute to more positive attitudes, behaviors and outcomes (Goleman, 1998; Goleman et al., 2013; Wong and Law, 2002). Studies have also explored the importance of Emotional intelligence on the frontline employee performance (Prentice and King, 2011; Prentice and King, 2013).

Emotional intelligence is conceptualized as a multidimensional concept (Goleman, 1998; Schutte and Malouff, 1999; Wong and Law, 2002). FLE adaptability also encompasses several new dimensions that have lately attracted research attention. The dimensions like Interpersonal, Service offering, Political, Social, Physical, Group and Organizational adaptability dimensions unearthed by Sony and Nandakumar (2014) appear to be important and worthy of investigation in the context of Emotional intelligence. An investigation of these issues is important because emotional intelligence being a multi-dimensional construct, the different dimensions may impact FLE adaptability. To the best of our knowledge previous research has not explored the impact of the each dimensions of emotional intelligence on the dimensions of FLE adaptability.

Another potential aspect to consider is most studies on emotional intelligence is conducted on Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies. Henrich

et al. (2010) stressed the importance of use of non western samples especially when the interest of study is of human nature. This study is conducted in India which is a non western society (Viswanathan et al., 2010). Zeidner et al. (2004) commented that though there exists a plenty of literature of Emotional intelligence in workplace environment, however they stressed that the ratio of hyperbole to hard evidence is high. They also observed that there was over-reliance in the literature on case studies, expert opinion, anecdote, and unpublished proprietary surveys. In this study we seek to extend to address this gap and this study investigates the impact of Emotional intelligence on frontline employee adaptability and job outcomes in a non western sample through a cross sectional study in power sector.

2. Background theory

Adaptability is an indistinct construct that is purported to be pertinent in a range of situations. It can also be viewed from numerous perspectives (Van Dam, 2013). Stokes et al. (2010) explicated that adaptability in the workplace has been conceptualized and investigated as an outcome, such as task or job performance, adaptive expertise, as strategy selection or as a stable individual difference construct etc. They further argue that while each study adds to our understanding of workplace adaptability in its many different ways thereby clarifying the construct further. Pulakos et al. (2000) broad definition of adaptive performance was altering behavior to meet the demands of the environment, event, or new situation. Ployhart and Bliese (2006) model helped to understand individual differences in the context of adaptability. They further submitted that the individual differences contribute to aspects of job performance which can impact the task, contextual, and counterproductive work behavior. This theory clarifies adaptability as a predictor in terms of dispositions and various KSAs (knowledge, skills, and abilities). However this theory does not consider adaptive performance as an outcome or criterion as it is in the job performance domain. Elucidating adaptive performance as a criterion is important for and ascertaining the usefulness of job performance models which can be used by practitioners at the forefront of the changing workplace.

Allworth and Hesketh (1999) have recognized that adaptability is a substantial component of the job performance domain. Ilgen and Pulakos (1999) stressed that business and military settings alike also commented on the need for their personnel to be agile and adaptable. In response, a plethora of research projects have been directed at identifying predictors of adaptive performance for training and selection purposes (Ployhart and Bliese, 2006; Pulakos and O'LEARY, 2011; Stokes et al., 2010).

2.1. Frontline employee adaptability

FLE's are an integral part of the service experience (Singh, 2000) and play a salient role in the customers' satisfaction and perceptions of service quality. Service judgments are based primarily, on the specialized skills, techniques, and experiences of the employee with whom a customer interacts (Paulin et al., 2000). FLE's are perhaps, the most critical link in the provision of superior service to customers (Alexandrov et al., 2007). However, they are caught in the middle between discerning customers' service excellence demands and management's productivity and performance requirements or constraints. Most often, they need to participate in unscripted and challenging interactions with customers (Zablah et al., 2012), thus leading to altering of behaviors in response to interactions with customers (Hartline and Ferrell, 1996). Different employees respond to such situations differently (Gwinner et al., 2005; Ployhart and Bliese, 2006). Hence, some

employees may be good at it, and some are not. Thus, adaptability of FLE's attains a perennial dimension, as usually such behaviors being purposeful, in role and organizationally desired behaviors. Pulakos et al. (2000) were the first to propose a global model of adaptive performance. Ultimately, they proposed eight dimensions of adaptive performance, including: dealing with uncertain or unpredictable work situations; handling emergencies or crisis situations; solving problems creatively; handling work stress; learning new tasks, technologies and procedures; demonstrating interpersonal adaptability; demonstrating cultural adaptability; and demonstrating physically oriented adaptability. The advantages of the model were that it was the first time a multi-dimensional model of adaptive performance was proposed. An vital reflection from their study is that each of the eight dimensions were dependent on the type of job being considered (Gwinner et al., 2005). Besides, another aspect, to ponder over, was the disagreement on the number of dimensions. Johnson (2003) criticized that four out of eight dimensions can be viewed as a Single dimension.

They argued that dealing effectively, with unpredictable and changing work situations and learning new tasks, technologies, and procedures uniquely reflects adaptive performance, as opposed to task performance or citizenship behaviors. This model was more parsimonious and predicted adaptive performance. However, when Pulakos et al. (2002) asked supervisors to rate employee's adaptive performance using similar items, they found that a single factor best fit the data (see also Shoss et al. (2012)). Subsequently, researchers have conceptualized adaptive performance as a one-dimensional construct, but one that encompasses adaptation to changes occurring at the task, team, and organizational levels (Griffin et al., 2007; Griffin et al., 2010). Studies by Charbonnier-Voirin and Roussel (2012) viewed employee adaptability as a multidimensional construct with five dimensions and found in a non military setting there were significant differences in the dimensions proposed by Pulakos et al. (2000) and Pulakos et al. (2002).

Charbonnier-Voirin and Roussel (2012) developed a five dimensional adaptability performance scale, however there is disagreement on number of dimensions proposed by Pulakos et al. (2000). Moreover, the research was not conducted among the FLE's and hence cannot be used in this research. Recent research has suggested that the dimensions of adaptability in power sector are different as compared to other service sectors. FLE's are distinct from other employees. The three distinctive functions reported by previous researches are first, FLE's disseminate information coming from the external environment back to the organization (Rafaeli et al., 2008). Second, they represent the face of the organization to the customer (Karatepe and Kilic, 2007). Lastly, they must display organizationally desired behaviors during interactions with customers (Arnold and Barling, 2003) even if these behaviors are not a reflective of their true feelings (Adelmann, 1995).

Besides it is also prudent to consider the context specific nature prevailing in a developing country power sector, in addition to these three factors. Frontline employee being the interface, between the customer and the organization, has to bear the brunt of the customer and other stake holders, due to the inherent inability of the power sector to meet needs of the customers. Power, being an essential service, it caters the basic needs of customers, hence, there is a narrow zone of tolerance for the customers as the expectation of desired service is high (Michael and Mariappan, 2011). FLE's plays an important role being the first interface between the Power utility and customers. Hence the FLE's in addition to actually offering the technical service like attending complaints etc, the FLE has to exhibit an in role, organizationally desired behavioral requirement, wherein they need to change their behavior in

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