Employee Engagement as an Outcome of Friendship at Workplace: Moderating Role of Job Embeddedness

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the outcomes of friendship at workplace. Based on the prior literature present study proposed a conceptual framework including Friendship at workplace, job embeddedness and employee engagement. The literature on friendship at workplace, job embeddedness, employee engagement and the related theories are backing as starting-point for constructing the conceptual model for this study. Based on the prior literature all the variables and dimensions are discussed in depth. This study also attempts to reduce the gap in the literature of friendship at workplace and employee engagement. It is anticipated that this study expands the scope of friendship at workplace and employee engagement in the field of research by testing job embeddedness as moderator between the two. Also this study gives better insight to researchers and the managers, regarding to positive and negative effect of friendship at workplace.

Keywords: Job Embeddedness; Employee Engagement; Workplace Friendship

Introduction

A larger part of an individual's life is at workplace and it is natural to develop interpersonal relationship with the colleagues. Friendship at workplace is naturally develop from our personal desire to have a close relationship with others however there is still an unending debate as to whether friendship at workplace produces more negative consequences than benefits. The study on the field of interpersonal relationship and friendship is not new. In fact sociologists, psychologist s, anthropologists and many other disciplines have extensively examined the antecedents and outcomes of friendship. But specifically friendship at workplace is not being studies extensively. Various authors showed interest in studying friendship at workplace (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002; Morrison & Nolan, 2007; Nielsen, Jex, & Adams, 2000).

All organizations do not support friendship at workplace. Many organizations discourage the friendship at workplace, Some managers believe that workplace friendship only result in

sexual harassment, romantic relationship (Bayes & Kelly, 1994; Gutek, 1985; Paul, 1994) loss of productivity, conflict of interest, office romance and office gossips (Milam, 2012). For example Morrison and Nolan (2007) in their study reported that friendship at workplace leads to decrease in productivity, conflict of interest, difficulty for management and negative emotions if friendship turned bitter. Sometime this fear is reasonable and also allows managers to see through the benefits of workplace friendship.

Present study proposes the framework with the positive outcome of the friendship at workplace. Nielsen et al. (2000) reported that it is significant to study friendship at workplace as it belong to several positive organizational outcomes. The main purpose of conducting present study is that friendship in the context of workplace is being rarely tested and most of the studies have focused only on few aftermaths of friendship such as increased job satisfaction (Winstead, Derlega, Montgomery, & Pilkington, 1995), organizational commitment (Nielsen et al., 2000), information sharing (Kram & Isabella, 1985), reduced turnover intention (Morrison, 2004), and job performance. The present study will further explore the positive outcome of the friendship at workplace and will study employee engagement as outcome of friendship at workplace. As Gallup survey claimed that workplace friendship enhances employee engagement. Therefore this study will test the relationship between employee engagement and friendship at workplace. Furthermore present study will also explore the buffering effect of job embeddedness in the relationship between friendship at workplace and employee engagement.

Friendship at workplace

The term friendship has different meaning to different people. Depending on the cultural and demographic settings friendship may have different criteria. Berman et al. (2002) defined friendship at workplace as an interpersonal relationship that "involves mutual commitment, trust, and shared values or interest between people at work, in ways that go beyond mere acquaintanceship but that excludes romance" (p. 217). In operationalizing the definition of friendship at workplace, Nielsen et al. (2000) defined friendship at workplace as a dual dimensional construct of prevalence and opportunity. The present framework of the study is based on the social exchange theory.

Social exchange theory argues that in order to have satisfaction with in the relationship, the reward must be equal to or balance the cost (Gächter, Fehr, & Kment, 1996). Studies on social exchange have found that the negative feeling will always arise if there is over benefit or under benefit in the relationship (Walster, Berscheid, & Walster, 1973). For example, if a person helps someone and the other in response does not reciprocate, the one who helped may feel upset that he or she did not get anything as a reward of his effort. On the other hand the one who received the help but cannot respond may feel shame and guilty. Therefore in the exchange to the friendship at workplace individual produces equal and opposite outcomes or responses.

Friendship in the context of workplace has not received much attention. Hackman and Oldham (1975) were the first scientist to study friendship in the context of workplace in the development of job characteristics model. The two interpersonal dimensions (dealing with others and friendship opportunities) were initially included in the 1971 study. However Hackman and Oldham (1975) did not have a specific hypothesis that how these two dimensions interact with the dependent variable. The researcher did not consider these two dimensions as core to job characteristic model, as they do not directly predict performance,

absenteeism and motivation. On the other hand Hackman and Lawler (1971) found that friendship opportunity is directly correlates with the general job satisfaction.

Mao, Chen, and Hsieh (2009) in their study found that bureaucratic organizations characterized by a hierarchical structure with prescribed rules and procedures, characteristically encourage impersonality and discourage friendships at workplace. They found that bureaucracy has significantly negative relationship with workplace friendship. Several Empirical studies have been conducted on friendship at workplace that shows the positive outcome of the friendship at workplace such as increased job satisfaction (Winstead et al., 1995), organizational commitment (Nielsen et al., 2000), information sharing (Kram & Isabella, 1985), reduced turnover intention (Morrison, 2004), and job performance. Workplace friendship is hypothesized to have a negative relation with intent to leave (Morrison, 2004). If a person is facing a personal crises or having stressful job, friends at workplace may provide support and hence reduce the chances of turnover. Friends at workplace are generally the people that the individual works closely with and consequently may have similarities and can provide guidance.

Employee Engagement
Kahn (1990) developed the term work engagement he describe it as "the harnessing of organizational members' selves to their work roles" (p.694). In other words it is the positive feeling of interaction of the employees to their work. Kahn (1990) argued that in order to engage employees to the work, they must feel safe, meaningful and psychologically fit at the workplace. The most agreed upon definition of employee engagement is "a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006)(p. 701). There is very minute research on employee engagement (Saks, 2006). A study lead by Towers (2006) evaluated highly engaged employees with employees with lower engagement. Result shows that engaged employees tend to believe that they could affect the quality of the company, cost of product and customer service. Meta-analysis conducted by Harter, Schmidt, and Keyes (2003) from the data collected by Gallup survey of several large firms, they found that companies that encourages employee engagement tends to have high customer satisfaction, high employee productivity , higher profit and lower turnover.

Workplace Friendship and Employee Engagement
Friendship at workplace are distinguished by interdependence (Winstead et al., 1995) and some scholars propose that interdependence strengthen engagement by the development of collective efficacy (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007) and want to perform at advanced level to attain the team goal or group success (Gorgievski & Hobfoll, as cited in (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008). Prior studies has stressed various antecedents of employee engagement are job resource, more precisely interpersonal resource. For example, social climate (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006), social support (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004), and organizational climate (Bakker et al., 2007) are positively related to employee engagement. Friends at workplace are reflected as resource in many ways. Friends that are associated with workplace provide social support to the individual that is considered as a resource associated with increased engagement (Schnorpfeil et al., 2002). Amicable relationship with colleagues may help individual to feel safer and expose themselves at the job (Kahn, 1990). Workers who are satisfied from their work relationships will be satisfied from their job that leads to more engagement to their work (Ducbarme & Martin, 2000; Schaufeli et al., 2006).

P1: Friendships at workplace are positively correlated with employee engagement.

Moderating Effect of Job Embeddedness

Job embeddedness is the combination of financial, material and psychological factors that forbade a person to quit his job (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). The most commonly studied outcome variable of job embeddedness is turnover intention. Job embeddedness is negatively related to turnover intention (Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2001). Various studies show job embeddedness as a predictor variable. Prior literature shows very limited evidence regarding to moderating role of job embeddedness. For example Lee, Mitchell, Sablynski, Burton, and Holtom (2004) in his study found that job embeddedness moderated the influences of volitional absences, organizational citizenship behaviors, job performance and volitional absences on turnover. Karatepe (2011) conducted a study on frontline hotel employees and found that job embeddedness moderated the relationship between perceived organizational support and turnover intentions. Prior literature shows that job embeddedness is used as moderating variable with turnover intention and its predictor. Current study will increase the scope of job embeddedness and will use it as moderating variable between friendship at workplace and job embeddedness. Workplace friendships are the interpersonal relationships that possess trust, attachment to the organization and commitment. Similarly job embeddedness also involves commitment and attachment to the organization. If an individual have friendship at workplace will be more committed to his work and attached to the organization.

P2: Job embeddedness will moderate the relationship between friendship at workplace and employee engagement

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study proposes to investigate the relationship between the friendship at workplace and employee engagement. Based on the existing knowledge on friendship at workplace (Berman et al., 2002; Nielsen et al., 2000), present study will contribute by examining the relationship between employee engagement and friendship at workplace. Moreover present study will also examine the moderating effect of job embeddedness on the relationship of employee engagement and friendship at workplace. Present study will explore the question what are the effect of workplace friendship? Does Management should encourage or discourage the friendship at workplace? This study will answer these questions and will also purpose several implications for the individuals and organizations. Overall, this study suggested that friendship at the workplace is important element in the organizational environment. Therefore it should be studied and promoted more because it is significant both for the employee and the organization.

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