ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE AND MANAGEMENT STYLE: PERCEIVED EFFECTS ON EMPLOYEE PRODUCTIVITY AT AN URBAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Cost pressures at universities, brought on by declining levels of subsidies in real terms, above inflation wage increases, as well as a volatile rand-dollar exchange rate, have resulted in a renewed quest for efficiency gains. While various cost containment measures have been pursued by universities, employee productivity has not received the same level of attention. Despite a number of studies having investigated the effects of an organisational structure and management style on employee productivity, a gap in literature exists in the context of South African universities. This holds especially true for the administrative, non-academic, part of universities.

This study was qualitative in nature, taking the form of a case study, utilising semi-structured face-to-face interviews and direct observation. Twenty-five interviews were conducted at a Student Enrolment Centre at an urban university in Gauteng. Data was analysed by means of content analysis. Results indicated that the prevailing centralised structure and autocratic management style is perceived to negatively affect employee productivity, due to a lack of communication and low motivational levels. The findings assist universities and industry to improve employee productivity by making changes to structure and managerial style.

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary education plays an ever increasingly important role in countries, particularly in emerging economies such as South Africa. It provides a foundation to alleviate poverty, create employment opportunities and reduce socio-economic inequalities (KPMG, 2016). These socio-economic ills are particularly evident in South Africa, owing to its history of exclusion and Apartheid-era policies. In recent times, funding for higher education institutions has received increasing attention in South Africa, mainly due to the #FeesMustFall movement. A report by commission of enquiry into the feasibility of higher education and fee-free training, released by the Presidency, highlights the lack of funding for universities. The report indicates that while a doubling of student numbers has occurred, from 495,356 in 1994 to 983,698 in 2013, relative increases in funding have not materialised. As a result, many South African universities are facing immense cost pressures, resulting in budget deficits which are unsustainable over the long term (Commission of Enquiry into Higher Education and Training, 2017). As a consequence, universities have sought to reduce capital expenditure, improve internal efficiencies and delay maintenance. In particular, reduction in costs and improvement

in efficiencies in administrative and support functions has been touted as one of the avenues to reduce the risk of ballooning budget deficits (KPMG, 2016; Commission of Enquiry into Higher Education and Training, 2017).

While the delay and reduction in maintenance and capital expenditure is a relatively simple method to reduce costs, more intricate initiatives are needed to lift efficiencies and reduce costs. One such initiative, or focus area, is employee productivity. Employee productivity plays an important role in the smooth operation of an organisation. Employee productivity can be best described as "the output in relation to people employed and/or hours worked. Employee productivity could be measured at the individual level (for example, number of calls answered per shift in a call centre) or at a team level" (South African Board for People Practices, 2016:4). Employee productivity has a direct relationship to organisational competitiveness, success and growth (Korkomaz & Korkomaz, 2017). While employee productivity is influenced by a wide array of factors, such as technology, education and training, some studies have linked the structure of an organisation, as well as management style to employee productivity (Iqbal, 2009; Tabari & Reza, 2012). This study therefore aims to explore the effects of organisational structure and management style on employee productivity, as perceived by employees themselves.

This paper is structured as follows. The following section provides a theoretical overview of the concepts of organisational structure, management style and employee productivity. This discussion is followed by an overview of the status quo of South African universities in terms of funding. Next, the methodology employees in this study is described. This section is followed by a presentation and discussion of the findings, together with recommendations for universities and industry. Lastly, limitations to the study together with a conclusion are presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The objective of literature review is to present the relevant theoretical approaches and linkages regarding organisational structure, management style, employee productivity, as well as outline the status quo of South African universities.

Organisational structure

According to Daft (2004:11) "organisations are defined as social entities that are goal-directed, are designed as deliberately structured and coordinated activity systems and are linked to the external environment". From the definition, it becomes apparent that an organisation incorporates a multitude of elements, forming a complex whole. Key to the definition are the elements of structure and management. Prominent managerial scholars such as Frederick Taylor, Max Webber and Henri Fayol were in consensus in that management usually refers to coordinating activities, people, processes and material flows to achieve specific goals in an effective and efficient manner (Steers, Sanchez-Runde & Nardon, 2010). According to Langton and Robbins (2007:475) "organisational structure defines how tasks are formally divided, grouped, and coordinated". In essence, organisational structure formally describes the operational process of an organisation, i.e. the manner in which work is going to be done. Further, organisational structure has been defined as "the outline of a company's framework and guidelines for managing business operations for creating their companies' organisational structure, which is usually an extension of the owner's personality" (Vitez, 2012:2). This indicates that the structure of an organisation, as well as the management of it, are organically intertwined, the manifestation of which emerges in day-to-day activities.

As organisations can be structured in a variety of ways, depending on requirements and managerial preference, some authors suggest that organisational structure is merely the linking of departments and jobs within an organisation (Nelson and Quick, 2000:498). While a multitude of different structures exist, Langton and Robbins (2007:480) suggest six common

types of organisational structures which an organisation can choose to follow, namely i) bureaucratic, ii) functional; iii) divisional; iv) matrix; v) centralisation; and vi) decentralisation.

Bureaucratic structures are characterised by the existence of clearly defined, processes, procedures and multiple levels of management. While benefits for bureaucratic structures include increased efficiencies and consistency, bureaucracies tend to introduce red tape, rigid rules, slow-decision-making and aversiveness to change (Hellriegel, Slocum & Jackson, 2013). **Functional** structures are traditionally regarded as the preferred organisational structure as areas of specialisation are grouped according to function and process (Thompson, Strickland & Gamble, 2007). **Divisional** structures are characterised by "divisional units performing one or more of the major processing steps along a value chain", thereby creating its own profit and loss centre that can be optimised for its specific purpose (Thompson, Strickland & Gamble, 2007:377). **Matrix** structures are said to combine the benefits of functional and product-based structures by forming project teams which exist to serve a pre-defined project and are led by a matrix manager, who yields control over both functional and product managers. Matrix structures are often more cost efficient by eliminating duplication of activities and creation of flexibility. However, matrix structures are often complicated by a need for multi-skilled matrix managers, a need for effective communication and dual reporting structures (Hellriegel, Slocum & Jackson, 2013). Langton and Robbins (2007:483) define **centralisation** as "the degree to which decision making is concentrated at a single point in the organisation". Hodge, Anthony, and Gales (2002:39) define centralisation as "the type of management style where decision-making is vested in top management. This concept includes only formal authority, that is, the rights inherent in one's position". This implies that centralisation is experienced when decision-making rests in top management with little or no input from lower-level employees, thereby being reminiscent of an autocratic management style (Langton & Robbins, 2007). Centralisation is often practiced as it allows for efficiency in decision-making. On the downside, however, is that bureaucracy is introduced, slowing down decision-making over time and causing an organisation to be reactive to external factors, negatively affecting competitive advantage (Vitez, 2012). Conversely, **decentralisation** refers to the degree to which "decision-making authority is vested in lower-level employees" (Hodge, Anthony & Gales, 2002:39). Decentralised organisations are often more flexible and responsive to environmental changes and tend to introduce a management style that is more democratic, favouring open-door policies (Iqbal, 2009). Decision-making if however often complicated due to differences in understanding and viewpoints (Langton & Robbins, 2007). Ackroyd (2002:55) "defines **bureaucracy** as an organisational type with a high proportion of officials whose sole task is coordination and who use authority to secure uniformity of practice". Max Webber developed the concept of a bureaucracy as a way to improve the operation of organisations in his book *The Theory of Social and Economic Organisation* (Hodge and Anthony, 1991:327).

Management style

Management style can be regarded as the conduct of managers in their role to enhance and achieve optimal performance from employees (Walker, 1996; Prasetya & Kato, 2011). In terms of the four managerial functions, management best relates to the leading and controlling aspects of the operational process. It should however be noted that management and leadership are often viewed as fundamentally different, as management concerns itself with effective structuring and allocation of tasks and resources, while leadership is concerns itself with connecting goals to people by means of positive influence (Daft & Benson, 2016). Daft and Noe (2001:379) best capture the essence of management style, who state that "leadership is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their shared purposes". It should however be noted that management style is a multidimensional construct, complex in nature and has a significant effect on employee and organisational performance (Kanyabi & Devi, 2011). While a multitude of management styles exist, four main styles are said to best capture conduct in practice. These include management

styles commonly referred to as i) autocratic, ii) democratic, iii) paternalistic and iv) laissez-faire.

Nelson and Quick (2000:392) defines an **autocratic** management style as "a style of leadership in which the leader uses strong, directive, controlling actions to enforce the rules, regulations, activities, and relationships in the work environment". This implies that autocratic managers tend to be transactional in nature and are more concerned with achievement of goals, rather than employee welfare. Ekaterini (2010:14) argues that older, more mature managers tend to be more autocratic in their managerial style, as compared to younger managers. This can be attributed to a more transactional leadership style that values financial achievements of the organisation. Conversely, younger managers correlate more with the democratic style of leadership. This is due to the fact they are more of transformational leaders and believe in the welfare of the employees; as such they tend to depict a more **democratic** managerial style (Ekaterini, 2010). According to Nelson and Quick (2000:392), a "democratic management style is a style of leadership in which the leader takes collaborative, reciprocal, interactive actions with followers concerning the work and work environment". Daft and Noe (2001:385) view the democratic manager as "a leader who delegates authority to others, encourages participation, relies on subordinates' knowledge for completion of tasks, and depends on subordinates' appreciation and respect for influence". This implies that greater value is placed on employee input. A **paternalistic** management style shares a similar philosophy, as the manager "takes into account the best interest of the employees as well as that of the business", although "communication is downward, feedback and questioning authority are absent as a respect to superior and group harmony" (Okon & Isong, 2016:52). Lastly, the **laissez-faire** management style is characterised by style in which "the manager hands-off and allows group members to make the decisions. Employees are empowered to determine their own objectives, solve their own problem and make their own decision with little or no interference" (Okon & Isong, 2016:53). This implies that management places trust in effective employee decision-making, empowering employees to act in the most effective manner as perceived by each individual employee.

Employee productivity

Paton, Clegg, Hsuan and Pilkington (2011:389) describe productivity as "the relationship between results and the time it takes to accomplish them", which is expressed "usually in the form of a ratio or a percentage, which is calculated by taking the outputs and divided by the inputs". The only two ways in which productivity enhancements can be achieved are therefore to either decrease inputs or increase outputs. Productivity related to employee activity, the aim would be to increase outputs by raising efficiencies. It is therefore imperative that managers manage in a style which improves productivity, mainly by means of effective goal setting, motivation and communication (Jones & Robinson, 2012). While the management of an employee is not the only factor in their productivity, with other factors such as capability, incentives and motivation also playing a role, employee productivity is an indicative measure of internal efficiencies and how well an organisation functions (Okoye & Ezejiofor, 2013; Oloke, Oni, Babalola & Ojelabi, 2017). Employees, or human capital, which are adequately trained, motivated and managed often lead to productivity enhancements, resulting in improved service delivery, an increase in organisational competitiveness, as well as positively affecting longevity of an organisation (Arraya & Pellissier, 2013).

Impact of organisational structure and management style on employee commitment

A number of studies have attempted to draw a link between organisational structure, management style and employee commitment. Al-Qatawneh (2014) suggests that a direct correlation exists between organisational structure and employee commitment, both in the public and private sector. It is suggested that forms of formalisation exhibit the largest correlation with commitment in the public sector, while in the private sector participation has

the largest correlation with commitment. These findings are supported by authors such as Holagh, Noubar and Bahador (2014), who argue that deeper research into the underlying reasons connecting structure and commitment is warranted. This view is suggested by Sano (1999), while Carson, Carson, Birkenmeier and Phillip (1999) suggest that organisations increasingly rely less on formal structures, thereby suggesting a paradigm shift in the views of structure and commitment.

In terms of the effects of management style and employee commitment, authors including Eby, Adams, Russel and Gaby (2000) suggest that managerial style manifests itself in day-to-day work practices such as decision-making, feedback, support and reward systems. These managerial practices have a direct effect on the individual employee's commitment and motivation, as managers therefore have the propensity to increase the individual employee's levels of intrinsic motivation, thereby ensuring job satisfaction (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990).

Status quo of South African universities

South African universities have long found themselves in a situation in which government subsidies have been declining in real terms, thereby placing increased pressure on operating budgets. As a result, universities have sought to reduce costs, improve efficiencies and find other sources of income. The effects of this precarious situation have resulted in above inflation tuition fee increases, as well as increased reliance on third stream income. The sector has received significant attention in the media due to the emergence of the #FeesMustFall campaign. (KPMG, 2016). While the greatest cost driver for universities are salaries, austerity measures have already been introduced, mainly in the form of reduction on infrastructure and maintenance spend, reduction in library budgets, as well as a freeze on administrative posts (Commission of Enquiry into Higher Education and Training, 2017). This has added additional complexity to the management of universities and departments within universities, as austerity has forced institutions of higher learning to rethink their approaches to management (Winberg, 2016). An improvement in administration is required, with cost and productivity efficiencies needed to adapt to the changing status quo of reduced funding. This necessitates the need to reduce complexity and thereby improve productivity (Commission of Enquiry into Higher Education and Training, 2017). While some studies have been conducted on employee productivity in South African universities (Tchapchet, Iwu & Allen-Ile, 2014), a gap in literature still exists with regards to the management and structuring of administrative sections in universities, and their effects on labour productivity. This gap specifically relates to the administrative portion of university function.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

The rise of the #FeesMustFall movement, declining levels of government subsidy, above inflation wage increases and cap on tuition fee increases have forced South African universities to reduce spending and improve internal efficiencies. While issues of management style, organisational structure and employee productivity have been covered in depth in literature, a gap in literature exists with reference to South African universities. The aim of this research is therefore to explore the effects of management style and organisational structure on employee productivity at a student enrolment centre (SEC) within an urban university in Gauteng. This research will help in understanding to what extent does organisational structure and management style contribute to employee productivity in the SEC department. The study aims is to provide high level managers with information on how best to make use of organisational structures and management style which will positively influence employee productivity. It also aims to provide line managers with possible management styles that can be used in order to influence the productivity of the employees

The objective of this paper is therefore to explore the perceived effects an organisational structure and management style has on employee productivity.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study followed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research makes use of a naturalistic approach and seeks to understand phenomena in context-specific settings (Golafshani, 2003:600). This research approach was used in seeking to understand the viewpoint of employees on the management style and organisational structure and how they are perceived to affect productivity (Creswell, 2007). This study takes the form of case study design. Yin (1989:23) defines case study research "as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident and in which multiple sources of evidence are used". A case study therefore has the aim of understanding the views and sense-making process of participants in a specific context, relative to a particular phenomenon. According to Nieuwenhuis (2007:294) the case study design is "useful for learning about situations which might be poorly understood or about which not much is known".

The case

The specific case study will be an instrumental case study design, because this is aimed at illuminating a particular issue (Creswell, 2007). The research aims to obtain a deeper understanding of the effect of organisational structure and management style on employee productivity within a particular context (an urban university in Gauteng) and within a particular environment (a Student Enrolment Centre) (Hancock and Algozzine, 2006). These choices of design enable the researchers to investigate the effect of organisational structure and management style on employee productivity levels.

A challenge of case study design is the lower sample numbers inherent in the design. Participants were selected on the basis of convenience and limitations to scope of the study and might therefore not expand variability and be representative of the natural population. However the aim of this study is not generalise, but rather to obtain a deeper understanding of the influence of organisational structure and management style on employee productivity in a specific context (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). This possibility of tendencies identified in this case study being observable to similar department does exist, as other departments in the university might display similar characteristics.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants in the study were informed of their anonymity and their right not to participate. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study in an introductory letter. The researchers obtained ethical clearance from the university in question. No follow-up interviews were conducted.

Population and sampling

The target population in this research are permanent and contract employees located within a Student Enrollment Centre (SEC) at an urban university in Gauteng. The selected SEC is characterised by some flexibility in the job environment, however as the processes are set according to central university rules, regulations and processes, limited flexibility exists in terms of the discretion at the hands of employees.

The sample frame includes employees of the Student Enrolment Centre who are call centre, biographics, selection and information management employees. These employee groups comprise all permanent and contract employees at the SEC. A nonprobability sampling approach was used in this study. According to Zikmund, Babin, Carr, and Griffin (2010:394) "nonprobability sampling is when the units of a sample are chosen so that each unit in the population does not have a calculable non-zero probability of being selected in the sample".

This is "a sampling technique in which units of the sample are selected on the basis of personal judgment or convenience" (Zikmund, Babin, Carr, and Griffin 2010:395). According to Sekaran and Bougie (2009:263) "sampling unit is the element that is available for selection in some stage of the sampling process". The sampling unit will consist of all the permanent and contract employees in the SEC. Student assistants were excluded from the sampling frame. Thirty-seven employees form part of the SEC, with 25 of the employees selected for interviewing. Employees were selected by means of convenience sampling, as only some employees could be accessed due to time constraints on the part of participants.

As a second data collection technique, direct observation, was used. According to Creswell (2007:221) "observation is the process of gathering open-ended, first, hand information by observing people and places at a research site". As observations can add richness to the findings of other data collection techniques, understanding of a phenomenon can be enhanced. In this research, observation supplements the interview findings.

Data analysis

The primary data analysis technique was content analysis, which is a "systematic approach to qualitative data analysis that identifies and summarises message content" (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:101). Content analysis involves looking at data from differing perspectives to identify common themes to aid understanding of information generated from transcripts, documents and other media (Nieuwenhuis, 2007:105). After each interview, the researchers reviewed the data collected to become immersed in it. Once acquainted and familiar with it, the researchers generated preliminary codes and code headings through which to categorise the data (Creswell, 2007:225).

Ethics

Prior to the interviews, interviewees were informed of their right not to partake in the study, the right to withdraw at any time, as well as the right to anonymity. No personal and identifiable information of interview participants was collected, thereby ensuring anonymity. Due to potential sensitive information emanating from the interviews, no demographic information was collected from participants.

Trustworthiness

In terms of transferability of the results of this study, it should be noted that as a case study was chosen, the results should be seen as context-bound and are therefore not generalisable to other South African universities. An experienced academic and researcher inspected the interview schedule prior to interviews taking place, thereby addressing the concerns of content and face validity. The interview schedule was guided by the primary objective by unpacking the topics of organisational structure, management style and productivity, thereby addressing the criterion of credibility. Also, interview results can be seen to be triangulated by means of undertaking observation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived effects of management style and organisational structure on employee productivity. The findings are structured according to the key topics of the study, namely, organisational structure and management style, with additional key themes as discovered during the data collection process.

Organisational structure

All participants indicated the SEC to possess a centralised organisational structure. The structure was described as decision-making power and influence being concentrated in a small number of top managers. Decisions were reported as merely being implemented, rather than a consultative process being followed. In addition, 88% of participants indicated the structure being unsuitable for the prevailing environment, negatively affecting productivity. As a result, employees in the SEC reported feeling unfairly treated and having low confidence in management, with one interviewee stating:

> "Top management knows nothing of what goes on. They take decisions without asking for commentary and it is killing the department."

According to Langton and Robins (2007:483), a "typical centralised organisational structure is experienced when top management makes the organisation's top decisions with little or no input from lower-level employees". As the SEC displayed signs of a centralised organisational structure, it naturally emanated that participants indicated that input is usually not solicited on the part of management, with no employee being informed of the decision to change the structure of the department to a centralised organisational structure. This means that little to no consultation takes place due to the organisational structure. Interviewees indicated that some years prior, the SEC was restructured and better aligned with organisational priorities. These changes resulted in significant changes to the work environment, structure, policies and processes within the SEC. Decision-making and processes were centralised at the primary campus. The effects of the change in structure, some years back, still resonated with some participants, with one interviewee describing the changes as "making employees at other campuses to feel useless and unappreciated, while on the other hand, employees at the main campus feel they are being overloaded with work and other staff members on other campuses do little". Participants indicated that these predicaments eventually lead to demoralisation and demotivation of employees, which then leads to low productivity levels.

Management style

24 participants (95%) described the SEC as having an autocratic management style. The prevailing management style was viewed as inappropriate and was flagged as a factor contributing to low productivity levels. Two interviewees described the management style as follows:

> "[An] Autocratic management style does not allow employees to be creative."

> "Employees are not given enough freedom to express themselves"

Participants indicated feeling restricted in performing their duties which eventually lead to low productivity because of the restrictions that management impose on them. This negatively impacted items such as creativity, communication and team-work. The lack of these elements was indicated as negatively affecting productivity, as well as negatively impacting potential productivity improvements. This view is supported by Nelson and Quick (2000:392), who define an autocratic management style as "a style of leadership in which the leader uses strong, directive, controlling actions to enforce the rules, regulations, activities, and relationships in the work environment". Participants indicated that lack of creativity in a job can lead to routine, which eventually leads to low productivity levels. Additionally, the lack of employee welfare in the SEC was perceived to affect the productivity level of employees.

Communication between management and employees

An additional factor, created by the autocratic management style and centralised structure, is the lack of communication between management and employees. Besides the organisational structure that is in place, participants perceived, unanimously, that management does not involve them in any of the decisions they take that directly affect their work, with one participants stating the following:

> "Management make decisions without proper consultation of employees and they like to be in control of every situation"

The autocratic management style and the centralised organisational structure were perceived to be the root cause of a lack of communication between managers and employees, which participants indicated should be more open and frequent. Unlike with a more democratic management style, which tends to value employee participation and empowers employees to make decision, use their knowledge to complete tasks and places reliance on employee appreciation (Daft & Noe, 2001), an autocratic management style does not give employees freedom to perform any task without prior approval of management, thereby stifling potential employee productivity improvements.

Observation results

During the observation process, it was noted that employees appeared very conservative in day-to-day decision making and not forthcoming in disclosing true feelings about the management style and organisation structure currently in use. Conservatism in decision-making and lack of proactive engagement therefore seem to be the result of prevailing structures and processes. It was further observed that employees did not share information on their true feelings to avoid being regarded by management as negative. The lack of sharing of information hints at a more widespread problem in terms of effective internal communication. The researchers further noted patterns of behaviour of employees appearing afraid to address issues with management. These patterns can have negative effects on motivation, productivity and day-to-day performance as processes can not be improved due to a lack of communication.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceived effects of management style and organisational structure on employee productivity. The study was framed as part of a case study of an SEC at an urban university in Gauteng. The literature behind the key concepts indicated that that productivity levels of employees are a function of many variables other than the work itself. From the literature review to the field work of this research; it is evident that employee productivity levels are influenced by a balance of management style, organisational structure and employees' motivation levels. An autocratic management style and deeply centralised structures seem to have a negative influence on employee productivity levels. This can be attributed to a lack of flexibility and empowerment.

Management of employees however was shown to be key to perceived productivity levels. The structure of the department and organisation that management sets, in this case a centralised one, coupled with the prevailing autocratic management style, hold the potential to negatively affect employee productivity levels. This indicates that employee productivity, while not purely a product of structure and management style, can be influenced the prevailing climate in an organisation, thereby creating scope for low-cost efficiency and productivity improvements.

The findings of this study suggest that the organisational structure that SEC is using is inappropriate in its current form. The management style in use is also deemed inappropriate, which eventually lead to the low productivity level of employees. In lights of these findings, firstly it is recommended that management review their management style. Instead of using the autocratic management style, it is suggested that they use an alternative management style which will allows employees to exhibit more freedom in doing their work, participate in decision making and improve internal levels of communication. Secondly, it is recommended that the organisational structure be changed from centralised structure to a more decentralised structure. This will allow employees in campuses other than the main campus to feel equally important and allow for more equitable distribution of work. This will improve the work relation of employees and their motivational levels, which will eventually could lead to improved productivity level. Lastly, communication between management and employees needs to be strengthened. This will help in addressing issues that cannot be solved by changing organisational structure or management style. Issues of trust and moral support between management and employees can be addressed more easily when there is a good communication between management and employees.

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