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Indications of mentoring efficacy in the development of school administrative assistants

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Abstract

This study was approached as an action research project where school administrative assistants (SAA) responded to a questionnaire that examined their current workplace performance against their job description. A mentoring package was used as an intervention to develop and align workplace performance with their job description in four (4) key areas: (1) Generic Competencies, (2) Office and Administration, (3) Financial Management and (4) Teacher and Student Support. After completion of the mentoring package, school administrative assistants responded to the original questionnaire again. Using quantitative measures, the study found indications of mentoring efficacy in the development of school administrative assistants within public schools. The implications of these findings recommend that mentoring be used to meet the training and development needs of all administrative roles within the public school sector.

Key Words: Mentoring; Workplace Performance; Administrative Staff; Public Schools; Questionnaires; Performance Management.

Introduction

School Administrative Assistants (SAA) are non-teaching staff within public schools that are expected to perform broad functions of administration duties that are equivalent to that of a small-to-medium enterprise. In Australia, public schools are government funded primary and high schools with any student having access to these types of schools.

This paper sets out to explore the relationship between a mentoring programme and an increase in workplace performance within a public school setting. It is the first to assess SAAs workplace performance against their job description and whether the implementation of a mentoring programme can help develop the necessary skills to meet the requirements of their job description.

DET (2001) investigated and found that administrative roles within public schools were evolving and that the skills of administrative staff were not evolving at the same rate. Furthermore, DET (2001) suggested that training and development was required to meet the demands of an evolving job role. At present there are minimal tools to measure the existing skills or professional learning of SAAs with the public school arena. In an attempt to manage workplace performance, School Administrative Managers (SAM) developed a mentoring package that provides a guide for SAAs to develop the required skills to meet their job description.

A structured questionnaire was developed to test the skills of the participatory sample. The questionnaire is based on the SAAs job description and recommendations from DET (2001: 81-84). Using action research pretest-intervention-posttest methodology (Veal, 2005), the objective was to test and answer the following questions (1) Do SAAs have the minimum skills as outlined in their job description? (2) Will a mentoring programme increase the SAAs skills to align with their job description?

Literature Review

The following literature provides an exploratory view on studies that have investigated the relationship between a mentoring programme and workplace performance of school administrative staff.

Mentoring is a process by which an expert and/or qualified person facilitates learning through specific learning experiences. The mentor must actively involve the learner in problem solving, thinking and extending and constructing knowledge (Tovey, 1999: 14).

Performance management evaluates and improves individuals, groups or the organisation as a whole to achieve organisational objectives (Glendinning, 2002; Grote, 2000).

Schools provide a service to a number of stakeholders with a variety of socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. The expectations of those stakeholders are that SAAs are able to perform broad functions such as:

- Interaction with students and staff
- School administration and operation
- Financial management

DET (2001) suggests that evolution has seen the role develop into one that currently requires skills and knowledge in the following areas:

1. Generic Competencies
2. Office and Administration
3. Financial Management
4. Teacher and Student Support

Training, development and mentoring in the abovementioned areas will assist SAAs to develop the necessary skills to meet their job description, evolving job role and stakeholder expectations.

DET (2001: 7) indicates that the majority of current SAAs are aged between 40 and 65 years old and entered the public school system by means of assisting at their child's local school. Despite their children leaving the education system, many SAAs retained their positions within their associated schools. The concept of re-training an ageing workforce is a dilemma public schools now face.

Performance management helps manage under-performance, it can also be used to recognise and reward good performance (MAC, 2001: 7). However, SAAs within public schools provide a service. Therefore, the relationship that links providing a service and performance management outcomes is hard to measure and complex (McGuire, 1999).

Services are intangible and almost impossible to measure. Despite this difficulty, Walderssee (1999) argues that the usual practice in a service environment is to only measure the components that can be measured. The job description for SAAs is heavily weighted towards the tangible aspects of the service being provided.

DET (2001: 35) suggests that SAAs are performing new tasks that do not form part of their job description. However, there are also tasks on their job description that they are not performing. Despite the irregularities between work performance and job description, any task performed can still be categorised into the four main areas: (1) Generic Competencies (2) Office and Administration (3) Financial Management and (4) Teacher and Student Support.

The general acceptance by protégé's of the benefits of mentoring is clearly evident throughout the literature (Ehrich and Hansford, 1999). Specifically, women fulfill majority of SAA and SAM positions with public schools (Public Service Association, 2007). However, literature to date, indicates that women in professional industries such as education; experience a lack of mentoring experiences (Clarke, 1985; Patterson, 1994 and Shakeshaft, 1989).

Tharenou (2005: 78) suggests that some organisations have established a mentoring programme for women, acknowledging that women are underrepresented in management. This may be due to family, organisational and interpersonal barriers (Blake-Beard, 2001; Clutterbuck and Ragins 2002). The advantages of formal mentoring programmes are that, the process is extended to individuals and minorities who previously, would not normally be considered for such types of training and development within the organisation (Ehrich and Hansford, 1999: 5).

SAAs indicate that they have received informal on-the-job training and are part of a network of school assistants. This indicates the willingness of SAAs to participate in training and development activities. Participation occurs when an activity is closely related to mentoring. Therefore, the mentoring process is taking place via informal means. Possibly, for mentoring to be successful in public schools; a paradigm shift is required from an informal process to a formal process.

Methodology

In an attempt to balance cost-efficiency and comprehensiveness, this paper only reviewed twenty (20) participants from twenty (20) individual public schools. No attempt was made to control variables as the twenty (20) schools were made up of a combination of primary and high schools.

An expression of interest was sent to 241 public schools. The expression of interest was addressed to the SAAs and contained an information sheet, letter to the principal, consent form and the skills questionnaire. Those who voluntarily gave their consent to participate formed the group of research participants. Of the 241 schools sent expressions of interest, 8.3% responded. Of those respondents, 100% were female with 50% being between the ages of 40-49 years old.

Research participants were given fourteen (14) days to return the consent form and the pre-test skills questionnaire. The intervention (i.e. mentoring programme) was operational for seventy five (75) days. Participants were then given fourteen (14) days to return the post-test skills questionnaire.

To maintain the reliability and consistency of the skills questionnaire, it was developed prior to the mentoring programme taking place. All SAAs perform their duties against the same job description and the questionnaire was based on questions relating directly to the key responsibilities as outlined in the SAAs job description. To further enhance validity of the relationship between the SAA job description and workplace performance, the questionnaire also contained questions as recommended by DET (2001: 81-84).

The questionnaire consisted of forty eight (48) quantitative questions. Using a likert scale, they were designed to highlight the following: (1) Demographics (2) Generic Competencies (3) Office and Administration Skills (4) Financial Management Skills and (5) Teacher and Student Support Skills.

Data collected was via the pretest-intervention-posttest action research methodology (Hoonakker, Carayon and Schoepke, 2005: 2). Jones (2001) suggests that people are reluctant to assess others due to the issue of confrontation, therefore; research participants will evaluate themselves pre-test and post-test using the same skills questionnaire. The questionnaire does not include sample questions except for questions 1.4 and 1.5 of the demographics section.

Research participants assessed themselves by answering all questions on a 5-point likert scale ranging from (1) I need supervision to (5) I don't need supervision.

Results with scores between (1) I need supervision to (3) Unsure will be deemed that they do not meet the requirements of their job description.

Results with scores between (4) I don't need assistance to (5) I don't need supervision will be deemed that they meet the requirements of their job description.

The mentoring package required on-the-job training and guidance from SAMs who assessed competency via a checklist. SAMs had daily interaction with the SAAs and specifically met weekly to provide feedback culminating from the checklist.

The 'mean' for every individual question (i.e. 10 questions) per section (i.e. 4 sections) will be calculated against the minimum performance standard. This indicates the overall skill base in relation to the individual skill set (i.e. section) being tested. Also, the 'grand mean' will be calculated against the minimum performance standard. This indicates the SAAs overall skill base against their job description.

Limitations

With several limitations, it should be noted that the number of research participants is low which led to generalised results. Therefore, only limited conclusions can be drawn. Potential external validity concerns may render recommendations for wider populations to be 'taken with caution' and that future papers may benefit from further research with larger numbers of research participants.

Secondly, the 'skills questionnaire' does not form part of a standard policy or approved method of testing by the public school system. This creates potential construct validity problems due to limited statistical analysis of the questionnaire.

Thirdly, a further limitation relates to data collection at a single point in time which does not allow for changes in perception and attitudes over time, due to the limited duration of the intervention. Furthermore, this leads to an issue of not only reliability, sufficiency and fairness/equity; but the accuracy of individual self-perceptions with relation to self-assessment.

Lindeman, Sundvik and Rouhiainen, (1995) investigated self-assessment accuracy in work settings. Self-assessment was compared to objective work performance. Findings: (1) men rated themselves more highly than women (2) two thirds of men over rated themselves, whereas the proportions of women were spread equally across the three categories of underestimation, overestimation and accurate estimation (3) many contextual factors help improve the validity of self assessment (i.e. instructions, training, etc.).

Fletcher (1999) reviews research findings into self-assessment and gender differences, in relation to self-awareness and performance; and consistent findings in studies suggest:

- A person rates their performance more lenient when compared to the ratings made by their colleagues
- Women rate themselves less positively than men and are less susceptible to leniency effects. Therefore, women's ratings align closely to their colleagues' ratings; which indicates a high index of self-awareness.

The only variables controlled were that research participants came from public schools (i.e. primary and high schools).

It should be noted that there was limited literature on mentoring efficacy in the development of school assistants. Therefore, new ground is being covered and this paper appears to be an appropriate advance for the field of mentoring and professional practice.

Results

Table 1

1.1 What is your Gender	Total	Percentage		
Male	0	0%		
Female	20	100%		
1.2 What is your Age				
18-29	0	0%		
30-39	4	20%		
40-49	10	50%		
50-65	6	30%		
1.3 Current Status				
Single	1	5%		
Married	16	80%		
De-facto	1	5%		
Divorced	2	10%		
1.6 What is your salary				
\$0-\$15,000	0	0%		
\$16,000-\$30,000	16	80%		
\$31,000-\$42,000	4	20%		
\$43,000+	0	0%		
1. A. Completion of the following courses	Yes	No		
Induction	6	14		
Code of Conduct	7	13		
Duty of Care	6	14		
Your Rights at Work	6	14		
First Aid Certificate	12	8		
Prescribed Medication Course	5	15		
MEAN	7	13		
STANDARD DEVIATION	2.5	2.5		
1. B. Your skills with Microsoft Office	Beginner	Intermediate	Advanced	Professional
Word	2	10	7	1
Excel	11	6	3	0
PowerPoint	14	4	2	0
Publisher	11	4	4	1
Web Mail	6	9	4	1
MEAN	8.8	6.6	4.0	0.6
STANDARD DEVIATION	4.8	2.8	1.9	0.5

Note: * Sample size = 20

* Questions 1.4 and 1.5 were omitted from Table 1 because they were sample items only.

The Demographic results indicate that SAAs are predominantly female and that they are a maturing workforce. 80% of the research participants are between the ages of 40-65.

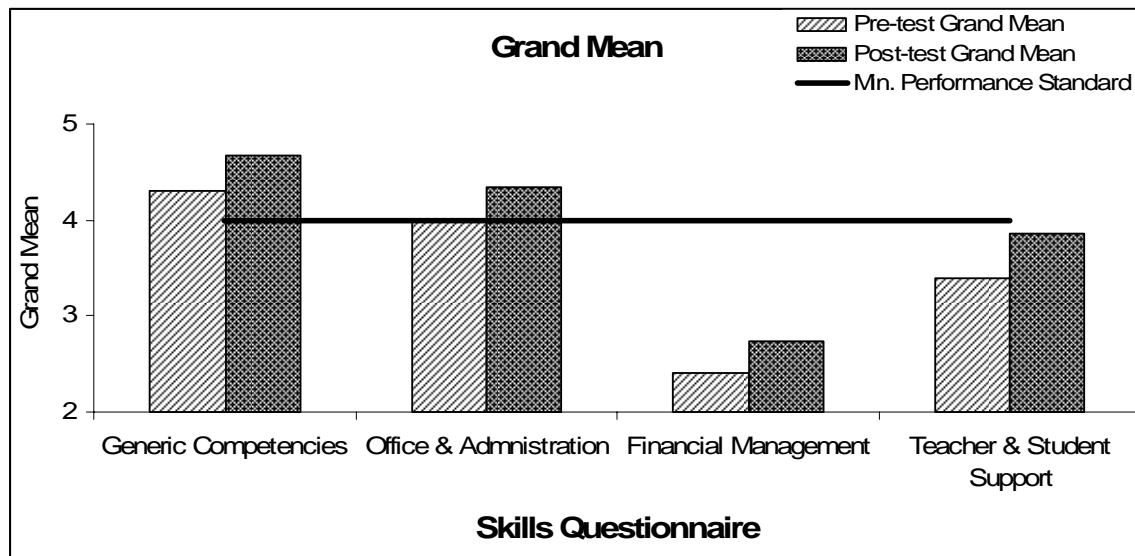
80% of participants are married and paid an income of AUD\$16,000-\$30,000. The low income is reflected by 65% of participants having not completed on-the-job courses as described in section 1.A (demographics) and 44% having only 'beginner' skill level with Microsoft computer packages.

Grand mean results clearly indicate that SAAs do not meet the minimum skills of the job description. Only two (2) of the four (4) sections returned a grand mean equal to or above (4). This indicates that SAO's are only able to perform 50% of their job role to the minimum requirement/standard.

SAO's show strong skill sets in 'generic competencies' and 'office and administration'. These two (2) job functions are common amongst administrative duties and would be performed regularly. 'Financial management' and 'teacher and student support' are the two (2) job functions that returned poor results. Predominantly, 'financial management' would be performed by the SAM, thus giving limited hands-on exposure and experience to the SAO. 'Teacher and student support' probably indicates the office management aspect of the SAO's duties. Once again, this function would be performed by the SAM; which could inhibit on-the-job learning and the practical aspect of the job function.

Another factor to be considered is the knowledge base held by SAMs. The job functions of 'financial management' and 'teacher and student support' could be deliberately withheld from the SAO's due to a desire not to share knowledge in fear of loss of employment, control and/or power.

Graph 1



Note: *Grand Mean Scale starts at 2.

For Q2 to be supported, post-test 'grand mean' results for all categories had to return a result with a minimum grand mean of (4). This did not occur (Graph 1). However, the mentoring package

clearly made significant improvements in all aspects of the SAAs workplace performance and clearly displays the mentoring efficacy in the development of SAAs.

The following, will specifically address the pre-test and post-test results from the individual sections of the skills questionnaire.

Table 2

Results - Skills Questionnaire								
Question	Generic Competencies		Office Administration &		Financial Management		Teacher & Student Support	
	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean
1	4.4	4.8	4.6	4.9	2.4	2.7	2.8	3.5
2	4.6	4.8	4.5	4.8	1.9	2.2	4.4	4.6
3	4.6	5.0	4.3	4.8	2.0	2.6	4.5	4.9
4	4.5	5.0	4.4	4.8	2.9	3.5	3.2	3.6
5	4.5	4.9	3.9	4.3	2.9	3.4	2.9	3.5
6	4.1	4.5	3.5	3.7	2.1	2.6	2.8	3.3
7	4.3	4.7	3.9	3.9	2.4	2.7	3.3	3.9
8	4.3	4.7	3.2	3.4	2.6	2.7	4.2	4.7
9	3.9	4.2	4.1	4.6	2.4	2.4	2.9	3.4
10	3.9	4.4	3.9	4.4	2.5	2.7	3.0	3.4
Grand Mean	4.3	4.7	4.0	4.3	2.4	2.7	3.4	3.9

Generic competencies returned post-test mean results above the minimum performance standard. The mentoring package increased the grand mean by (0.4). Pre-test, questions 9 and 10 were both below the minimum performance standard. This result is clearly linked to information collected via the demographics component of the questionnaire and confirms that 65% of research participants have not completed on-the-job courses and only 44% have 'beginner' skill level with Microsoft computer packages.

Fifty percent (50%) of the office and administration pre-test mean results were below the minimum performance standard. The mentoring package increased the grand mean by (0.3). Pre-test, questions 5 to 8 and 10 were all below the minimum performance standard.

Questions 5 to 7 indicate that these duties are performed by the SAM, thus giving limited hands-on exposure and on-the-job learning experience to the SAA.

Question 8 is also linked to information collected via the demographics component of the questionnaire and confirms that 65% of research participants have not completed on-the-job courses and only 44% have 'beginner' skill level with Microsoft computer packages.

The mentoring package was only able to improve questions 5 and 10 above the minimum performance standard. These duties are normally performed by the SAM, however; these tasks were delegated to the SAAs to give hands-on exposure and on-the-job training.

All of the financial management pre-test mean results were below the minimum performance standard. The mentoring package increased the grand mean by (0.3) but was unable to increase any of the post-test results above the minimum performance standard.

DET (2001: 38) suggests that the SAA job description has not been reviewed for some time and may not adequately reflect the necessary requirements of financial management that the SAA must perform. Also, prior to fulfilling their role; SAAs have had limited prior exposure to budgets, cash flow, general accounting principles and other aspects of financial management.

DET (2001: 33) indicates that the SAM is charged with the responsibility to concentrate on the financial management of the school and may not have sufficient time to train/teach the SAA. The SAAs skill gap with technology may prevent them from being able to adequately handle finances (DET, 2001: 35).

Sixty percent (60%) of the teacher and student support pre-test mean results were below the minimum performance standard. The mentoring package increased the grand mean by (0.5). Despite, post-test results just falling short of the minimum performance standard, the intervention had the greatest impact/improvement on this section, compared to the rest.

DET (2001: 36) suggests that a lack of performance in the teacher and student support section is due to a significant increase in administrative work/duties and the accrual of new responsibilities and as a result, a subsequent reduction in time that can be allocated to these tasks. This is specifically relevant in the case of question 5.

The original quantity of voluntary research participants was 22 ($n = 22$). However, two (2) were omitted from the analysis of final results.

When analysing results from generic competencies, office and administration, financial management and teacher and student support it can be seen that there is a distinct correlation where, with variance, the post-test mean follows the same linear pattern as the pre-test mean. This theme supports the credentials of the mentoring package by increasing work place performance across all aspects of the participants skill sets equally. This theme could also be used to further analyse the mentoring package and improve upon sections where despite SAAs improving, they still did not meet the minimum performance standards.

Overall, the mentoring package proved to be a successful tool to increase workplace performance in public schools.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study is the first to provide a comprehensive, systematic questionnaire assessing the workplace performance of SAAs in public schools. This study makes two key contributions not found in previous studies. First, for this sample, supporting arguments indicate that SAAs do not

have the minimum skills to adequately perform their job description. Secondly, this study is the first to examine the relationship between a mentoring programme and the workplace performance of SAAs in public schools.

The implementation of the mentoring package was only one (1) action research cycle. However, recommendations are made for the implementation of further participatory research directed interventions utilising a larger number of participants.

The skills questionnaire could be used to test the skills of potential candidates prior to being recruited for the role of SAA within a particular School. In addition, the questionnaire could also test the skills of employees who are under rehabilitation.

Replicating the research project using a larger number of participants will be able to support and/or challenge findings in relation to mentoring efficacy in the development of school SAAs.

Conceptually, future research needs to examine the workplace performance of SAMs and other administrative staff in public schools. Whilst attempting to control variances, any changes to the questionnaire, as few as possible, should be made in a systematic way, using specific criteria and ultimately, approved by DET.

Although this study followed propositions that argued for the influence of a mentoring programme and the intended benefits it provides, further examination is still needed on the links between mentoring programmes and work place performance within public schools.

The following is a brief summary of initiatives that could improve workplace performance in public schools:

- Set minimum work place performance skills for potential new employees or employees under rehabilitation
- Make mentoring programmes policy in relation to training and development
- Implement induction programmes for all new employees
- Implement internal and external training for all administrative staff
- Implement specific training in finance to ensure the schools needs are being met
- Adjust administrative remuneration packages to reflect skill levels and work place performance
- Embrace technological advancement through its utilisation and training staff in its capabilities

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