Perceived Performance Appraisal Effectiveness, Career Commitment and Turnover Intention of Knowledge Workers

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Abstract

Despite the awareness of high global labor turnover, studies on performance appraisal and its effects on turnover intention have been very limited. Earlier studies undertaken have either primarily embarked on very few appraisal elements or fail to analyze the appraisal from the vital psychological perspective. No study has examined the nature and scale of this relationship. The well-explored *turnover intention studies* are not being used within the performance appraisal framework. *Furthermore, past literatures have yet to contemplate the role of career commitment into the performance appraisal-turnover intention framework. Hence, the aim of the study is to examine perceived performance appraisal effectiveness, career commitment and turnover intention among academics in Malaysia. The study also captures the key performance appraisal dimensions and processes. A pilot study of 36 academics and 4 human resource experts is carried out. The framework is then verified and validated. Findings are slightly different from those found in literatures.*

Keywords: human resource management, effectiveness, performance appraisal, turnover intention, career commitment

1. An Overview

The undisputable transition from production-based to knowledge-based economy results in the rapid rise of knowledge-based organizations across nations (Dawson, 2000). Knowledge-oriented organizations are people-focused types of organizations, where work is merely of an intellectual nature and knowledge workers represent the majority of their workforce (Alvesson, 2000; Davenport, 2002). Knowledge has since become a nation's preeminent resource (Drucker, 1994), while knowledge workers have become primary creators of wealth and jobs. From the broader literature reviews, knowledge workers have been generally referred to workers with high level of education, expertise and persistent interest in lifelong learning stance (Davenport, 2005). Their intellectual ability to understand, analyze, synthesize and evaluate information in complex, dynamic and unpredictable environment would indubitably create a firm's value and new opportunities (Davenport, 2005; Drucker, 1999; Horwitz, Heng, Quazi, Nonkelo, Roditi & Van Eck, 2006). Besides, their human capital is considered more important than any physical or capital assets and critical for survival and long-term success of the organization. As a consequence, contemporary businesses depend largely on the performance of this knowledge workforce (Drucker, 2002) to gain both regional and global competitive advantage (Oltra, 2005).

The intellectual nature of knowledge workers is stored in the memory of these knowledge workers. This tacit form of knowledge, therefore, is not easily accessible and can only be secured, shared and extended primarily through formal, as well as, informal contacts with these workers. Hence, aggressive efforts are crucial to be carried out in knowledge-based organizations not only to find and employ these qualified workers, but also to retain them within the organizations (Damir, 2008). While firms are no longer able to afford employment for life (Kimiz, 2005), these knowledge workers are evidently renowned to be the most mobile type of workers and their retention within an organization is difficult to maintain (Zalina, 2005; Somaya & Williamson, 2008). Their commitment is more occupational and less organizationally motivated. Unless their organizational and professional values and goals are similar (Lee, Banker, Potter & Srinivasan, 2000), high turnover is a norm among these workers (Despres & Hiltrop, 1995; Boutwell, 1997). Professional networking and closed association with peers (Despres & Hilltrop, 1995; Julian & Anita, 2000; Zalina, 2005), make them highly competitive from being organizationally committed and seeking other employment opportunities (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee & Graske, 2001). The costs of this "brain drain" directly not only include declines in firms' profitability, productivity, higher costs of hiring and training replacement workers, but also, harms customer relationship, reputation; and loss of best practices information and productive time of senior managers. As the key organizational essence, it is crucial for firms to recognize what is important to their knowledge workers – what is of value to them and to their professional practice as well as what the organizations stand to gain (Kimiz, 2005). One of the means to achieve this is through the organizational Human Resource Management (HRM) practice.

Past literatures suggest that an employee's decision to leave employment may depend on his or her reaction towards a firm's HRM practice. One of controversial issues in the practice that circumvents among employees is the effectiveness of its performance appraisal (PA) system. Despite the attention and its immense evolvement across sectors and occupations, major researchers claim that most appraisal systems fail (Deming, 1986; Longenecker & Goff, 1992; Varma, DeNisi & Peters, 1996). Many of its flaws are intractable (Rees & Porter, 2004; Latham, Almost, Mann & Moore, 2005). Hence, an ineffective PA is often a source of unmet expectations for workers (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). By putting a PA policy on paper is no guarantee that it will be followed in the manner intended (St-Onge, Morin, Bellehumeur & Dupuis, 2009). As far as PA is concern, there appears to be no one best methods of PA, though there are certain common elements in all effective methods. Effective performance appraisals are commonly associated with clear goals that are attached to specific performance criteria and well-accepted by both appraiser and appraisee. Its performance criteria links to specific key results in departments or organizations and is assigned to relevant measuring instrument that is amenable to scaling and able to weigh significant behaviors required for successful job performance (Henderson, 1980). In addition, raters are well-trained to conduct the appraisal process and discuss employee performance effectively (Ritter & Nunnally, 2002). Besides, an effective appraisal feedback must come from relevant sources and may require multiple sources, especially when appear multiple lines of reporting, greater cross functional collaboration and higher level of communication (Barnes, 1997). Finally, frequent PA and feedback upholds an effective open communication between superior and subordinate on expected performance behaviors, ratings and areas of improvement for the development and growth of the professional intellect (Quinn, Anderson & Filkenstein, 1996a). Unfortunately, only few organizations own well-structured PA systems (Quinn, Anderson & Filkenstein, 1996b).

Though concept of knowledge management and PA has been extensively long delved within management studies, not much has been written about the effectiveness of the employee PA system in a knowledge-driven context. Moreover, knowledge worker's beliefs about the effects of this appraisal on turnover intention (TI) has been overlooked and omitted in most research efforts (Arthur, 1994; Mor Barak, Cherin & Berkman, 2001). Generally, issues on PA history, development, and impact of its perceived effectiveness on TI have also been lacking or ignored in later literatures (St-Onge, Morin, Bellehumeur & Dupuis, 2009). Some of the work undertaken has primarily concentrated on one or few of the appraisal system elements such as raters' feedback and/or standards. Other studies fall short of analyzing the psychological approach that are vital in understanding and reassessing appraisal and its challenges, so as to alleviate issues on appraisal subjectivity and biasness. Though researches on TI studies are well-explored and more inclined toward organizational/job-related and demographic variables, however, they are not being used within the PA framework (Whiting, Kline & Sulsky, 2008).

Many studies, though noteworthy in advancing the field, have been conducted based on a limited focus on the mechanics of the system rather than the system as a whole (Malinauskas & Clements, 1987; Smith, 1986). Consequently, there exists urgency for a complete and balanced integrated approach on issues generated by various appraisal perspectives in relation to employee's TI, which is also believed to be beyond the scope of individual level (Huselid, 1995).

2. Background to the Study

The education industry in Malaysia has experienced a significant growth for the past few years. With the aim of becoming a world class education hub, the Malaysian government, as well as, the universities has been aggressively engaged in increasing research contribution, as well as, foreign students' intakes to improve the universities' world ranking. In order to sustain or enhance the country's global competitive edge (Tight, 2003; Humphreys & Hoque, 2007), it is therefore imperative for universities to engage and retain highly committed and experienced academic talents. Academics, as knowledge workers are the backbone of every institution of higher education that contributes to a large extent to the national and global education quality, along with institutional reputation (Rowley, 1996). Losing these academics will jeopardize human capital quality through their replacement, work disruption and foregone investment. Though the importance of human resource (HR) practices and their effectiveness to better understand this intellectual capital and its development has since received remarkable attention, not much of empirical research has been conducted in this discipline, as compared to researches on teaching and learning academic excellence. Additionally, the upward trend of academics turnover in local (Khoo, 1981) and private universities is still prevalent for the past few decades (National Higher Education Research Institute, 2004).

In order to reduce this loss, therefore, it is utmost crucial to study how academics perceived the effectiveness of one strand of HR practices, in particular, PA, and its effect on TI. Subsequently, this relationship will be further justified with their level of career commitment. Indirectly, the study also captures the PA dimensions and their appraisal process, so as to explore whether these HR PA practices are congruent with knowledge management philosophy and practices. This preliminary move is expected to improved academics tenure and quality in their institution, as well as, assists in the development of human capital in the knowledge era.

Hence, the major aims of this study are to:

- establish the main elements of PA that will contribute to academics perceived PA effectiveness;
- investigate the effect of perceived PA effectiveness on academics turnover intention;
- establish the main elements of career commitment that will contribute to academics career commitment intensity;
- investigate the effect of career commitment on academics TI;
- determine whether career commitment mediate the relationship between perceived PA effectiveness and knowledge worker turnover intention;
- make significant theoretical and practical contribution in the area of knowledge workers, perceived PA effectiveness and TI, knowledge management and HR management;
- make a constructive contribution to future development of HR practices or appraisal systems in managing and motivating knowledge workers, as well as, encourage positive attitude towards organization among them;
- suggest and discuss problems of current appraisal systems, employees' responses and also solutions to resolve them through verification and triangulation to participant and experts;

3. Method

The research is based on a mixed method (Creswell, 2009), which comprise of both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. An empirical pilot study is carried out through a questionnaire-based survey and a few interviews. Applicability to the academics as the knowledge workers is the primary criterion for question selection. The empirical study is vitally important to test validity of constructs and variables for the main survey. Specifically, it helps to identify specific problems in undertaking the main survey, important constructs and variables affecting the perceived performance effectiveness, career commitment and TI, as well as, how to phrase individual questions. The sample selection is based on convenience sampling from three universities.

Means of contact prior to the study are either through telephone or e-mail and informed consent is secured from all participants. There are 40 participants (Cooper & Schindler, 2008) of which 4 are HR appraisal experts and 36 academics.

The questionnaire which is developed through a wide range of literature review (majority is adopted, with some being modified and self-constructed) consists of the following sections and sub-sections:

1.   Personal demographics
       (a)   Age
       (b)   Gender
       (c)   Position
       (d)   Faculty
       (e)   Years in the industry

2.   Perceived PA effectiveness
       (a)   Goals
       (b)   Criteria
       (c)   Standard
       (d)   Source
       (e)   Feedback
       (f)   Frequency

3.   Career commitment:
       (a)   career identity
       (b)   career resilience
       (c)   career insight

4.   Turnover Intention

The questionnaire is semi-structured and whenever possible, a Likert scale is used for measurements, ranging from 1 (strong disagree/not important) to 7 (strongly agree/most important). It is based on self-completed questionnaire, with sections for additional comments on changes or details that need to be given. Following the development of the questionnaire, a pilot study is mounted for one week. This is to check on ambiguous questions, clarity of the data produced and whether the method of administration is appropriate. The questionnaire, which is equipped with full instructions, is then distributed among the HR experts and academics; and collected. All questionnaires are 100 percent returned. Since sample size is small, simple descriptive and reliability analyses are performed using SPSS. Only 4 participants volunteered to be interviewed. Each interview lasts approximately 45 minutes. With prior permission from the interviewees, all interviews are recorded by a micro-audio recorder and later transcribed. The questionnaire is later revised for the main survey.

4. Findings and discussion

Only the 36 academics responses from the pilot study are relevant for the analysis. Demographic results are provided in Table 1- 6. There are more female than male academics for the survey. The proportion of Chinese academics is the highest, while the Malays and Indians are approximately of similar proportions. Majority of the academics are either singles or married, holding at least a master degree, which also concur their status as being at least senior lecturers.

Table 1. Gender

Category	Number	Percent to Total
Male	14	39%
Female	22	61%

Table 2. Race

Category	Number	Percent to Total
Malay	8	22%
Chinese	14	39%
Indian	10	28%
Others	4	11%

Table 3. Job Status

Category	Number	Percent to Total
Lecturer	6	17%
Senior Lecturer	12	33%
Principal Lecturer	6	17%
Associated Professor	8	22%
Professor	4	11%

Table 4. Marital Status

Category	Number	Percent to Total
Single	14	39%
Married	19	53%
Divorced/Widowed	3	8%

Table 5. Highest Level of Education

Category	Number	Percent to Total
Degree	2	6%
Masters Degree	18	50%
Doctoral or above	16	44%

Table 6. Others

Category	Mean	Std Dev.
Age	30.8	4.8
Income/annum (RM)	70, 780	10,240
Length of service in present company (years)	4.2	1.5
Years of experience in the industry	6.8	2.6

Table 7. Important items to be included in research

Constructs	Sub constructs
Perceived PA Effectiveness	Goals
Perceived PA Effectiveness	Criteria
Perceived PA Effectiveness	Standard
Perceived PA Effectiveness	Source
Perceived PA Effectiveness	Feedback
Perceived PA Effectiveness	Frequency
Career Commitment	Career Identity
Career Commitment	Career Resilience
Career Commitment	Career Insight
Turnover Intention	Turnover Intention

Perceived PA Effectiveness refers to subjective probability that an organizational HR performance appraisal practice will increase an employee satisfaction on his or her job performance assessment (Shamima, 1999). The widely accepted sub domains of constructs that have greater influence on academics perceived PA effectiveness are performance goals, criteria, standard, feedback, source and frequency (Table 7). With respect to perceived PA effectiveness, specifically, the followings are of the knowledge worker interest:

- Discussion of organizational goals during the appraisal meetings – types and number of goals being established, goals clarity, expected achievement, target periods, and compatibility with other personal or departmental goals within the knowledge-driven environment.
- Criteria that are being used as a benchmark of performance – criteria clarity, what gets measured, rewarded possibility of the criteria to be quantifiable, and linkage to departmental/organizational key results.
- Reliability and validity of the measurement that are being used – types of rating scales and weight to describe behavior, how sufficient and relevant they are to measure criteria.
- Details of sources involve in appraising performance – the number of sources involved and who they are, as well as their credibility in appraising performance.
- Discussion of feedback involved – types and specific contents of feedback, feedback timing, preparation and credibility of the person in-charge of doing the feedback, the extent of communication involved, feedback transparency and the presence of trust.
- Frequency of appraisal and duration of each multiple appraisals, if relevant.

Career commitment refers to one's behavior towards one's profession or vocation, where it involves one's personal attachment or identification with one's career, one's persistent willingness to maintain one's career, as well as, one's exert continuous effort in support of one's career development and goals (Blau, 1985) The constructs that have greater influence on career commitment are career identity, resilience and insight With respect to career commitment, the followings details are relevant to knowledge workers:

- Career identity - the extent of their close emotional attachment to be in their career field, how much excitement and sense of identity in their line of work (Carson & Bedeian, 1994).
- Career resilience - The level of resistance in keeping their jobs or the extent of comfort in staying within their career, regardless of career-related problems and   challenges faced (Snape & Redman, 2005).
- Career insight - is a behavioral concept that refers to one's career pathway or means of means of planning and setting developmental needs towards one's career goals   accomplishment (Knibbs & Swailes, 1993).

Turnover intention refers to an employee's perceived probability of staying or leaving an employing organization (Jenkins & Thomlinson, 1992).

Table 8. Coefficient alphas for each questionnaire construct

	Initial number of questions	Revised number of questions	Revised Cronbach's alpha
Goals	11	7	0.91
Criteria	11	7	0.84
Standard	11	6	0.78
Source	9	5	0.84
Feedback	10	5	0.95
Frequency	9	5	0.89
Career Identity	8	5	0.73
Career Resilience	8	5	0.72
Career Insight	8	5	0.81
Turnover intention	8	5	0.90

Results of reliability are shown in Table 8. Items that are excluded would not harm the reliability of existing scales. Reliability analysis is performed to reduce the number of items. Hence, a Cronbach's alpha is used to measure the internal consistency of a scale, where larger values indicate higher levels of internal consistency. Acceptance region of this coefficient alpha is at least 0.70 (Nunnally; 1978; Spector, 1992). All constructs are primary, except for turnover intention. After the elimination takes place, the initial 93 questions is reduced to 55 questions. All constructs are primary construct, except for turnover intention.

Table 9. Construct means and standard deviations

Constructs	Mean	Std Dev.
Goals	3.55	0.69
Criteria	3.60	0.63
Standard	4.68	0.58
Source	4.62	0.68
Feedback	4.34	0.84
Frequency	4.46	0.85
Career Identity	4.23	0.66
Career Resilience	4.73	1.12
Career Insight	4.69	0.83
Turnover intention	3.94	0.74

The mean scores from the questionnaire constructs are calculated from the values obtained from responses to the individual questions. The mean and standard deviations are listed in table 9.

5. Conclusion

Generally, the pilot survey results in some important findings. Most of the variables used are rated highly by the respondents. The relationship between perceived PA effectiveness and TI has been prevalent and receive much attention among academics, government and management of higher education institutions. Efforts have to be actively carried out by these institutions and governments to reduce the academics actual turnovers by giving importance to their turnover intention predictors. Close monitoring of their perceptions and the extent of their career commitment are important and need to be identified. Their competencies need to be further developed, within their respective institutions, so as to enhance the quality of education and the industry reputation, nationally and globally. The academics in this study confirm that their turnover intention is affected by both perceived effectiveness of their appraisal, as well as their levels of career commitment.

Feedback and discussion of the study has enabled the survey to be both constructive and positive. The pilot test works well from the administration of the questionnaire to data entry and data analyses. This provided the confidence to do the national survey. However, minor adjustments to the questionnaire had to be made based on some feedback. Though the presence of limitations of this pilot study is realized due to the small size, however, it is believed that the mechanics and results of future research, based on this pilot study will be of interest to academics, governments and higher education institutions in Malaysia and elsewhere. Hence, this model is expected to be adopted or adapted to their needs and purposes. Subsequently, this research will provide a foundation for the betterment of planning and managing their academics and institutions. Besides, this study will also be of interest to researchers within similar or related fields.

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