How HR attribution: well being, contributes to employees’ affective commitment.

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Abstract

The purpose of the present study was to reveal, that when the employees’ attribution of HR practices is well being, the employees will show higher levels of affective commitment. The study took place at the individual level. The sample of the study consisted of 439 employees from 71 units of 35 different private organizations in the Netherlands. A scale of Nishii, Lepak & Schneider (2008) was used to assess 5 general practices, in order to measure the employees’ perception of why these specific practices are used by the company (Cronbachs’ α= 0.778) anchored at 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree. A 3-item scale was used to assess affective commitment (Cronbachs’ α= 0.782). The scale was designed according to Allen and Meyer (1990) and Moideenkutty, Blau, Kumar and Nalakath, (2001). The respondents rated the answers from 1 representing strongly disagree to 7 representing strongly agree.

Results indicate that employees enjoy attribution well being (M=3.33, SD= 0.68), and show employees’ affective commitment (MD=4.6, SD= 1.22). Attribution well being has a positive effect on affective commitment and the coefficient of the two variables is significant (β=.330, p=.000) and remains significant after controlling for age, gender and actual commitment focused HR practices (β=.334, p=.000). Future studies can extend this study by connecting it with employees’ performance and/or the employers’ actual intentions and with a longitudinal approach find out if the relationship shows reversed causality.

Key words: Affective commitment, HR attribution, workplace well being.

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Nowadays, workplace well being in an organization is both a matter of organizational outcomes and of organizational status. Best workplaces awards are very popular corporations’ awards everybody in the human resources world is familiar with. These awards are given by the “Great place to work” institute (http://www.greatplacetowork.com/), to companies based on the results of surveys that take place in the competing organizations. The main focus of these awards is how employees are treated by their organizations. This orientation is supported by the notion “Being a great place to work, creates significant competitive advantage for an organization”. In support of that, several researches indicate, that when an organization is one of the best workplaces, this results in significant business and financial benefits as indicated by “Great place to work” institute. Microsoft, Cisco, Coca Cola, HBC and many more giant multinational companies are in the leading positions of the winning lists of the above awards every year, which suggests that big companies understand the importance of workplace well being. This is the reason why every year more and more companies are struggling to earn a position in the “best workplace” list.

Imagine the employees of a company agreeing in the phrase “I go to work every day with the best mood”. Isn’t that, or at least shouldn’t be, one of the HR goals? Human Resource Management is supposed to have both economic and social goals (Boxall & Purcell, 2003). However, an obvious gap in the related literature is that research concerning workers’ perspectives and reactions on HRM has been neglected, while focus has been given to performance outcomes (Boselie, Dietz & Boon, 2005; Boxall & Purcell, 2003; Nishii & Wright, 2008; Purcell & Kinnie, 2007). Another area that is not fully researched till now is the employees’ perception of HRM (Guest, 1999; Nishii & Wright 2008; Purcell & Kinnie, 2007).

The overall well being of a person describes someone’s overall experience in his/her life and is connected to how different persons experience their own happiness (Danna & Griffin, 1999). Workplace well-being and performance are not independent, but complimentary and dependent aspects of a workplace that is psychologically and financially healthy (Harter, Schmidt & Keyes, 2003). In this research the workplace well being, meaning the employees’ well being in the workplace, is going to be studied. This study is designed to be human centered and
aims at revealing the outcomes of the attribution of HR practices on workers’ well-being, as the concern for the health and well-being of workers is an increasingly important issue. Commonly, researches are connecting well-being with performance (Appelbaum, Bailey, Berg & Kalleberg, 2000; Boxall & Purcell, 2003; Nishii & Wright, 2008; Legge, 1995). Harter et al. (2003) support that workplace well-being is associated with higher business-unit customer loyalty, higher profitability and productivity as well as lower rates of employees’ turnover. Furthermore, employers have to provide an appealing employment offer to the possible employees, in order to achieve successful recruitment, since surveys have shown that employees today are more concerned in finding a job with greater meaning and more personal development and they have the need to see their work as an enjoyable, fulfilling and useful task for society (Avolio & Sosik, 1999; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin & Schwarz, 1997). As a result, it is more than obvious that workplace well-being, besides being an important issue on its own right, is also really important for employers and managers. Furthermore, there are indications that we should take a closer view to the employee’s perspective, perception and attributions of HRM (Nishii, Schneider & Lepak, 2008; Guest, 1999; Peccei, 2004). Furthermore we should always have in mind that there is a difference between the actual HRM practices that managers apply and the employees’ perception of these practices (Boxall & Purcell 2008; Nishii & Wright, 2008; Ostroff & Bowen, 2000; Purcell & Kinnie, 2007). Besides employees’ perception of HRM practices, employees’ attributions exist as well, which can be defined as the causal explanations that employees modulate about the HR practices (Nishii et al., 2008).

Considering a macro perspective, if performance is achieved at the cost of individuals, and more specifically of employees’ well-being, then there will not be a reason for the latter to perform better. Consequently, this study puts aside the aspect of performance and tries to get a closer look at the connection between different HR practices and employees’ well-being.

Finally, besides the fact that there is limited research concerning the effects of HR attribution: well-being, the sample that was used for this research is new target group that was never used in a similar previous research.
Workplace well-being

Workplace well-being is a broad subject that can be described, as the way that employees experience function and quality at their workplace (Warr, 1987). As well-being can appear in different areas, subdivisions were developed to help the research and the understanding of that concept. These subdivisions are health, happiness and, the most recent one, social well being. The first two are more attitudinal and the latter is more relational (Grant, Christianson & Price, 2007).

The dominant perspective is that HRM has positive outcomes not only for the organizational performance, but also for the employees’ well being. In this study the happiness subdivision of well being is going to be examined and more particularly one indicator that reveal its existence: commitment, since HR attributions have important consequences on it (Nishii et al., 2008).

According to Danna and Griffin (1999), well being may be considered as a rather subjective concept. Nevertheless, there are some commonalities that Diener (1984) used, in order to identify the dynamic surrounding the measurement of it. In this study, well being’s external criteria were identified and were used in an “ideal condition”. However, it is important to keep in mind that “ideal conditions” differ across cultures (Diener, 1984).

Happiness well being and affective commitment as an indicator, of it.

Different types of workplace well being are affected by HRM practices. The happiness aspect of well being is purely psychological, most times subjective and is related to the satisfaction that employees experience in their jobs (Grant et al., 2007). Some components of happiness well being are job satisfaction, engagement and affective commitment (van de Voorde, 2010). In this study commitment is going to be used as it was used before as an indicator of well being in some excellent studies (Riordan, Vandenberg & Richardson, 2005; van Veldhoven, 2005).

The various conceptualizations of attitudinal commitment can be summed up in three general topics: Affective attachment, connected to affective commitment,
perceived costs, connected to continuance commitment and obligation, connected to normative commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1987a). The above are related to different kinds of commitment perceptions. Affective commitment is the one that drives employees to remain in an organization, because they want to. Continuance commitment makes them stay because they need to and normative commitment because they have the feeling they ought to stay. Some employees might feel the need and the obligation to stay in an organization even if they do not want to or vice versa. What keeps the employees committed to an organization is the “net sum” of these psychological states (Allen & Meyer, 1990).

This study is going to focus on affective commitment. This is because when employees stay in the position because they want to, they take a step closer to well being (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch & Topolnytsky, 2002; Shore & Wayne, 1993), this probably happens as when someone does what he/she wants, feels happier. An additional reason is that commitment is an important employee attribution that is not yet fully examined (Meyer & Allen, 1997; Ostroff & Bowen, 2000). Research has shown that affectively committed employees are more satisfied with their jobs and as a result, they have lower rates of tardiness and absenteeism, higher performance and they assist others more (Meyer et al., 2002; Shore & Wayne, 1993). Employees with higher levels of affective commitment have more possibilities of getting a promotion and climbing to managerial positions (Shore et al., 1995). Finally the link between affective commitment and well being is consistent and positive, rather than the one between continuance commitment and well being which some research have shown that may have positive connection but most of it shows generally negative correlation between the concepts (Meyer, & Maltin, 2010).

HR Attributions and its distinction between exploitation and well being attributions:

But how do the employees experience the employers’ goal, whatever that may be? This study is built on HR attributions as introduced by Nishii et al., (2008). In their study the researchers support the notion that employees make attributions about the reason why HR practices exist, and then they behave accordingly. The
same authors define HR attributions as causal explanations that employees make regarding management’s motivation, for using particular HR practices. In other words, the understanding of why employers use the HR practices that are using.

Nishii et al., (2008) made a distinction between HR attributions with expected positive relation to employees’ attitudes (i.e., the attributions that HR practices are designed due to management’s intention to enhance service quality and employee well-being) and those expected to have negative relation to employee’s attitudes (i.e., the attributions that HR practices are designed due to management’s interest in cost reduction and exploiting employees). This distinction suggests, on the one side, that employees’ attribution of cost-control HR practices is exploitation philosophy and that is something that could lead to employees’ strain (Legge, 1995) , and on the other side, that commitment focused practices are perceived as contribution to employees’ well being as they contribute to affective commitment of the employee (Shore & Wayne, 1993).

Research Hypothesis :

Once the managers choose to implement HR practices that point out their concern about workplace well-being, employees will feel more committed to their organization than they would if their managers would care less (Eisenberger, Mangel, & Circ, 1990; Shore & Wayne, 1993). From the above we assume employees’ attribution that the HR practices are focusing on well being, will lead to higher affective commitment.

Methodology

This is a cross sectional study as the data for both dependent and independent variables were gathered at one point at a time. A quantitative research was used to collect and analyze the data. Data collection and data analysis took place at the individual level.
Population and sample:

This study took place at the individual level. Data were gathered from 71 units of 35 different private organizations in the Netherlands. All of the organizations were service intensive, mostly from the bank and the consultancy sectors. In order to gather the necessary data the researchers prepared a letter describing the research and send it to different service intensive organizations to which they had a contact. In continuance they had a face to face appointment with managers of the organizations that responded positively in order to provide the organization with more details about the research and organize the data gathering. When the organizations agreed and provided that time schedule in which the researchers had the chance to conduct the research. The questionnaires were distributed to the employees in hard copies and when these were filled, were gathered by the researchers who created the database with the answers. The total amount of questionnaires was 510. 439 of them were filled in by employees and 71 of them by managers. From the employees sample 49,6% were men and 50,4 % women. The average of organizational tenure was 10,1 year. The average age was 38.6 years.

Control Variables:

As Paauwe and Richardson (1997) propose in their model of HRQ/TQM, the relation between performance, age and gender can affect HRM outcomes at the individual level. As a result age and gender are used as control variables in this research. More specifically, gender was identified by asking the sample to indicate if they were male or female. For analysis purposes the gender variable was transformed to a dummy variable with 0 being the man (reference group) and 1 the woman. To identify the age, a question asking how many years old each person was, was used.
Measures:

HR Attributions:

Five general HR practices were used (Nishii, Lepak & Schneider, 2008) with five questions in each scale, to measure the employees’ perception of why these specific practices are used by the company. The five general questions that were referring to the practices are: My unit evaluates the performance of the employees the way it does; My unit provides the employees with the current possibilities for communication and participation; My unit rewards the employees the way it does; My unit recruits and selects the employees the way it does; This unit provides the employees with the training that it does.

For the attribution of well being the five questions of the scale where extended with: … so that employees will feel valued and respected (Cronbachs’ $\alpha = 0.778$) anchored at 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Affective commitment:

Affective commitment scales were designed according to Allen and Meyer (1990) and Moideenkutty, Blau, Kumar and Nalakath, (2001) and were measured in the employees’ questionnaire. A 3 item scale was used. The response system ranged from 1 representing strongly disagree to 7 representing strongly agree.

Statistical Analysis

In order to create the scales used to interpret the answers for HR Attribution: well being and affective commitment, the researchers summed up the results of question in each scale and then divided the sum with the questions number, hence getting the mean score of the questions that corresponded to the scale. For the age the actual declared number was used and as for the gender scale a dummy variable was used converting the results to 0(man) and 1(woman). The validity was checked with a factor analysis method. Cronbach’s alpha was used to check the reliability of each and every one of the (sub) scales in the model. Univariate and bivariate analyses were conducted, in order to describe the variables and check the existence of
correlations. Simple and multiple regressions were used to reveal the significance of the relationships between the variables and the effect of the control variables on these relationships. Affective commitment was the dependent variable, HR attribution: well being was the independent variable and age, gender was the control variables.

Results

Starting with the results’ description, some descriptive statistics will be presented. The Mean (M) levels and the Standard Deviation (SD), as well as Pearson correlations, are shown, the results of which are demonstrated in Table 1.

As it can be seen in Table 1 the affective commitment variable has a mean of 4.6, on a 7 point scale, which means that most employees feel affectively committed to their organizations, as the results score above average.

HR attribution well being scored close to the average, on a 5 point scale. This reveals that most of the examined population feels quite neutral about the concept.

From table 1 it is noticeable that on one hand the first two control variables gender and age have a significant positive correlation only with affective commitment. The correlation between age and affective commitment is positive which means that the higher the age the higher the affective commitment and with gender negatively connected, meaning that females are more affectively committed to an organization than males, as the variable was coded with 0 for men and 1 for women.

The most fascinating observation though, is that perceived control and commitment practices are significantly and positively correlated, which means that the higher the perception of control HR practices the higher the perception of commitment practices.

All the above findings are going to be further elaborated in the regression analysis and discussion part of the paper.
Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Reports of Attribution Well Being, Affective Commitment, Gender, Age. Means (M), Standard deviations (SD) and Pearson Correlations (N=510)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Cronbach’s α</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Attribution well being</td>
<td>0.778</td>
<td>3.3304</td>
<td>0.67549</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Affective commitment</td>
<td>0.782</td>
<td>4.6018</td>
<td>1.22061</td>
<td>.333**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Gender (female)</td>
<td>0.4969</td>
<td>0.50050</td>
<td>0.025</td>
<td>-.172**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Age</td>
<td>38.6208</td>
<td>15.70826</td>
<td>0.002</td>
<td>.147**</td>
<td>-.215**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05.  **p < .01 (Attribution well being were measured on a scale ranging from 1 to 5, Affective commitment was measured on a scale ranging from 1 to 7, Gender was measured by male (0) female (1), Age was a continuous scale).

For testing the effect that attribution well being has on affective commitment a simple regression analysis was conducted that resulted with the following outcomes:

Table 2: Results regression Analysis: Standardized Regression Coefficients, Variance explanation, Corresponding F Values. Model 1 significance of Independent Variable, Model 2 significance of Independent variable after Controlling for age, Gender.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HR attribution well being</td>
<td>.330</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.023</td>
<td>.592</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DGender (f)</td>
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| R²                           | .109    | .14     |
| F                            | 59.70   | 26.63   |
| R² change                    | .109    | .032    |
| F change                     | 59.706  | 9.110   |
From the latter table is shown that Attribution well being has a positive effect on affective commitment and the coefficient of the two variables is significant ($\beta=.330$, $p=.000$) and remains significant after controlling for age, gender and actual commitment focused HR practices ($\beta=.334$, $p=.000$). Furthermore model two is demonstrating that on one hand age didn’t have a significant positive effect ($\beta=.023$, $p=.592$) and on the other hand gender had a negative significant effect ($\beta=-.176$, $p=.000$) on affective commitment which means that men are more affectively committed to the organization, as men are coded with 0, as a dummy variable, which means that if the effect is negative the dependent variable is mostly explained by the 0 variable.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Employees’ HR attribution: well being, will lead to higher levels of affective commitment, as derives from the confirmation of the hypothesis. It is common sense that every employee would like to work in a company that provides an environment that enhances well being, a fact that is also supported by the researches of the “Great place to work“. That means that employees who are already occupied in an environment like that, would not want to leave. Moreover, as affective commitment is an indicator of happiness well being, we can see that that if the employees think that the reason that their employers are choosing the HR practices they do, is to promote employees’ well being then the workplace well being is actually enhanced. The latter is in accordance with the research that have taken place up until now and suggests that well being and affective commitment are positively correlated (Meyer & Maltyn, 2010; Nishii et. al, 2008; Shore & Wayne, 1993). Furthermore in the work of Meyer and Maltyn (2010), we may see that there are some studies that suggest a positive correlation between continuance commitment and well being, however most if the studies suggest that the correlation between continuance commitment and well being is mostly negative. Additionally we saw that women are enjoying higher affective commitment to an organization. This could be explained either by the common notion that women are more sentimental, thus they get more affectively committed or that they need more stability is their life as they grow up and they have
to have the double part of a mother and an employee. This could be supported by the results of Scandura & Lankau (1997) that support that the women experience greater organizational commitment when the job environment is supportive to their family needs. However there are other studies that suggest that men are more committed to the organizations they are employed, like the one from Mardsen, Kalleberg and Cook (1993), meaning that it is a connection that should be studied further.

As this study is cross sectional and thus did not show how the employees' attribution of the perceived HR practices could change during some years' period or if there is a reversed causality in the relationships. Therefore, future studies with a longitudinal design, may be able to study both how the perceived HR practices affect employees as time passes, as well as the possibility of a reversed causality. Furthermore attention should be given in the design of this research, which was conducted at the individual level. This means that everything was measured from employees' point of view. But do the perceived HR practices, match the actual? There are several researches that indicate the importance of distinguishing between actual and perceived HR practices (Boxall & Purcell, 2003; Nishii & Wright, 2008; Ostroff & Bowen, 2000; Purcell & Kinnie, 2007) but the most proper way to see how these two differ is by conducting a multilevel research. So if researchers are interested in acquiring a more extended view of the concept by using also actual HR practices, a multilevel data collection and analysis should be designed. Another important limitation is that both health and happiness well being were measured with only one indicator each. Both of these aspects of well being have several indicators that can be used for their measurement such as workload, work intensification, emotional exhaustion for health and job satisfaction and engagement for happiness (van de Voorde, 2010). Finally future researches should include more predictors of affective commitment as control variables such as wage, tenure, job position etc. (Scandura & Lankau ,1997; Mardsen, Kalleberg and Cook, 1993))

As mentioned in the introduction part of this paper, employees' well being is really important for organizations as it is associated with higher profitability and productivity as well as with lower employees' turnover (Harter et al., 2003 ). So, as derived from this research, enhancing employee’s perception that the organization is using
commitment HR practices, is going to lead to employee’s well being and thus to better outcomes for the organization. Furthermore, affective commitment in specific is a crucial aspect for organizations and finding out ways of fostering it is really important (Meyer & Allen, 1987a). From this research is derived the conclusion that enhancing employees’ well being attribution and employees’ perception of commitment focused HR practices can help in the latter.

Finally should be noted that even if human resource management has both economic and social goals (Boxall & Purcell, 2003), the researches till now, have focused more on the economic outcomes of HRM, while the limited research on the social goals is still connected to performance. Since the first word of the concept is human, shouldn’t research have paid more attention to employees, which are the humans who experience the management? As Peccei (2004) suggests, employees’ well being is an outcome of its own right, and does not have to lead to something else. So in this study attention was given to how employees attribute HR practices and how this affects their well being. The results of this research reveal that management understands the importance of employees’ well being in the organizations, and even if their goal is better performance, they probably realize that they can easier succeed that, when their employees feel good about what they are doing and when they are doing it. This research, although limited in some ways, provided some future research recommendations that could be used to acquire a more complete picture of employees’ well being.
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