FACTORS DETERMINING HUMAN PERFORMANCE AT WORK: STUDENTS’ VIEWPOINT

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper reveals students’ attitudes to human performance in organization. The paper reports the findings of a study of 236 university students from 3 different universities in Lithuania and Estonia.

Methodology: The research design is based on Blanchard and Thacker’s (2004) Human Performance model, which includes three main factors as i) Motivation, ii) Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes (KSA), and iii) Environment.

Findings: Speaking about motivation, the results of the survey showed that students basically are motivated by satisfaction of safety needs. It should be noted that salary and prestige is more important for younger than older students. Students’ personal health, country’s economic situation and support of their family are the main factors of environment, influencing their career. Moreover, survey depicted some statistical differences between knowledge and skills according to gender and different specialties.

Research limitations: First of all it was too small sample of students from Estonia (only 34) in order to speak about differences between students studying in Lithuania and Estonia. Next, it is not enough samples of respondents from different universities to try to look throw differences among them.

Value: It was original research provided among students, trying to find out their values for future performance in organizations. The results of the survey can be useful for professors to improve students’ viewpoint for human performance at work and for employers to understand better new employees coming from universities.

Keywords: Students, Performance, Motivation, KSA, Environment.

Paper type: Research paper.

Introduction

Knowledge and skills of future employees should be constantly developed and to understand the importance of lifelong learning in order to be in line with changes, information flow, and new technologies (Kumpikaite, 2008). Learning, both institutional and individual, and the ensuing corporate changes are seen as a prerequisite for the success and survival of organizations (Alas, 2007).

Professors in the entire world deal with students who do not care or who do not want to work every day. Motivation of students is a field of interest for researches. As the phenomenon of disengagement is becoming more prevalent, researchers are focusing their studies on the concept of motivating reluctant learners (e.g., Brophy, 1998; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Lumsden, 1994). Sometimes it happens that students study only because their parents want them to do this or only because students know that they will be able to get better work after graduation of university. While some students work and achieve regardless of external pressures or concerns, others actively resist all outreach efforts or passively slip through the cracks into anonymity (Daniels and Arapostathis, 2005).

University students will become employees in organizations. Professors try to give them the best knowledge and to teach them to be good specialists for the future (Kumpikaite and Alas, 2009). However, they, as it was mentioned earlier, deal with the problem that students do not want to learn, to work every day and to get more knowledge. Necessity to have good work performers in complicated economic situation and question how to motivate and prepare them in the best way gave an idea to explore students’ attitudes to their studies and work. The aim of the study was to determinate students’ viewpoint to human performance in organization according to
group of factors using Blanchard and Thacker (2004) model. Lithuania and Estonia were taken as purpose countries because authors of this paper work in these countries and deal with described problems.

Looking what is done in this field of interest, it could be mentioned that questions of employees’ skill development, their competence advantages were researched by Kazlauskaite and Buciuniene (2008), Zakarevičius and Zuperkiene (2008), Kumpikaite (2007 and 2008), Kumpikaite and Ciarniene (2008a, b), Alas (2007), Savaneviciene et al. (2008) and others recently in Lithuania and Estonia. Bye et al. (2007), Debnat at al. (2007), Ruban et al (2003) and Griffin et al (2008) explored motives of students at the different levels. However questions of students’ as future performers’ motivation and environment influencing studies and work are still not analyzed deeper in Lithuania and Estonia.

The structure of this study is as follows. The first part describes human performance in organization, determining its main factors. Subsections of this part introduce every of these factors (motivation, knowledge, skills and attitudes, and environment) deeper. In the second part method and sample of the survey is introduced. The third part shows the results of the survey including subsections according to every analyzed factor. Conclusions of the paper are represented after this. And finally further research proposal is given at the end of this paper.

**Human performance in organization**

Growing importance of globalization of knowledge and information technologies make us to understand the importance of lifelong learning, modern technologies, and knowledge spread (Kumpikaite and Alas, 2009). These changes with a resultant accessible diversity of cultural and moral choices enabling growing individual autonomy, leads to what sociologists call a “detraditionalization” of social life (Hake, 1999).

Periods of learning, work, unemployment, care giving, or resting have spread throughout the course of life in recurrent cycles, sometimes resulting in a challenging combination of tasks for individuals when different life stages overlap (Glastra et al., 2004; Hake, 1999). Keeping pace demands an active engagement in knowledge and competence acquisition at each transition in the life course, such that lifelong learning has been defined as a necessary condition of survival in the 21st century (Glastra et al., 2004).

Employees’ job performance, employees’ behavior in general, is a function of what they know, what they are able to do and what they believe. Figure 1 depicts a general performance model (Blanchard and Thacker, 2004). This model indicates that a person’s performance depends on the interaction of motivation, their knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSA), and environment. If people do not have the KSASs, they cannot perform. Motivation arises from people needs their beliefs about how best to satisfy those needs. Both motivation and KSAs are part of person’s memory and thinking and thinking systems. Environment refers to the physical surroundings in which performance must occur, including barriers and aids to performance, as well as objects and events that people might see as indicating that employees’ performance will be rewarded or punished.

**Figure 1. Factors Determining Human Performance (Blanchard and Thacker, 2004)**

![Performance Model](image)

Each of the factors M, KSA, and E in Figure 1 can influence performance, but it is the combination of these factors that determines the person’s performance. It helps us to understand whether poor job performance is due
to KSAs or other factors. The likelihood of engaging in any activity, then, is limited by the weakest factor. For instance, no matter how knowledgeable or skilled a person is, if he is not motivated to perform the activity – or worse, is motivated not to perform it – then he will not. The model in the figure is important for determining employee’s training needs. It is also important in the design of training. When putting together the learning modules and training methods, the trainer must consider how they will affect the trainees’ motivation to learn. A deeper understanding of the three determinants of performance will increase ability to design and implement effective studies programs.

Motivation

Most of the scientific literature defines motivation as the direction, persistence, and amount of effort expended by an individual to achieve a specified outcome. In other words, the following aspects reflect the person’s motivation:

- What need(s) the person is trying to satisfy?
- The type of activity the person does not satisfy the need.
- How long the person keeps doing it.
- How hard the person works at it.

In 1943 Abraham Maslow, one of the founding fathers of humanist approaches to management, wrote an influential paper that set out five fundamental human needs and their hierarchical nature. They are quoted and taught so widely now that many people perceive this model as the definitive set of needs and do not look further. Maslow (1967) suggested these five main needs:

- **Physiological needs** are to do with the maintenance of the human body. If we are unwell, then little else matters until we recover.
- **Safety needs** are about putting a roof over our heads and keeping us from harm. If we are rich, strong and powerful, or have good friends, we can make ourselves safe.
- **Social (belonging) needs** introduce our tribal nature. If we are helpful and kind to others they will want us as friends.
- **Esteem needs** are for a higher position within a group. If people respect us, we have greater power.
- **Self-actualization needs** are to 'become what we are capable of becoming', which would our greatest achievement.

Physiological and safety needs were described as lower-order needs; and social, esteem and self actualization needs were described as higher-order needs.

Knowledge, skills and attitudes

Training refers to a planned effort by a company to facilitate employees’ learning of job-related competencies. These competencies include knowledge, skills, or behaviors that are critical for successful job performance. The goal of training is for employees to master the knowledge, skill, and behaviors emphasized in training programs and to apply them to their day-to-day activities.

What types of skills will students need to their job? Since they are university students; we could mind that they will be specialists and lower-level or middle managers. Research by Katz (1974) found that managers need three essential skills or competencies: technical, human (interpersonal) and conceptual.

- **Technical skills** include knowledge of proficiency in a certain specialized field, such as engineering, computers, finance or manufacturing. Katz proposed that technical skills become less important as manager moves into higher levels of management, but even top managers need some proficiency in the organization’s specialty.
• **Human or interpersonal skills** represent the ability to work well with and understand others, to build cooperative effort within a team, to motivate, to work in group and to manage conflicts. These skills are important for managers at all levels. Because managers deal directly with people, interpersonal skills are crucial.

• **Conceptual skills.** Performers must also have the ability to conceptualize and to think about abstract situations. Managers must be able to see the organization as the whole and understand the relationships among various subunits and to visualize how the organization fits into its broader environment.

In today’s demanding and dynamic workplace, employees who wish to be invaluable to an organization must be willing to upgrade their skills constantly and to take on extra work outside their own specific job area.

**Environment**

In modernist organization theories, the organizational environment is conceptualized as an entity that lies outside the boundary of the organization, providing the organization with raw materials and other resources (inputs) and absorbing its products and services (outputs) (Hatch and Cunliffe, 2006).

We can divide environment to internal and external. Speaking about universities’ students their internal environment could be everything at university. It would be based on university’s culture, programs, learning methods and on professors’ abilities to provide knowledge for students.

**The external environment** refers to forces and institutions outside of the organization that potentially can affect the organization’s performance. The external environment is made up of two components, the specific environment and the general environment.

**The specific environment** includes those constituencies that have a direct and immediate impact of students’ preparation for work. It is personal health and abilities to study and work, families support.

Overall academic performance does not appear to be adversely affected by the substantial increase in the number of undergraduate students who work for remuneration either part-time or full-time while attending university (Sales et al., 2001). However, the rhythm of study is changed, usually through a need for time extensions to meet the requirements for program completion. In Canadian universities during the 1990s, fewer than half the students in their 3rd year of a bachelor’s program followed a linear and continuous academic path in their postsecondary education programs (Sales et al., 2001). Such situation influences students’ preparation for future performance.

**The general environment** includes the broad economic, political/legal, socio-cultural, demographic, technological and global conditions that may affect their studies and future job.

**Method and sample of survey**

It was decided to use Blanchard and Thacker (2004) model, which was provided in Figure 1 for this research. Structured questionnaire was prepared for the study. Questions about motives for study and work, students’ knowledge and skills evaluation and factors of preparation for work were in the questionnaire. Sample of the research was 236 students from 3 different universities in Lithuania and Estonia. 202 students were from Kaunas University of Technology and from University of Management and Economics in Kaunas, Lithuania. 34 students were from Estonian Business School in Tallinn. 9 respondents study Personnel Management and 88 Economics at Faculty of Economics and Management and 63 students - Information Technologies at Faculty of Informatics and 13 students study Export Transportation at International Study Centre at Kaunas University of Technology. 28 respondents studied Business and Administration at the 1st course at University of Management and Economics, Kaunas, Lithuania. 34 students studying Business and Administration from Estonian Business School in Estonia participated in the survey too.

55.3 percent of all respondents were males and 44.7 percent – females. Information about age groups is provided in Table 1.
Table 1. Respondents’ Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>20.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>75.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>235</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

60.4 percent of respondents study because they want to receive a diploma, 70 percent want to get specialty, 69.6 percent want to get more knowledge, 28.3 percent study because they like it and 6.5 percent answered that their parents wanted them to do this.

Interpretation of results

Motives for work

Safety, social and higher needs were evaluated in this research. According to results, we can state (see Table 2) that safety needs, especially salary and work conditions, are the most important for respondents. But it should be mentioned that for 87.5 percent of respondents’ possibilities to be promoted are very important too.

Table 2. Respondents’ needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Needs</th>
<th>Safety needs</th>
<th>Social needs</th>
<th>Higher needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>Salary</td>
<td>Work conditions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluation, %</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>47.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>25.2</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little important</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quit unimportant</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significant statistical different was found between different specialties. Needs of safety are more important for students studying economics than for students studying business and management.

During this research it was tried to explore some basic students’ attitudes to work providing them 4 propositions (see Figure 2).
Figure 2. Students’ attitudes to work, in percent

Looking at these results we can see that 79.20 percent of respondents agreed that any work should not make troubles for their normal life and 75.77 percent of them agreed that they want to perform the work nominated for them as better as possible, despite their received salary. This question was connected with the next one, trying to explore if students see work as business. 60.09 percent of respondents agreed with this proposition that they see work as business: the more they are paid the better they work and vice versa. These answers show some variance between them. However using Spearmen correlation analysis, it was found statistical significant negative dependents (-0.381 at the 0.05 level) between these answers. It shows that respondents are motivated by money. They work better if they are paid better and look at work as a business.

Quite negative aspect was found from these questions too. More than a half of respondents (58.93 percent) would not work if they could. Spearmen’s correlation coefficient is 0.202 (at the 0.01 level) in this case. This shows significant linear dependence and shows that part of respondents work only because to survive and do not have for work higher needs.

Skills

Table 3 shows results how students evaluated their skills. The highest evaluations are for interpersonal skills as communicability (very good and good 42.53 percent) and ability to contact (very good 41.36 and good 41.36 percent). Looking at personal skills it is important to mention that even 62.73 percent of respondents evaluated themselves as having very good responsibility sense. The lowest evaluations are for technical skills.
Table 3. Evaluation of students’ skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Technical skills</th>
<th>Interpersonal skills</th>
<th>Conceptual skills</th>
<th>Personal skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation, %</td>
<td>Subject knowledge</td>
<td>Specialty experience</td>
<td>Application experience</td>
<td>Self-presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>17.27</td>
<td>13.24</td>
<td>8.60</td>
<td>27.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>50.45</td>
<td>25.11</td>
<td>30.32</td>
<td>50.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>29.55</td>
<td>38.36</td>
<td>37.10</td>
<td>18.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>23.29</td>
<td>23.98</td>
<td>3.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analyzing data in detail, it was found statistical significant difference between genders. Results showed that female assess their skills higher than men. Figure 3 shows how students evaluate their skills according their gender. Males evaluate their technical and conceptual skills better than females and females evaluate their interpersonal and personal skills better than males. Exceptions are only among self-reliance and criticism tolerance, which evaluation is higher among males. It shows that boys believe more in themselves as girls and they tolerate criticism better. Looking at means of results we see that the lowest assessment is for application and specialty experience, and criticism tolerance.

Figure 3. Males’ and females’ attitudes to work, means
Looking for statistical difference among different specialties of students according to skills some significant differences were found (see Table 4). Students studying economics evaluated their technical, interpersonal and personal skills better than students studying export transportation and business and management. And students, studying information technologies evaluated the same skills better than students studying export transportation.

Table 4. Groups of specialties evaluating skills different

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specialty</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Specialty</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Specialty</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>Information Technologies</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>38.8</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Export Transportation</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>Export Transportation</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Business and Management</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>96</td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>134</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.003</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Professors working with students should pay attention to these results, trying not to criticize students a lot and to improve their technical skills especially in application and specialty experience.

Also students were asked to select five mostly training factors. Looking at results of factors (see Figure 4) motivating students, we see that the most motivating factor is project performing and teamwork.

Figure 4. Factors, motivating students, in percent

Even 67.80 percent of respondents are motivated working in project performing and 67.37 percent are motivated by teamwork. Development courses (52.54 percent) are on the third place and special tasks (50.85 percent) are on the fourth place. Observation, what others do is on the fifth place. But less than a half of students (41.53 percent) told that they are training by this factor. The last factors are distance learning (14.83 percent of positive answers) and watching of training program (18.64 percent of positive answers). Probably the reason of this is that the most of students never had such kind of training. Instructions of others (22.88 percent of positive answers) and reading handbooks (29.55 percent of positive answers) are also not very popular factors. It means that teachers should look for other more popular and more modern training means. Such means could be
technology-based learning, as and distance education, e-learning and other means of computer based learning (Kumpikaite and Ciarniene, 2008b).

Environment

We did not explored internal universities’ environment in this research. Survey paid on prior on direct or personal factors and external environment. Results show that at students’ mind their personal health is the most important factor, influencing their career (82.2 percent). Economic situation is the second most important factor (72.03 percent of positive answers). Started economical crisis can influence students’ decision and preparation for performing very much. As well, students state that their families’ support is very important factor (64.41 percent) for their career too (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5.** Factors, influencing the implementation of students job goal, in percent

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal health</td>
<td>82.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family/parents</td>
<td>66.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governmental educational policy</td>
<td>32.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governmental foreign policy</td>
<td>40.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political situation of country</td>
<td>42.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic situation of country</td>
<td>72.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

In order to become good performance in future, students should understand the influence of globalization, rapidly changing our life, environment and organizations. Students should be motivated to improve their knowledge at skills at university and in all their life as lifelong learning process in order to be successful employees.

Both countries Lithuania and Estonia are small, their history, environment conditions and economical situation is similar. They do not have any big natural resources. Therefore they should pay the biggest attention to their main resource and its development. And this is human resources and their skills.

An employee’s performance is a function of the motivation, knowledge, skills, attitudes and the environment. Empirical research was provided in Lithuania and Estonia in order to find out their motives for work, skills and outside environment.

The following main conclusions about students’ attitudes were made from the current research. No statistical difference was found among answers of respondents according students’ age and country of studies. But research showed that there were some differences according to sex and specialty. Survey depicted that men evaluated their technical and conceptual skills better than women. But it should be mentioned that females expressed their skills more optimistic than men.

To conclude, we can say that students basically are motivated by satisfaction of safety needs, the main factors, influencing their career they keep their personal health, country’s economic situation and support of their
family. It is interesting that salary and prestige is more important for younger than older students. Presumptive, that these students seek financial independence from their families and parents more than older ones.

It looks like students do not imagine themselves as future performers in an organization. Therefore it would be useful to improve their view of work in organization, to develop their skills and understanding that educated and with good skills employees are needed and should be successful in organizations.

In order to achieve sustainable development and to keep organizations in competition, Estonian and Lithuanian students need skills different from those taught during Soviet regime and during early stages of transition. Based on the results of other study (Alas and Edwards, 2007), the following paradigm shift is suggested for those involved in management education in Estonia: the teaching of management and teaching teachers of management in Estonia should emphasize the development of social skills instead of focusing on technical systems. We could foresee that similar situation is in Lithuania too. Results of our research showed that students evaluated their social skills the best. So situation is changing to the better side according to nowadays requirements. But risk that not enough technical and conceptual skills will be developed appears in this case. So it is important not to forget all three types (technical, conceptual and interpersonal (social)) skills are necessary and important for employees, especially for specialists and managers.

Teachers, trying to develop better all skills should look at the most motivating factors and to use modern computer based training methods (Kumpikaite and Ciarniene, 2008a, b). They should involve students to different projects, working in groups and providing special tasks for them. Distance learning, educational computer or media based programs; Internet and other means could be used for this purpose.

Further research proposal

Authors have a plan is to increase sample of Estonian students. It would let to explore if differences appear among students studying in Lithuania and in Estonia.

Also it would be interesting to make survey for students when they study at the 1st course and to repeat the research with the same students when they are at the 4th course. It would give possibility to see if differences appear in their answers and to look how students’ opinion changes in years when they are getting older.

Continuous research would let to investigate how the main position and opinion of students changes in time. It would show if the same motives stay in nowadays and 5-10 later.

References


Biographical notes:

**Ruth Alas** is Professor, Vice rector of Estonian Business School. She has written more than 100 articles and 10 textbooks. Her recent monograph is about organizational changes and learning in Estonian companies. She has published in Human Research Development International, Journal for East European Management Studies, Trames and others. Her research is focusing on communicating change, employee learning abilities and organizational learning.

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