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Applying Psychology to Understand and Enhance Workplace Productivity

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ABSTRACT: Work psychology undertakes the analysis of human functioning and behaviour at both the individual and organizational levels. With the pandemic, people's productivity has been affected due to the different work settings as well as drastic changes in the external environment. The research literature also found mixed trends in workplace productivity during the pandemic. Hence, there was a need felt to understand the psychological factors which affect workplace productivity thereby applying psychology to enhance productivity as well. Therefore, the present paper aimed to understand the application of psychology in enhancing workplace productivity. To fulfil the aim, secondary sources like reports, research papers, newspaper and magazine articles were reviewed to obtain the results. The discussion presents the application of psychology in effecting workplace productivity in two broad domains of affective and cognitive aspects. Following which the broaden and build framework as well as the ecological framework have been discussed to understand the interaction and intersection of the affective and cognitive domains. The paper concludes by acknowledging that this is not an exhaustive list of psychological factors which affect productivity and makes certain suggestions for future research.

KEYWORDS: work psychology, employee productivity, motivation, efficiency, functioning

I. INTRODUCTION

In the broadest and simplest sense, psychology is the scientific study of human behaviour in diverse settings. Taking into account, people's affective, cognitive, and conative capacities, the subject of psychology paints a holistic picture of an individual which makes visible their strengths, limitations, restrictions, as well as their wellbeing, thinking capacity, and other significant social-adaptive functioning capabilities. The application of psychology in the context of work has made possible the study of a variety of factors that contribute to understanding motivation, satisfaction, engagement, productivity, wellbeing, as well as training and prevention of accidents in organizational and industrial settings. Various concepts and theories have been put forward for the understanding of human behaviour in the context of the workplace which has allowed the opportunity of application of certain psychological principles for achieving maximum efficiency and productivity. Work psychology is defined as the individual and organizational level of analysis through the lens of psychology (Arnold et al., 2005). The areas enlisted by the British Psychological Society (1986) register of the Division of Occupational Psychology members show the roles played by work psychologists as researchers, trainers, and consultants in various organizational settings include selection and assessment, training, performance appraisal, organizational change, and development, ergonomics and equipment design, career choice, development, and counselling, interpersonal skills, equal opportunities, occupational safety and health, work design, attitude surveys, wellbeing, and work.

Any inquiry and exploration must be contextualized in the present time where it has been conducted. This paper which aims to delineate the application of psychology for the enhancement of work productivity is being undertaken when the world is still grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic. We are past the second wave; however, scientists have warned that a third wave might be knocking on the Indian doors. In this context, it is important to note that although organized shifted their operations to a work-from-home setup, the productivity of employees was not compromised. However, research has pointed out mixed results of employee productivity during the pandemic (Bao et al., 2021; Farooq & Sultana, 2021; Kaushik & Guleria, 2020; Prasad et al., 2020). Therefore, it becomes necessary to explore the psychological factors which influence workplace productivity to understand these mixed trends.



II. AIM AND METHOD

The aim of the present paper is to understand the application of psychology in enhancing workplace productivity. To fulfil the aim, secondary sources like reports, research papers, newspaper and magazine articles were reviewed to obtain the results.

Applications of Psychology in Enhancing Productivity

Psychology is a vast subject and exploration of its principles, concepts, and theories to enhance work productivity is not an easy task. Hence, for the sake of brevity, the application of psychology in enhancing work productivity would be discussed under two broad headings of the affective domain and cognitive domain. Moreover, it must be understood that looking at affective and cognitive domains in isolation is not the intention of this paper, rather it is to build an understanding of the intersection and interaction of these domains by their relative discussion. Additionally, it also needs to be emphasized that since these domains interact to produce human functioning (Kiviniemi et al., 2017; Yolles & Fink, 2021), interventions designed to address any one of the domains would automatically have an influence on the other domain of functioning as well.

Affective Domain

Under the affective domain, the discussion shall be focused upon the moods, feelings, and emotions of the individual. To understand, people's moods, feelings, and emotions we shall narrow down our lens to examine personality traits, workplace stress, as well as mental health of employees which colour their feelings and emotions thereby having an influence on worker's productivity.

Personality traits: The role of personality in the context of organizational life has been discussed extensively through which we have come to the understanding that personality has direct and indirect associations with employee and workplace productivity (George, 1992). For instance, Cubel et al. (2016) through a controlled laboratory setup found the relationship of big five personality traits with work productivity reporting that neuroticism decreased productivity whereas participants posing the trait of conscientiousness performed better.

Similarly, Harris & Fleming (2017) also noted that conscientiousness had a consistent effect on productivity propensity. Using a large sample of 1050 working adults, through hierarchical multiple regression analysis, Akhtar et al. (2014) found openness to experience, extraversion, and conscientiousness as predictors of employee engagement and mentioned that employee engagement has a significant role to play in employee productivity. According to these shreds of evidence, it can be understood that personality traits have an impact on workplace productivity, whereas, it is also known that the personality of an individual cannot be changed. Hence, to achieve maximum productivity, organizations can either undertake personality assessments before hiring employees, or they can put employees in conducive conditions and supportive environments to help them achieve maximum efficiency.

Workplace stress: Conducive conditions and supportive organizational climate is achieved by the reduction of workplace stress. Colligan & Higgins (2006) defined workplace stress as the change in one's mental or physical state in responding to workplaces where there is an appraised challenge or threat to the employee. In their paper, they also reviewed certain factors which induce workplace stress. Some of the factors include a toxic work environment, negative workload, isolation, types of hours worked, role conflict, role ambiguity, lack of autonomy, career development barriers, difficult relationships with administrators and/ or coworkers, managerial bullying, harassment, and organizational climate. In case the stress continues, it leads to a decrease in productivity and more absenteeism. Nevertheless, there also exist certain psychological interventions which can be introduced to combat workplace stress. Some of these interventions include effective leadership and managerial styles, the building of motivating climates at the workplace, development of staff morale, positive relationship building at work (Martin, 2005).

Mental Health: Poor mental health is known to reduce workplace productivity levels (Paton, 2009) because poor mental health manifests itself through a wide variety of emotional, psychological, and cognitive symptoms which leads to a decrease in cognitive resources to engage in productive work as well as low energy, and fatigued conditions. Moreover, mental health conditions at the workplace have been noted to be quite prevalent (Dewa et al., 2004; Gabriel & Liimatainen, 2000). Bubonya et al. (2017) found that absent rates were five percent higher in workers who reported poor mental health suggesting that poor mental health might have a direct and significant impact on work productivity. Similarly, a literature review by Burton et al. (2008) revealed that mental health conditions were strongly associated with absenteeism and that depression impacted presenteeism i.e., on-the-job productivity. Lim et al. (2000) also noted that work impairment was predicted by depression, generalized anxiety disorder, and personality disorders. It is needless to mention here that since mental health issues pose significant problems for workplaces, organizations should be encouraged at both the local and policy-level to implement programs for the wellbeing of their employees. Providing counselling services, and including mental health insurance in the employment contracts could be some beginning interventions for the protection and promotion of mental health at the workplace to ensure efficiency and productivity.



Cognitive Domain

The cognitive domain mainly relates to people's way of gaining knowledge about their world through thinking, learning, problem-solving, etc. Though the factors mentioned below are mainly explained through cognitive-affective models, it only reiterates a previously mentioned understanding that the broad domains of human functioning are constantly interacting.

Motivation: Workplace psychology has focused and emphasized on motivation to be one of the most significant factors influencing workplace productivity. A number of theories of work motivation have been put forward, the application of which has been found to be extremely helpful and beneficial in enhancing workplace productivity. The Need Hierarchy Theory of Maslow (1943) presents a model of the five basic needs of humans including physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs arranged in a hierarchical manner meaning that only on the fulfilment of a lower-need, the next need is activated. Another theory worth mentioning here is the two-factor theory of Herzberg et al. (1959). The two factors include motivators and hygiene factors. Motivators are the factors which when present encourage the worker to work harder and be more productive. Some of the motivators include recognition, responsibility, growth, etc. Whereas the hygiene factors which include salary, working conditions, safety and security, relationships, etc. which when absent demotivate the worker.

Self-efficacy: The concept of self-efficacy was introduced by Bandura (1986) in his socialcognitive theory and defined it as "people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true." Self-efficacy basically relates to people's perception of their own abilities to complete a particular task or goal. Cherian and Jacob (2013) through a literature review revealed that positive self-efficacy enhances the work performance of employees thereby increasing work productivity. Moreover, the organizational climate, as well as the management of the organization, shapes the self-efficacy of the employee. Similarly, Haglund et al. (2013) found the existence of a strong and significant association between negative self-efficacy and reduced work productivity. The influence of self-efficacy in work-related performance and productivity can be further noted in the extensive work of Stajkovic & Luthans (1998) as well as Judge et al., (2007). It also needs to be mentioned that Bandura (1977) mentioned that individuals develop their self-efficacy according to four major sources of influence. Firstly, mastery experiences allow one to develop self-efficacy as one engages in practicing a task and completes it successfully, they master their experience thereby enhancing their self-efficacy. Secondly, vicarious experiences also enhance self-efficacy. As people observe their social role models perform a task efficiently, they come to believe that they have the potential to do the same task as well. Thirdly, social persuasion i.e., being encouraged after completing a task enhances people's self-efficacy. Lastly, the emotional and physiological states of a person have an influence on the perception of their self-efficacy. For instance, a person in a chronic state of emotional distress or having poor mental health is likely to have a negative view of their self-efficacy. Therefore, the importance of the enhancement of self-efficacy of employees for increasing workplace productivity can be readily noticed through this description.

Job satisfaction: Included under the concept of cognitive wellbeing, job satisfaction can be defined as the person's overall evaluation of the specific domain of their job (Luhmann, 2017). Halkos & Bousinakis (2010) found that increased job satisfaction was found to be positively and significantly associated with work productivity. Similarly, Fassoulis & Alexopoulos (2015) also reported satisfaction at the workplace to be a significant predictor of work productivity. Similar trends of the positive association of job satisfaction and work productivity have been noted by a variety of researchers (Borcherding & Oglesby, 1974; Mamiseishvili & Rosser, 2011; Nanda & Brown, 1977; Katzell et al., 1975). Anin et al. (2015) delineated factors affecting job satisfaction into two broad headings including personal determinants and organizational factors. Among the personal determinants, age, gender, educational level, and years of experience are included whereas organizational factors include pay, recognition, work security, the work itself, supervision and promotion opportunities, and working conditions as well as work group. Similar factors were included by Kapur (2018) which influenced job satisfaction. These pieces of the research direct us toward the direction of understanding making visible that the enhancement of job satisfaction would help in the increase of work productivity.

Survey

In order to apply this literature in real-world settings, we conducted a small survey wherein we intended to find out the correlation among the variables of workplace stress, general self-efficacy, and employee engagement. A google form was prepared wherein the first part enquired about the demographic details after making explicit the confidentiality of their responses, and in the following parts, three questionnaires were used. The three questionnaires included in the survey were the workplace stress scale by the Marlin Company and the American Institute of Stress (2009), the General Self-Efficacy Scale by Schwarzer & Jerusalem (1995), and the Employee Engagement Scale by Shuck et al. (2016). The data was collected through the online modality following the technique of convenience sampling.

A total of 24 Indian adults engaged in full-time jobs participated in the survey where the age range of the sample was found to be 39-74 years. Almost 79% of all the participants identified as males and around 20% identified to be females. The data were analysed using SPSS software. As per the correlation analysis, the results obtained indicate the existence of a significant and



positive relationship between general self-efficacy and employee engagement ($\rho = 0.438, p < 0.05$) whereas no existence of significant correlation was found between workplace stress and general self-efficacy as well workplace stress and employee engagement. It must be noted that the obtained results have been so due to the small sample size. However, the results of the positive association between general self-efficacy and employee engagement seem meaningful because as the employee receives a sense of being self-efficacious at their job their engagement at work increases resulting in higher productivity. Similar results have also been noted by multiple researchers (Chan et al., 2017; Yakin & Erdil, 2012; Lisbona et al., 2018).

Frameworks to enhance workplace productivity

From the above discussion, the affective and cognitive domains of enhancing productivity in the workplace have been understood. This paper shall stay incomplete if there is no mention of frameworks or theoretical underpinnings which are based on the interaction and intersection of the affective and cognitive domain. Below explained are two frameworks of Broaden and Build Theory and Ecological Theory which present an understanding through multidimensionality and whole-systems approach to enable the maximum level of functioning.

Broaden and Build Framework: Forwarded by positive psychologists, the broaden and build framework of positive emotions mentions that “positive emotions and processes provide the potential to broaden individuals’ momentary thought-action repertoires and also increase individuals’ capacity to enhance their personal resources” (Martin, 2005). It means that the broaden and build framework enhances people’s functioning in the present moment whilst also equipping them with useful resources for the future. In this context, Martin (2005) developed a broaden and build framework within the workplace by including multiple levels of dimensions that are worker level, manager level, and organizational level. The following figure (figure 1) represents their framework.

LEVEL OF WORKPLACE	DIMENSIONS to broaden and build	STRATEGIES to broaden and build
Organizational Level	Motivating climate	Developing and sustaining: - Focus on learning/improvement - High expectations - Shared vision - Recognition of the individual - Appropriate role modeling - Cooperative and collaborative work
	Staff morale	Developing and sustaining: - Good leadership - Effective people management - Effective decision making - Clarity of roles - Supportive appraisal and recognition process
	Supportive relational context	Developing and sustaining: - Sense of community amongst workers - Cooperative/collaborative climate - Optimism for staff - Affirming and getting to know staff
Leader/Manager Level	Authoritative style	Developing and sustaining: - Value-added involvement of leader/manager - Improvement focus for workers - Constructive and supportive discipline - Respect for staff autonomy - Responsiveness to workers - High expectations and support to reach them - Clear standards - Warmth in leadership
Worker Level	Motivation	Developing and sustaining: - Self-efficacy, learning/improvement focus, valuing of work, planning, work organization, persistence, control
	Workplace resilience	Developing and sustaining: - Self-efficacy, persistence, control, and reduced anxiety
	Flow in work	Developing and sustaining: - Balance between challenge and skill
	Personal Bests (PBs)	Developing and sustaining: - Competitively self-referenced goals - Challenging goals - Clear and specific goals
	Value of work	Developing and sustaining: - Attainment value - Utility value - Intrinsic value

Figure 1: Multi-level Broaden and Build Approach to Enhancing Satisfaction, Motivation, and Productivity in the workplace – adapted from Martin (2005)



Ecological Framework: The Ecological framework was provided was Bronfenbrenner (1977) who recognized that individuals are embedded into socio-cultural systems, hence to achieve wellbeing a holistic view needs to be undertaken (Lomas, 2015). In the framework, he proposed four levels – the microsystem which is the immediate setting of the individual and includes their workplace, family, and school. Next, is the mesosystem that is the interaction between the microsystems; the third level is exosystem which refers to the wider “social structures” that “impinge upon or encompass” the microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1977) including community, neighbourhood affordability, green environments, etc. and the last level is that of the macrosystem that is the social, economic, political, legal, and educational systems which have an influence on the others thereby including policies, governmental interventions, etc. The application of the ecological framework in the work context makes sense as it will enhance the wellbeing of the person through a whole-systems approach thereby increasing the productivity and efficiency of the person. For instance, on the microsystem level, maintaining positive relationships at work, or getting recognition for the tasks could be important for the facilitation of wellbeing. We have also noted in the discussion above that these are also important for job satisfaction as well as motivation. On the mesosystem level, interventions could be designed that allow an individual to maintain the nexus of their worklife balance. On the exosystem level, we can note that if people live in areas that are safe, secure, and stable they achieve wellbeing. This can be tied in with the safety needs of Maslow’s Need Hierarchy theory as well. Lastly, on the macrosystem level, there must be certain policies and governmental interventions in place which allow the workers a certain sense of autonomy, and control over their work to receive maximum output. A variety of job satisfaction factors like pay, work security, etc. can be regulated through effective policymaking.

III. CONCLUSION

The discussion above takes a much-limited review of a variety of factors coming under the purview of the affective and cognitive domain which has an influence on workplace productivity. There exists a wide variety of factors, concepts, and theories in workplace psychology that enable the aim of enhancing workplace productivity. Through this paper, we would also like to put forward the suggestion of a more nuanced research approach in handling subjects of workplace productivity. For example, there should be scientific attempts in order to understand the relationship of workplace productivity with race, nations, culture, etc. It must not be forgotten that most of the theories and evidence that are available in the literature today come from privileged contexts. Hence, an inquiry of understanding the workplace productivity of the marginalized communities shall help us in painting a diverse canvas of efficiency and productivity.

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