Flow at work: An exploratory study

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This study aims to investigate a positive psychology phenomenon of flow among Malaysian hotel employees, what are the causes and consequences. Previous research demonstrated that flow has positive consequences in enhancing performance, in individuals and groups (e.g. Bakker et al., 2005; 2008, 2011; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010). The flow experience has been investigated in computer games and information technology environment, and recently flow has also been examined in the context of Human Resource development (HRD). Most research on flow have been carried out against the background of Western developed countries’ settings (Australia, Holland, Denmark) (e.g.: Bakker, 2005; Martin & Jackson, 2008; Nielsen & Cleal, 2010) but not in Eastern Asian culture. Although flow is a universal experience, the flow experience can be expected to be culture specific and culture dependent. There are reasons to believe that emotions at work, and how people express their positive emotions reflects and originates from their cultural characteristics (i.e. Asian are not encouraged to show their negative emotions, see Idris, Dollard & Winefield, 2011). So far, no known research on flow in HRD context has been conducted in Asia (for exception: Chen, Ye, Chen, & Tung, (2010) in Taiwan or in Malaysian context. Therefore it raises a question whether Western findings can be generalized to the Malaysian context; due to the socio-cultural differences between Western and Eastern Asian countries.

Literature Review

Too many research projects have concentrated on identifying the negative aspects of work environment (stress, burnout, fatigue, anger, bullying) and their implications on organizations’ performance’ (turnover, intention to quit, accidents). However, of late, there has been a shift in research focus whereby factors that contribute to making normal life more fulfilling and to understand how things go right are beginning to receive attention (Silegman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). An example of research focus within this positive psychology movement is flow, defined as a state in which people are so intensely involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Bakker (2005, 2008) conceptualizes flow as a short term peak experience at workplace, characterized by three
components i.e. absorption (total focus and total immersion), work enjoyment (positive judgment on the quality of working life) and intrinsic work motivation (desire to do certain work related activities). Flow is experienced when there is a balance between challenge of the tasks and skills of the performers. In short, when there is existence of both job demands and job resources. This study utilizes Job Demands and Resources (JD-R) Model (Bakker, Demerouti & Verbeke, 2004) as the underpinning theory.

Previous research demonstrated that certain core job characteristics (skill variety, autonomy, feedback, task significance, feedback) are positively related to flow at work (eg: Demerouti, 2006). Flow has been found to be related to greater performance, particularly among high achievers (Eisenberger et al., 2005). However, it is not clear whether all core job characteristics have the same effect on flow or whether low and moderate achievers also experienced flow. In addition, with the assumption that employees’ motivation is due to cultural aspects and socio-economic background (c.f. Maslow, see also Mearns & Yule, 2009), it is argued that experience of flow at work does not only rely on job characteristics, but also is influenced by cultural aspects. Moreover, the causal direction of the relationship between job enrichment, job stress and positive outcomes has yet to be established due to the use of cross-sectional method in previous studies. Thus, in the current study, a longitudinal design is opted instead.

**Methodology**

This study will use mixed methods - qualitative (interview) and longitudinal multi-level survey to explore flow at work among 250 employees in hospitality industry. Sarawak is chosen to reflect the diverse characteristics of the employees. Qualitative data will be analyzed using NVivo. Quantitative data will be analyzed using SPSS, AMOS (SEM). Advance multi-level analysis (i.e. Hierarchical Linear Modeling and Mplus) will also be employed as recommended by a recent methodologist (Probst, 2010). So far, most of psychological researches rely on individual analysis, and only a few studies in psychology emphasizes multi-level analysis (e.g. Mathieu & Taylor, 2007). With a notion that organizational climate resides at upper level of analysis (Idris, Dollard, Coward & Dormann, 2012), rather than on individual; and some emotions at work is a collective phenomenon (Bakker et al., 2011), it is postulated that only by employing a multilevel analysis will a better understanding of the psychological phenomenon such as flow can be gathered.

So far, no study has been found in Asian countries that uses a multi level analysis (with the exception of Idris, Dollard, Coward & Dormann, 2012). By employing a multilevel analysis, common method variance that always results in misleading interpretation of research findings can also be avoided.

Using longitudinal design, this study will able to predict the consequences of flow as well as determine how to create flow in workplaces. The findings are expected to assist human resource
development practitioners in job design, training and other interventions to promote positive psychology and well-being at workplaces.

Note: This research is work in progress

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References


