

Societal Impact Highlights



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Research Group: Organizational Behavior & Human Resources Group

Case study: **Motivation to attend and perform at work: Evidence from a privatized organization**

Summary

Silvia Dello Russo has been part of the founding group of researchers that started a close collaboration with the HR Department of a large privatized company in Italy. The aim was exploring the determinants of job performance and absenteeism and, thus, understanding what motivates employees to attend and perform work. The objective of the project was gaining evidence-based indications for implementing HR practices, and this resulted in the creation of a “laboratory” whereby a large panel of employees were followed across several years. This longitudinal study, still ongoing, stimulated a number of HR initiatives and was fed-back to participants, therefore impacting several constituencies.

Underpinning research

Silvia Dello Russo was part of a research team based at the University Sapienza of Rome, Italy, led by Laura Borgogni and comprising other two colleagues, namely Laura Petitta and Mariella Miraglia, which conducted a project titled “Determinants of job performance and absenteeism in a privatized organization”. The project extended from 2007 to 2012 and resulted from a close collaboration between University researchers and the HR professionals of Poste Italiane, one of the largest companies in Italy operating in the sector of post-delivery and communication, which

had undergone a privatization process. As a consequence, important changes had occurred with respect to work procedures and business, management, and organizational culture. Specifically, from the bureaucratic management and culture that characterized the previous stage of public monopoly, the company moved to operate in the market and diversified its business. Changes concerning HR management were also required. Above all, employees started to be selected and hired through assessment centers, differently from previous procedures that consisted in public contests. Thus, the role of personal characteristics and behavioral aspects was increasingly recognized (in addition to knowledge and skills) and the HR professionals paid increasing attention to their employees as key factor for achieving organizational success.

The collaboration started within such scenario and with the shared goal of providing evidence-based indications for implementing, designing, or re-defining HR initiatives in the company. The research team also received support funds from the Integrated School of Social, Juridical and Business Sciences at their home University in Rome (project Ref. C26F09MHS2/2009).

The first data collection started in 2007 via self-report questionnaires administered to a large proportion of employees and was followed by other data collections with the same panel of employees in 2010 and 2012. After taking part to the planning phase for the 2012 data collection Silvia Dello Russo moved to ISCTE-IUL, but the project is still currently ongoing.

The main findings of the project, published in well-renowned journals, concern the critical role played by individual characteristics in predicting job performance and absenteeism, which include attitudes toward the job and the organization, namely job satisfaction and organizational commitment (2, 3). Higher satisfaction is associated with better performance and fewer absences at work. Moreover, it was found that individuals may be bond to their organization via different combinations of affective and instrumental reasons. Only those employees with moderate to high levels of affective commitment to their organization, and with comparatively lower instrumental commitment, report higher job satisfaction and performance and lower absenteeism.

Most importantly, these attitudes are in turn triggered by an individual characteristic that can be trained and empowered: self-efficacy, defined as the belief of being able to act certain behaviors in specific domains. Researchers found that employees with higher self-efficacy at work perceive more positively their social work environment, because they contribute to “construct” it by behaving very proactively, and, partly due to these better perceptions of the context, employees develop better attitudes and behaviors at work (1). The research results showed that the way newly-hired individuals perceive their social context is particularly crucial

because in this group of employees absences increase over time (in spite of the organizational policies for absence management) to converge with the shared implicit norms of accepted absences among colleagues (4).

References to the research

1. Borgogni L., Dello Russo S., Petitta L., Vecchione M. (2010). Predicting job satisfaction and job performance in a privatized organization. *International Public Management Journal*, 13, 3, 275-296. DOI: 10.1080/10967494.2010.504114
2. Borgogni L., Dello Russo S., Miraglia M., Vecchione M. (2013). The role of self-efficacy and job satisfaction on absences from work. *European Review of Applied Psychology*, 63, 3, 129-136. DOI: 10.1016/j.erap.2012.08.007
3. Dello Russo S., Vecchione M., Borgogni L. (2013a). Commitment profiles, job satisfaction and behavioral outcomes. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 62 (4), 701–719. DOI: 10.1111/j.1464-0597.2012.00512.x
4. Dello Russo S., Miraglia M., Borgogni L., Johns G. (2013b). How time and perceptions of social context shape employee absenteeism trajectories. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 83, 2, 209-217. DOI: 10.1016/j.jvb.2013.03.005

Details of the impact

Since the very preliminary phases of research design and planning, this project characterized itself for being a collaborative endeavor with the company, with the shared goal of achieving evidence-based results that could inform the HR practices implemented in the organization.

The results of the research were communicated to the beneficiaries – HR department and other constituents within the company, therefore having an impact on the employees as well as the HR Department, and assisting the HR professionals and managers in designing some initiatives. However, researchers believe that some impacts were obtained beyond the use of the results, and actually before, through the collaboration itself.

Impact on the HR Department

The research required the collaboration and coordination of several different Units within the HR department that deal with specific aspects of all those involved in the study:

The Unit of “Assessment and Development Policies” was the one directly concerned with performance evaluation and improvement;

The Unit “Employee and Labor Relations” was the one in charge of absence management and control;

The Unit “Internal Communication” was the one preparing all sorts of communication inside the company, including publicizing the research and inviting employees to take part;

The Unit “Training” was the one that designed, planned and commissioned the training intervention as a result of the investigation.

This coordination required regular exchanges among them and with the researchers; hence, representatives of all these Units were involved in the multiple meetings that preceded the research, accompanied it along the years and, of course, concluded each phase with reporting and feedback.

An additional impact on the HR professionals was passing a research-oriented mindset on to them in terms of developing an evidence-based attitude that seeks for testing and verifying assumptions in order to plan activities. Indeed they frequently reported feeling a “positive contagion” and being happy to participate in the study sharing their “pieces” of information.

Impact on several constituencies across the organization

The results of the research (in its multiple phases) were fed-back to several organizational stakeholders. At the end of each data collection executive meetings were organized, with the HR Director and HR managers and professionals involved in the project [A, C]. Employees that took part by responding to the questionnaires also received summary reports of the results from the researchers [B]. Moreover all the employees of the company, regardless of their participation, received a general summary of the initiative that was written and published by the HR Department in the organizational journal.

Impact on HR practices and policies

In light of the research results that pointed out the critical role of self-efficacy beliefs for having better attitudes and behaviors in the workplace, the HR Department and particularly its Unit of “Training” decided to launch training sessions for employees to develop their self-efficacy. Accordingly, four short sessions (lasting 3.5 hours each) were scheduled and members of the research team were invited as trainers. The target population of the training sessions was

comprised of the employees who took part in the research and had been hired in the company within the last 2-3 years. This specific target-group was chosen in consideration of the strategic value it had for the company that was aiming to develop these employees as bench for their future managerial needs. Hence, the research findings could be well-used in support of the HR strategy [D].

The findings about self-efficacy also led the HR Director to consider how to include the assessment of this individual characteristic in their job applicants within the company's recruitment and selection procedures. A meeting was organized involving the HR manager from the Unit "Recruitment and Selection" where this issue was discussed [C].

Finally, the finding that the newly-hired employees showed an increasing trajectory of absences over time, associated with more positive perceptions of the work colleagues, was object of discussion in the last executive meeting. This finding in particular revealed that implicit social norms of behavior, shared by the group of peers, are more powerful than the explicit norms established by the company. In this sense, it stimulated the HR professionals to possibly re-think the absence control system they had in place, indicating initiatives focused on the team (vs. the individual) as a viable alternative - during the executive meeting in July 2012. [C].

Impact on the broader audience

A practitioner-oriented publication was edited by some members of the research team and some HR managers and professionals involved. The journal where the article was published has a broad diffusion and is regularly read by practitioners in all the functions of management [E].

Sources to corroborate the impact

[A] Executive meeting with HR Director and HR managers – March 27, 2008

[B] Participants Feedback Report – November 9, 2011 (sent by the HR Department to the research participants).

[C] Executive meeting with HR Director and HR managers – July 20, 2012.

[D] Training sessions devoted to newly-hired middle-managers to develop their self-efficacy. Title of the training course "Self-efficacy Perception and Development".

Four sessions of 3.5 hours each were delivered on:

- February 26th, 2008

- March 5th, 2008
- March 11th, 2008
- April 2nd, 2008

The above-referenced meetings [A, B, C, D] and feedback were accompanied by confidential reports that cannot be made available in electronic form, but may be requested to the author for inspection, similarly to the program of the training session.

[E] Borgogni L., Miraglia M., Petitta L., Gallo M., Mazzotta L. (2009). Efficacia Organizzativa, soddisfazione e commitment. Lo studio dei fattori che concorrono al successo organizzativo di Poste Italiane. *Sviluppo & Organizzazione*, 231, 32-42.