

The Motivation of Masons in the Sri Lankan Construction Industry

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Abstract

This research is an empirical study of human resource management (HRM) for the motivation of masons in the Sri Lankan construction industry (SLCI). The structured interview was chosen as a main research instrument for data collection. 90 masons and 30 supervisors were randomly selected from 10 construction sites within the SLCI.

The study's findings show that the supervisors and masons in the construction industry (CI) in Sri Lanka are aware of the supposed advantages of staffing, employee development and the rewards of a HRM approach. However, these characteristics have yet to play a significant role in the motivation of Sri Lankan supervisors and masons. A contextually sensitive application of these three strategies has the potential to improve motivation of the Sri Lankan construction workforce.

Keywords: Motivation of Masons, human resource management, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

The management of present day construction projects is becoming increasingly complex and challenging due to many factors. To meet this challenge it is of the utmost importance to provide efficient management throughout projects. This research is an empirical study of human resource management (HRM) in the Sri Lankan Construction Industry (SLCI). The research focuses on the particular roles that staffing, employee development and rewards have in the motivation of masons in the SLCI. The study as a whole contributes to the wider debate on worker motivation.

2. Statement of the Problem and Significance of the Study

The construction industry (CI) is one of the most important industries in almost every country [1]. The crucial importance of the CI to a sustained development effort in a developing country cannot be overemphasised. Although construction is not an end in itself, it is the means for the achievement of the desired end, which is the development of new production capacity in the

economy. In developing countries, productivity in construction has remained at a relatively low level compared to other major industries [2]. Therefore the effect of productivity on a nation's economy is highly significant. Improved productivity in the CI can have an important role in promoting national competitiveness and a satisfactory growth rate.

The Sri Lanka State Engineering Corporation, Sri Lanka Building Department, Sri Lanka Port Authority (SLPA) and Sri Lanka Labour Department have experienced that most of their projects are affected by low productivity and motivation [3, 4]. Most projects have also suffered from serious setbacks and even termination of contracts. In the SLCI, it is believed that productivity is low when compared to other developing countries and to the Asian sub-continent in particular [5]. One of the factors contributing to such low productivity is that of employees' motivation [6, 7, 8, 9]. However, in the ancient and colonial eras, the SLCI was properly organised, well motivated and highly productive [10, 11], although no evidence of the methods they used to manage and motivate construction employees still exists. It could be argued that without sufficient motivation of employees, such success could never have been achieved. Therefore motivation of Sri Lankan workers is one of the appropriate approaches to achieve higher productivity in SLCI. There is a large body of conceptual and empirical evidence concerned with the application of motivation theory to the CI [12, 13, 14, 6, 15, 16, 8, 9]. Unfortunately, there has not been so much empirical research on applying HRM strategies to the CI. No research about motivation was conducted for SLCI. The literature on motivational studies has flaws and weaknesses and is outdated [17, 18].

3. Motivational Theories vs. HRM Concepts

Motivational theories are also based on the functionalist paradigm, are not multi focused and do not give a real representation of how workers in construction are motivated. Most of them deal with intrinsic properties which are not sufficiently socially constructive for any credence to be given to them. The motivational theories, which take a functionalist view, offer only one perspective on the social construct. What is needed, therefore, are other methods of researching motivation in construction which embrace some of the salient points mentioned in social research theories [19]. Both the social as well as the scientific nature must be included in any study of construction worker motivation.

HRM is a socially constructed concept as opposed to the functionalist and traditionalist views of the motivational theories. Therefore, future studies of motivation of construction workers, in particular Sri Lankan construction workers, should embrace these modern, more pragmatic views of the social construct that are found within human resource management [20, 21, 22].

However, the traditional motivational theories used by previous researchers are dated: the researchers still talk in terms of managerial issues and personnel administration. These theories do not incorporate the different facets of human complexity and the evolving dynamic construction environment. They do not in any way play a significant role in shaping the self-identity of workers even though they have existed for a very long time. The main theme of this research is that motivation of workers cannot be separated from the context of the socio-

economic environment. The extent to which perception of the workplace can be changed by HRM discourse is questionable in the case of construction employees' motivation. However, from this perspective, HRM plays an active role in understanding and constructing the social reality of the workplace and motivation of employees.

More crucial is the need to be aware of the strong links between the conceptual literature that has sprung up on HRM and the outdated empirical research that has been carried out on motivation. Themes such as staffing processes, employee development processes and rewards systems have to be understood. On the other hand, in Sri Lanka, Western management and HRM approaches have been employed in construction projects over the past few decades, without an assessment of the appropriateness of such approaches.

This has raised some crucial problems. The workers in the CI in Sri Lanka are aware of the supposed advantages of the HRM approach. The discourse of HRM in the SLCI has played a role in the motivation of the Sri Lankan workers. Effective and efficient application of HRM to Sri Lankan workers would improve their motivation.

4. Methodology

Research data were collected by means of a survey of masons in 10 construction sites in Sri Lanka. The data-gathering techniques were:

Interviews (one-to-one)

Interview sessions were the main research instrument in the study. 120 structured interview sessions were conducted and fully tape recorded. The interviews were conducted in Sinhala, which is the lingua franca of the Sri Lankan operatives.

Observation

10 observation sessions were conducted in 10 work sites within the SLCI. Structured observation schedule was used for each observation session. The findings of the observations were triangulated with finding from the interview sessions. Both techniques were pilot tested prior to the main research work.

5. Research Results and Discussion

5.1 Staffing Processes

Staffing encompasses the human resource activities designed to secure the right employees in the right place at the right time [23]. Management professionals in the construction industries making a decision to recruit employees must consider whether to rely on the external or internal labour market [24]. Among Sri Lankan construction firms, those with outstanding and average performance seem to be less informed about recruitment and selection processes.

5.1.1 Existing Staffing Processes in the SLCI

This research shows that the most common staffing procedures for supervisors and masons in the SLCI are as follows: advertising the vacancy, calling job applicants, conducting interviews, direct recruitment through personal contacts, friendship or any other form of relationship. Advertising the vacancy is more prevalent than other existing staffing procedures.

Direct recruitment through personal contacts, friendship or any other relationship sometimes causes favouritism and employment of unsuitable workers. However, there are some advantages to this system. Recommendations from a reliable source can guarantee the trustworthiness of employees.

Other methods for recruiting employees are not common in the SLCI. These include: direct recruitment, conducting a practical test of applicants' knowledge, conducting a theory test of applicants' knowledge, giving effective pre-work training, and using a registered list or recruitment agency. Although direct recruitment as a result of political influence is not common in the SLCI as a whole, it does play some part in direct labour recruitment. Direct recruitment due to political influence is detrimental to the company and results in similar difficulties to those discussed earlier in relation to direct recruitment through personal contacts, friendship or any other relationship.

The theory test of an applicant's knowledge is not especially suitable for masons and not prevalent in the SLCI. One reason is that most masons are not taught the rudiments of masonry theoretically. They start off as an apprentice to another mason, or as labourer who shows some interest in masonry work. Only 7% of supervisors and none of the masons mentioned the theory test method. In general, masons are not as well educated as supervisors – thus some Sri Lankan masons cannot understand the theory test. The practical test is more suitable for the recruitment of masons, because their job is completely practical, unlike that of supervisors. 62% of masons and none of the supervisors specified a practical test. Recruiting employees through an agency system does not exist in the SLCI. This is due to the availability of cheap labour. An employment agency system has not taken root in Sri Lanka.

5.1.2 Characteristics of Staffing Processes in the SLCI

The research results show that the existing characteristics of staffing processes in the SLCI, which have a response rate of more than 50%, are as follows:

- There are appropriate and adequate job design and analysis procedures (mainly concerned with how to recruit, how to select, how to train, how to develop, how to downsize, how to administer wages etc.)
- The organisation has clear staffing procedures
- There are recruitment plans to avoid unexpected staff (labour) shortages
- Staffing is designed to secure the right employee at the right place and at the right time

- The recruitment and selection processes are concerned with identifying, attracting and choosing suitable people to meet an organisation's HR requirements.

The above characteristics are perceived as being very important to the SLCI. There is a general willingness to include them in company practices. Unfortunately, only the first characteristic is currently functional. The reasons for the malfunction of the other characteristics can be identified as follows: financial and facility problems, the difficulty of introducing new methods, the difficulty of giving up old procedures, insufficient time because of a busy schedule, the difficulty of changing how the institution is perceived, management deficiencies and superiors' lack of interest in management procedures. A small number of employees cited other influences (e.g. political). However, effective management can help to prevent the above problems from arising.

5.2 Employee Development Processes

Employee development processes have become an integral part of most construction industries (25, 26). In general, both new and existing workers will require more training and employee development, especially in developing countries. The findings show that the employee development and training process is a highly valued function, but not adequately distributed amongst supervisors and masons in the SLCI. Only 12% of the respondents stated that they had satisfactory access to employee development processes. This is the result of the reluctance of employers to invest in employees due to uncertainties in the SLCI.

5.2.1 Existing Employee Development Processes in the SLCI

The survey results regarding employee development processes in the SLCI reveal that the following processes are both widespread and popular:

- On the job training by specially appointed people
- On the job training provided by senior employees
- Induction training at the beginning of employment
- A short duration training programme.

Most construction firms in the private sector offer only introduction training as an employee development process. Some private firms do not even offer this limited option due to their busy day-to-day schedule. This means some employees are starting work without any induction being offered by their employer. This can obviously result in poor quality work and low productivity, because company procedures are not well understood. On the job training by senior employees can sometimes prove detrimental to a company because of favouritism, or the passing down of work-related weaknesses from senior employees to trainees. On the job training by specialists can overcome the above disadvantages.

There are other methods (e.g. a firm's own training programme, frequent conferences) which are not common in the SLCI. Although uncommon when considered as a whole, considerable variation in response can be seen if the responses of the various groups are considered separately (e.g. masons only or supervisors only).

Most employee development processes in the SLCI are available to supervisors to a much greater extent than they are to masons. The supervisor's role involves more responsibility and is thus of more importance to the firm. Consequently, only 36% of masons but all of the supervisors have short introductory training programmes. Similarly, only 26% masons compared to 80% of supervisors experience their firm's own paid training sessions. It should be noted that some training sessions that are conducted for masons can prove to be very challenging due to the low literacy level of most masons within the SLCI.

5.2.2 Characteristics for Employee Development Processes in the SLCI

The characteristics of most employee development processes are that they are scanty and not fully functional. This can be clearly seen from the fact that in the survey, when asked to identify the existing and functional characteristics of employee development in the SLCI, the respondents only cited one characteristic with a response rate of more than 50%:

The management may decide to orient their training and development activities towards short-term or long-term objectives.

In reality, this characteristic cannot be said to be functioning adequately in the SLCI.

The findings show that all characteristics investigated in employee development processes in the SLCI are clearly perceived to be important but that there are significant obstacles to their successful implementation (e.g. financial and facility problems, lack of time due to a busy schedule).

5.3 Reward Systems

Another key feature of modern approaches to HRM, within the construction industry and elsewhere, is reward systems [26]. Generally, the structure of the reward package is related to the job, as well as to the expectations of the employee and the labour market. Reward packages consist of either a salary component or an incentive component, and can also be categorised as money related or non-money related [27, 24]. However, most Sri Lankan construction firms suffer from serious financial problems and are busy with day-to-day workloads. These firms still have poorly distributed reward systems. The superficial view is that most of the small private sector firms in Sri Lanka are often bankrupt and terminate contracts without having a chance to reap the benefits of reward systems. The study findings show that the majority of construction firms in Sri Lanka have some kind of reward system, but that these are inefficient.

5.3.1 Existing Reward Systems in the SLCI

Certain reward and incentive systems are currently in existence in the SLCI. The following are all being implemented with varying degrees of efficiency: a satisfactory salary is earned; a good reputation is achieved, good employer/employee relationships are achieved; satisfactory facilities are provided (e.g. housing, accommodation, etc.); satisfactory welfare facilities are provided; a satisfactory bonus is offered; overtime is offered; social activities are organised; appropriate quality training is offered; permanent jobs are offered; praise is given; rewards and certificates are given; performance appraisal programmes are conducted; and promotions are given. However, from the above list, only the following elicited a response rate of more than 50%:

- Overtime is offered
- A good reputation is achieved
- Praise is given
- Satisfactory facilities are provided (e.g. housing, accommodation, etc.)
- Social activities are organised
- Rewards and certificates are given
- A good employer/employee relationship is achieved
- A satisfactory salary is earned
- Permanent jobs are offered

Overtime is currently the most prevalent and popular reward system in the SLCI. Considering the high amount of absenteeism and the insufficient number of employees, management has to cover the day-to-day workload by giving overtime to existing workers. This explains the high incidence of overtime in the SLCI. However, management has to manage and plan the workload. It also has to take into account employees' work capacity and allocate overtime accordingly, otherwise productivity and motivation will be negatively affected.

Unemployment is a severe problem especially in developing countries and this situation is clearly true for SL. The opportunity to have a job is a significant motivation for Sri Lankan employees. It must also be remembered that the benefits and salary provided by employment within the SLCI are much higher than in other industries. Hence having a job in the SLCI is also a means of achieving a good personal reputation.

Expressing warm approval, respect and gratitude for high-quality work is also considered to be a reward system in SL. This reward can be easily provided and achieved. However, praise given to unsuitable employees can also negatively affect the motivation of others. Management has to be aware of this because the problem of favouritism is also widespread in the SLCI. Bearing in mind the economy and living conditions of the country, the provision of satisfactory facilities (e.g. housing, accommodation, etc.) is a reward valued highly by Sri Lankans.

Considering supervisors and masons separately, it can be seen that there are more beneficial reward systems available to supervisors than masons. 100% of supervisors and only 36% of

masons have permanent jobs. 77% of supervisors and 53% of masons are satisfied with the social activities organised by their firms. Furthermore, the results show that there is only an 11% overall prospect of promotion in the SLCI. This is extremely low. The responses of supervisors and masons differ: 67% of supervisors and only 24% of masons stated that their firms have a clear promotion scheme. Offering training opportunities or facilities as a type of reward is more freely available to supervisors than masons.

Masons appear to be more satisfied with their salaries than supervisors, even though the supervisors' salaries are higher than those of the masons. According to the qualification, social status and comparison with other industries, masons are more satisfied with their salaries.

5.3.2 Characteristics of Reward Systems in the SLCI

The following characteristics are currently in existence within the reward system in the SLCI: the organisation has an efficient reward and incentive system; a reasonable performance appraisal programme exists in the organisation; money-related rewards are important; non-money-related rewards are important; group-related rewards are important; individual related rewards are important. There are incentives not linked to performance such as holiday pay, sick pay, long-service allowances, pension funds etc; there are incentives partially tied to performance such as profit sharing; incentives directly tied to performance; and the organisation keeps its payment structure up to date.

However, an examination of all the responses reveals that only a small number of characteristics can be said to be in existence to any significant degree. The following elicited a response rate of more than 50%:

- The organisation has an efficient reward and incentive system
- The organisation keeps its payment structure up to date
- Non-money related rewards are important
- Incentive is directly linked to performance
- Group-related rewards are important.

Although the respondents stated that all of the reward system characteristics were important to their firms and that they are willing to have them, the above characteristics are not functional due to financial problems as well as the inadequate resources and facilities available within the SLCI.

To summarise, the findings show that most supervisors and masons are aware of the supposed advantages of modern HRM approaches (i.e. staffing, employee development and rewards). They realise that these approaches can have significant positive effects on employee motivation, although they have yet to play a role in the motivation of the Sri Lankan supervisors and masons. Furthermore, supervisors and masons are aware of the motivation benefits, which can result from the implementation of the approaches. 95% of the respondents cited the motivational benefits (e.g. institutional and employee productivity is increased).

6. Conclusion

The study concludes that supervisors and masons in the construction industry in Sri Lanka are aware of the advantages of staffing, employee development and rewards in HRM; a contextual application of staffing, employee development and rewards for Sri Lankan masons would improve their motivation. The findings also show that the discourse of staffing, employee development and rewards in Sri Lankan construction industry have not played a role in their motivation.

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