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A study on the effect of workplace negativity factors on employee engagement mediated by emotional exhaustion

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Abstract. Business development executives across industries face negativity in their work due to multiple reasons. The negative actions of one person and the impact caused may spread among the employees in an organization and can even affect their performance and the organization itself. This paper attempts to study the effect of negative factors like abusive supervision by managers and negative gossips that prevail in the organizations on employee engagement. It also aims at finding out the mediating effect of emotional exhaustion on employee engagement. The conceptual model for the study is supported by the earlier research conducted in this area and the whole study is based on this model. Data is collected from business development executives of both service based and product-based organizations in India. The sample consists of responses of 91 business development executives across India. From the analysis of data collected, abusive supervision and negative gossips have a positive effect on emotional exhaustion which in turn has a negative relationship with employee engagement.

1. Introduction

Research has proven that negative actions spread from person to person in the same way as how happiness spread. A small act of being rude may spread from person to person and affect people whom we may not interact directly. A survey which was conducted in the HR division of a huge international manufacturing organization came up with the conclusion that 10 percent of the employees who were prone to negative interactions had 30 percent less overall performance scores compared to other employees. Negative or de-energizing experiences in an organization can lead to job dissatisfaction, lack of motivation and increased attrition. Another study has shown that high performers who experience significant negativity in their working environment tend to leave their organization at an alarming rate of 13 times more than other employees [13]. There are also studies that show that workplace incivility causes a higher rate of absenteeism among employees [23]. Thus, a positive work environment leads to positive emotional states of employees which can eventually help them be more engaged in work, growing and productive [11]. This study concentrates on the extent of impact on employee engagement of negativity factors like abusive supervision and negative gossips. The effect of these factors on emotional exhaustion is studied which in turn affects the employee engagement in the organization.



2. Literature Review

2.1. Employee engagement

An employee is the most important and valuable asset of an organization, if engaged and managed in the right way. Hence employee engagement is a factor that can best measure the vigor of the company. Employee engagement is the level of involvement and commitment of an employee towards the values and norms of his organization. An engaged employee is responsible to fulfill his individual goals and encourages his colleagues to fulfill their goals for the success of the organization. According to Kahn (1990, p.694), for an employee to be engaged, three psychological conditions are inevitable which are meaningfulness, safety and availability. Another significant definition for employee engagement was put forward by Hewitt Associates LLC (2004) as how individuals are intellectually and emotionally committed to their group or organization which is measured with the following three behaviors: say, stay and strive. (Anita, 2014). According to the study conducted by (Anita, 2014), there are 7 determinants of employee engagement namely work environment, leadership, team and co-worker, training and career development, Compensation, Organizational policies and workplace well-being. This study shows that there is a significant relationship between employee engagement and performance of employees in the organization. It also concludes that the strongest factors that affect the employee engagement is the working environment and the team and co-worker relationship [1].

According to Topchik (2000), the negativity at workplace begins with worried or unhappy employees. Once a few employees get affected by this, it spreads like a virus to the entire organization affecting the productivity and people start leaving the place as it is not anymore, a fun place to work. The Bureau of Labor Statistics states that, about 3 billion dollars of loss is experienced by U.S companies due to the effects of negativity in workplaces. A negative workplace can lead to increased turnover, lateness and absences among employees [19].

2.2. Abusive supervision

Abusive supervision is defined as the perception of subordinates of the extent to which the supervisors show hostile nonverbal and verbal behaviors. This excludes physical contact. The perception of a superior's behavior could be different in different contexts. Also, different subordinates will have different perceptions about their superiors. It is also studied in the literature that subordinates whose supervisors are highly abusive had higher turnover and unfavorable attitude towards their job and life [17]. An employee who perceive more abuses from supervisors gets emotionally exhausted and ends up abusing their coworkers [21].

2.3. Negative Gossips

Gossips are common in the social world and it occurs both in public forums as well as face to face interactions. The definition of gossip used in this study is negative information exchanged about a third party in his/her absence [10]. From earlier studies it has been proved that employees do spread negative and positive gossips about colleagues from their own teams and negative gossips are directed towards those employees who have fewer friends [8]. There are also studies that show gossiping about others acts as a stimulus to relax and can help to bring the employees closer in an organization [2]. Gossips between female pairs are tend to be more negative than between males or cross-gender pairs. Also, women were found to encourage gossips in same gender friendships to make social comparisons [12]

2.4. Emotional exhaustion

The definition of burnout was first derived from Maslach's theory. According to this theory burnout involves three components namely, emotional exhaustion, diminished personal accomplishment and depersonalization out of which emotional exhaustion has the primary influence on an individual. It also states that there are several physical as well as mental consequences due to burnout in an individual [22]. Emotional exhaustion at workplace is defined as a state which is caused by emotional and psychological demands made on employees. It is also studied that work-family conflicts and work-role conflicts are

positively related to emotional exhaustion [5]. Also, social support from co-workers is said to have a significant moderating effect between work-to-family and family-to-work conflict with satisfaction of employees [14]. The various factors that affect the exhaustion levels of employees are job related tension, job satisfaction, age and tenure on the job. Exhaustion can also lead to absenteeism, job changes and intention to leave [15]. Employees who are surrounded by optimal job demands are tend to have less exhaustion and maximum vigor compared to those employees who has many job demands [20]. A study conducted on the emotional exhaustion levels of college coaches showed that female coaches had higher exhaustion levels than male coaches. Hence the gender difference is significant when it comes to emotional exhaustion [6]. Emotional exhaustion is said to have positive mediating roles in studies that relate abusive supervision and performance and dedication of employees towards work [3]. Employees who experience burnout in the early stages of their career were found to be less likely to switch jobs and were more flexible [7].

3. Objective of the study

The objective of this study is to understand the effect of workplace negativity factors on emotional exhaustion. It also aims at finding out the most prominent factor that affect the exhaustion levels of employees and tries to find how the exhaustion levels of individuals has an effect on their engagement in job. The study justifies these effects with gender, age and type of organization as moderating variables.

4. Conceptual Model

The conceptual model is derived from previous literature. The most common workplace negativity factors are considered for the study. The direct effect of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion which is a main constituent of burnout is studied along with its effect on employee engagement. Also, the level by which negative gossips in an organization affect the emotional exhaustion levels of employees is studied. The combined effect of these factors on emotional exhaustion and the final effect of exhaustion of employees in an organization on their job engagement is studied. Exhaustion is the mediating variable that enhances the relation between abusive supervision, negative gossips and employee engagement in work. The study also concentrates on the effect of these factors on engagement levels of male and female employees individually. The experience levels of individuals are also considered for the study.

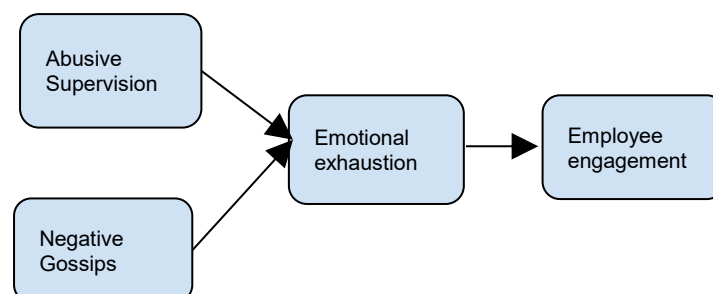


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the study

5. Hypotheses

From previous studies, it is found that abusive supervision has a negative effect on the work engagement levels of employees [4]. Also, negative gossips are negatively associated to job engagement specific to dedication and vigor [9]. Another study shows that engagement and burnout are negatively related to

each other [16]. The moderating effect of emotional exhaustion on the effect of these negativity factors on employee engagement is not mentioned in any studies. These insights were used to develop the following null hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Abusive supervision has no effect on emotional exhaustion

Hypothesis 2: Negative gossips has no effect on emotional exhaustion

Hypothesis 3: Emotional exhaustion does not mediate the relation between negativity factors and employee engagement

6. Methodology

The study was conducted on a group of business development executives across India. The sample was randomly chosen from service as well as product-based organizations. A sample of 91 business development executives who were directly involved in sales and other marketing activities were chosen. The method of data collection was a questionnaire with 49 questions gathered from the literature. The questions were floated among the business development executives to understand the relation between abusive supervision, negative gossips, emotional exhaustion and employee engagement. The participants consisted of both 56 males and 35 female business development executives with different experience levels. The respondents belonged to either product based or service-based organization type.

The abusive supervision questionnaire consisted of 9 items measured using a 5-point Likert scale. A few items of the questionnaire are “My immediate supervisor is rude to me”, “My immediate supervisor tells me I am an incompetent employee” etc. The questionnaire to measure the effect of negative gossips consisted of 11 items and the scale used was the 5-point Likert scale ranging from Never to Always. Emotional exhaustion was measured using a 9-item questionnaire which includes “I feel emotionally drained from my work”, “I feel frustrated from my job” etc. The scale used in this questionnaire was 5-point Likert scale which extended from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The employee engagement was measured using a 20 items scale from Aon Hewitt model which also used the above mentioned 5-point Likert scale measurement.

7. Analysis and Findings

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs = 91		
Model	3791.33123	2	1895.66562	F(2, 88) = 72.33		
Residual	2306.20723	88	26.2069003	Prob > F = 0.0000		
Total	6097.53846	90	67.7504274	R-squared = 0.6218		
				Adj R-squared = 0.6132		
				Root MSE = 5.1193		

emotionalex	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
abussup	.3735608	.0630229	5.93	0.000	.2483161	.4988055
neggos	.3789323	.0717684	5.28	0.000	.2363076	.5215569
_cons	5.167267	1.913439	2.70	0.008	1.364709	8.969825

Figure 2. This figure shows the result of regression analysis of workplace negativity factors and emotional exhaustion performed in STATA. The R-squared value and p-values for overall significance (f-test) of the model is mentioned along with individual p-values (t-test).

The effect of abusive supervision and negative gossip on emotional exhaustion is studied with the help of multiple linear regression analysis. The result of the predicted model is given in figure 1. As the p-value of the model connecting abusive supervision and negative gossips to emotional exhaustion is significantly less than 0.05 (F-test), the overall significance of the model is satisfied. Also, the individual p values of the factors abusive supervision and negative gossips are less than 0.05. Hence these factors can make a significant change in emotional exhaustion which is the dependent variable. At the same time this does not explain causality that any change in the dependent variable is only because of the changes in the independent variables. The R square value is 62.18 percent. This value which is greater than 50 percent explains the validity of the model and proves a right fit for the relationships. Both the

Source	SS	df	MS	Number of obs = 91		
Model	12559.3873	1	12559.3873	F(1, 89) = 90.48		
Residual	12353.9094	89	138.80797	Prob > F = 0.0000		
Total	24913.2967	90	276.814408	R-squared = 0.5041		
				Adj R-squared = 0.4986		
				Root MSE = 11.782		

empeng	Coef.	Std. Err.	t	P> t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
emotionallex	-1.435182	.1508794	-9.51	0.000	-1.734976	-1.135388
_cons	100.2396	3.913926	25.61	0.000	92.46275	108.0165

Figure 3. This figure shows the result of regression analysis of emotional exhaustion and employee engagement performed in STATA. The R-squared value and p-values for overall significance (f-test) of the model is mentioned along with individual p-values (t-test).

coefficients of the model corresponding to abusive supervision and negative slopes proving the theory pertaining to both these attributes having a positive relationship with burnout which means that an increase in either negative gossip or abusive supervision results in an increase in emotional exhaustion.

Similarly, the model connecting burnout and employee engagement, as seen in figure 2, also has a p value significantly less than 0.05 suggesting an overall significance of the model. Further scrutinizing of the result revealed that the individual significance is also maintained as the corresponding p values of the dependent variable involved are also significantly less than 0.05. An R squared value of 50.41 percent was obtained for this relationship model which explains the proposed relationship. Burnout also was found having a negative slope in the regression equation suggesting a negative relationship between burnout and employee engagement. Further analysis revealed a stronger dependence between the dependent variable emotional exhaustion and the independent variables abusive supervision and negative gossips, in female candidates than male candidates as the R squared value is greater for female candidates. Similar trend was found in the case of the second relationship pertaining to exhaustion and employee engagement.

Moreover, a strong relationship was found between the independent variables, negative gossips and abusive supervision and the dependent variable, burnout, for employees working in product-based organizations than the ones in service-based organization. A similar trend was found in the relationship between emotional exhaustion and employee engagement. The model fits better for the age group 20 to 25 as the R squared value for both the relationships are higher than that of the age group 26 to 30.

8. Results and Discussion

The analysis clearly explains the conceptual model. That is, in an organization if there is a presence of abusive supervision or negative gossips among its employees, then the emotional exhaustion element of the burnout factor is affected positively increasing with an increase in the magnitude of abusive supervision and negative gossips. This rejects the null hypotheses H1 and H2. Emotional exhaustion element has a negative relationship with employee engagement resulting in the decrease of employee

Table 1. The dependent and independent variables in each regression analysis performed is mentioned along with their R-squared values. Gender and type of organization is considered as moderating variables to arrive at conclusions

<i>R squared values</i>		
<i>Dependent variable</i>	<i>Independent variable</i>	<i>R-squared value (%)</i>
Emotional exhaustion	Abusive supervision, Negative gossip	62.18
Employee engagement	Emotional exhaustion	50.41
Emotional exhaustion (Male)	Abusive supervision, Negative gossip	55.84
Employee engagement (Male)	Emotional exhaustion	32.31
Emotional exhaustion (Female)	Abusive supervision, Negative gossip	69.66
Employee engagement (Female)	Emotional exhaustion	74.14
Emotional exhaustion (Product)	Abusive supervision, Negative gossip	79.61
Employee engagement (Product)	Emotional exhaustion	59.47
Emotional exhaustion (Service)	Abusive supervision, Negative gossip	59.73
Employee engagement (Service)	Emotional exhaustion	44.82

engagement with an increase in emotional exhaustion. Thus, it is proved that emotional exhaustion plays a mediating role between the negativity factors (abusive supervision and negative gossips) and employee engagement thus rejecting the null hypothesis H3.

As the obtained R squared values are not significantly high, the model does not imply causality among the variables involved. Changes in employee engagement or emotional exhaustion on all occasions cannot be completely explained by the changes in the independent variables of the model, abusive supervision and negative gossips. As the R squared values are sufficiently high we can say that the studied factors have a significant effect on employee engagement.

9. Conclusion

The study concentrates on finding out the effect of workplace negativity factors, abusive supervision and negative gossips on employee engagement and the mediating role of emotional exhaustion. Recent studies show that negative factors like abusive supervision has significant effect on employee well-being, performance, absenteeism as well as turnover [18]. After the analysis conducted on a sample of 91 business development executives, it was found that there is significant positive relationship between the workplace negativity factors and emotional exhaustion. Moreover, emotional exhaustion mediates the effect of workplace negativity factors on employee engagement. It was found that an increase in emotional exhaustion due to negativity factors has a negative effect on employee engagement. Female employees were found to have a greater effect of abusive supervision and negative gossips on their exhaustion levels and job engagement levels. Similarly, product-based companies were found to have a greater impact compared to service-based organizations.

10. Limitations

Current study does not focus on various other factors which causes either emotional exhaustion or employee engagement. Moreover, only one particular element of burnout, emotional exhaustion was taken as it was found to have primary influence in the work environment. This study was conducted without controlling various other factors which affect employee engagement. Future scope of the study would be to analyze the same by controlling these factors to get a more efficient model to explain the same.

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