UNDERSTANDING WORKER MOTIVATION IN THE TEA PLANTATION INDUSTRY OF SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The study attempted to identify factors that influence motivation of workers in the tea plantation industry in Sri Lanka. This industry is labour intensive and motivation is essential to retain the workforce. The study focused on working environment, pay and benefits as motivational factors and job stress as a demotivation factor. The primary data were obtained from 120 respondents through structured interviews. The respondents were selected from five tea estates managed by three different Regional Plantation Companies, based on a convenient sampling method. The results confirmed that work environment, pay and benefits are positively associated with motivation of workers. However, job stress and motivation did not show a significant association. The perception that tea plantation employees work under stress was not supported by these evidences. The findings emphasize the need for the companies to broaden the scope of management from productivity to motivational aspects of the employees.

Key words: motivation, working environment, pay and benefits, job stress, tea plantation industry

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1. INTRODUCTION

Employees are considered as valuable and indispensable assets of any organization, who assist the management effectively to implement organization’s policies and decisions. The subject of motivation of employees has become a very important part of the human resource strategy of any organization. Motivation is the force that makes people choose a particular job (Lin, 2007, cited by M. Kamal Hossain and A. Hossain 2012). It is concerned with what the people do and why they do. It answers such questions as why do managers or employees go for work and do a good job (Maduka and Okafor 2014).

The motivation of employees depends on the quantum and strength of their motives. Motives are needs, wants, desire or impulses within the individual and these determine human behavior. Organizational effectiveness depends on how organizations manage their employees (Moynihan and Pandey, 2007, cited by Roos W (n.d)). Conventional theories of motivation go on to prove that employees are induced to achieve their basic and upgraded needs. On the other hand, contemporary theories do not focus much on the satisfaction of needs but place more weightage on achievement of long-term goals, being treated in an equal and fair manner and recognizing employee’s values required for this purpose (Simons and Enz, 2006, cited by M. Kamal Hossain and A. Hossain 2012). It is argued that lack of motivation among the employees will lead to lower performance and high labour turnover which make the achievement of goals of organization impossible.

Motivation persuades a person to improve and enhance his or her commitment towards working hard with a view to achieving the target level to fulfill an identified need or expectation (Mullins, 2007, cited by M. Kamal Hossain and A. Hossain 2012). Researchers believe most of the theories related to motivation attempt to explain rational behavior of employees (Lin, 2007, cited by M. Kamal Hossain and A. Hossain 2012). In practice motivational factors influence the employee’s performance either positively or negatively, but the impact differs depending on what level of motivation they are presently targeting at (Kressler, 2003, cited by M. Kamal Hossain and A. Hossain 2012). Researchers also brought in a different dimension to the motivation factor by bringing in the concept of intrinsic and extrinsic sources (Jones and George, 2004, cited by
M. Kamal Hossain and A. Hossain (2012). Intrinsic sources of motivated behavior have been termed as reinforcement of behavior which leads to finding a job and finding it interesting. Extrinsic sources refer to the tangible and visible rewards such as extra holiday and money.

Sri Lanka’s Tea Plantation sector is a labour intensive one which requires labour throughout the process from plucking green tea leaves to the final level of manufacturing tea. In the Tea Plantation industry the term “workers” is generally used for unskilled and semi-skilled employees. Plantation companies employs a large number of workers who reside in the estate under more or less an elaborate management and are entitled to provident fund benefits. Further the tea plantation industry employs a higher percentage of women workers. Human Resource Development for employees in Plantation Industry is rather different in content and process than that of other organized sectors or industries. Within the workers group there are mainly two categories one is unskilled and other semi-skilled. The unskilled employees are engaged in plucking of leaves and the semi-skilled employees are engaged in tea nursery management, pruning, cleaning and clearing, loosening the soil, and spraying of insecticides and pesticides. In addition to these job categories some employees work in the factory as dryers, mechanics, blenders, store keepers and tea tasters.

In the Tea Plantation Industry labor is one of the most important resources of the companies specially the tea pluckers and factory workers. Therefore, the companies strive to secure employees’ loyalty towards them and to increase their productivity. The rationale for this study is to examine factors which influence the workers motivation in Tea Plantation Industry in Sri Lanka where studies carried out are rare. Most of the studies conducted in Kenya, India and Sri Lanka focus on factors such as job satisfaction of employees, labour productivity and labour out-migration, (Korir 2006; Mahalakshmi et al, 2015; Chandraboos, 2015). Labour productivity has been the most critical factor in labour intensive industries in enhancing performance. It is argued that traditional work norms and weak relationship between workers and the management adversely affect the labour productivity (Dishanka and Ikemoto, 2014). However, it is also important that employees should be motivated to enhance productivity and thereby performance. This study benefited
from a research conducted in Kenya on the factors affecting motivation of workers in tea plantation industry. Empirical studies on motivation is necessary to understand the reactions of the plantation employees to motivational issues.

Plantation workers are different from peasants and other industrial wage employees. Most of the workers live in the same estate area where they work. Their houses are called “Line Rooms” provided by the companies within the estate area which are far from main town. The worker’s wage is determined through the collective agreement reached between the Employers Federation of Ceylon (EFC) and Trade Unions from time to time. There are also different welfare packages and incentives introduced by the companies to motivate and retain the workers such as loan schemes, education and childcare benefits. Efficiency based incentives are a part of the collective agreement (Gunetilleke, Kuruppu, & Goonasekera, 2008). What role motivational factors play in their daily work is rarely studied. Therefore, this study aims to examine the responsiveness of workers to the motivational factors in the Tea Plantation industry and to explore whether conventional motivation strategies can be used to influence productivity and satisfaction of the workers.

2. LITERATURE

Motivation to Work

A study by Korir (2006) on the factors influencing motivation of workers in the Tea plantation industry in Kenya explains that motivation determines how workers behave at work, and what conditions within them are associated with effective job performance. This study identifies psychological rewards such as a sense of challenge, receiving appreciation from the management as intrinsic motivational factors. The study also identifies certain factors such as tangible rewards of salary and fringe benefits, job security and working environment as extrinsic factors that motivate plantation workers. These different types of factors could motivate an employee to perform well in an organisation, and greatly enhance productivity (Kodithuwakku and Priyanath, 2010).

Certain studies place more emphasis on intrinsic motivational factors as having more influence on job satisfaction of plantation workers than the extrinsic factors of working condition, compensation and fringe benefits (John, 2015). There are studies that argue that working condition and pay have higher influence on
the motivation of employees (Remi et al. 2011). To see how different factors play a role in the work of plantation workers in Sri Lanka this study treated working environment and pay and benefits as factors with positive impact on motivation of workers, whereas job stress as a demotivation factor with negative impact on motivation.

**WORKING ENVIRONMENT**

Working environment conditions in the plantation sector can be explained through four different dimensions. These include external physical conditions of weather, temperature, noise, dust and other harmful factors; the subjective factors that include gender, age of the worker, monotony and unfavorable posture during the work; productivity related factors such as duration of shift work, work schedule, work pace and strain; and safety related condition of danger to life or health. Safety also includes training of workers on handling of equipment, machinery and other instruments that will ensure personal protection (Buble, 2006, cited by Bakotić, D., & Tomislav, B. (2013)

Working environment, it is argued, can create positive or negative impact on lifestyle, work-life balance and the health fitness (Chandrasekar 2011, cited by Naharuddin and Sadegi, 2013) The working environment include hours of work, intensity of work, health and safety requirements at work place as well as job security. Naharuddin and Sadegi (2013) have found that workplace environment has significant relationship towards employees’ performance. Studies reveal that employees who complain about comfort and dissatisfaction at the workplace have their performance affected by the working environment (Leaman, 1995, cited by Naharuddin and Sadegi, 2013). There are evidences to suggest that work environment affects health and motivation of the employees strongly (Ettner and Grzywac 2001; Shikdar and Sawaqe 2003 cited by Naharuddin and Sadegi, 2013)). Therefore, this study attempted to test the relationship between working environment and motivation of tea workers.

*Hypothesis 1: Working environment has positive relationship with motivation.*

**PAY AND BENEFITS**

Pay and benefits include salary, allowance, incentives and bonus, medical and insurance packages. One of the main factors which influence work choices is salary (Lai 2009, cited by M. Kamal Hossain and A. Hossain 2012). In a study on fast food industry
Hossain (2012) found pay and benefits playing a key role in motivation of employees. Bokorney (2007), cited by M. Kamal Hossain and A. Hossain (2012) found that good wages along with other benefits have a significant effect on the employee’s motivation. An effective remuneration package ensures the retention of an individual in an organization for a longer period and to reduce the labour turnover (Korir, 2006).

Employees work for wages to meet their day to day financial needs and to uplift the lifestyle (Davidman, 1989). Pay can be related to output of an employee which is called as results oriented pay. Management provides incentives, allowances and bonuses to encourage the employees and motivate them to perform well. In the Plantation industry pay and benefits are decided based on the output level. For instance, in Kenya, Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) provides the payment structures of employees in tea companies. Tea pluckers were paid based on the kilograms of green leaf plucked subject to a minimum daily wage. Even though there is insufficient tea leaves available the workers have been paid not less than the average daily pay. In Sri Lanka the pay structure in this industry is determined by Employers Federation Council and Trade Unions. This pay structure is agreed through a collective agreement and is renewed every two years. Dissatisfaction with pay could lead to less productivity in the plantation industry.

**Hypothesis 2:** Pay and benefits are positively related to worker motivation

**DEMOVATIATING FACTORS**

Stress affects the ability of an individual to cope up or rather it would be appropriate to say that it affects the perception of an individual about personal abilities that he or she possesses (Ricardo et al, 2007). Job stress can be defined as the physical and psychological reactions an individual experience, resulting from a poor fit between the job demands and the individual’s capabilities (Jamal 1985). A high level of stress can lead to poor work performance or even sickness and injury.

Quality of life of an individual can be affected by job stress (Dyck, 2001 cited by Olaniyi 2013). Job stress can be related to several aspects in an organization. It can affect the well-being and satisfaction of employees or it can even influence the overall performance of an organization. Karasek (1979) developed a model study on Job stress which predicts
the mental strain of a job, based on the work demands and the decision latitude. According to the study of Yang, Che and Spector (2008) perceived job stress depends on the fit between preferred and actual job conditions. Every individual has a desire to select his or her own choice of job, but certain circumstances such as family, personal, financial and other commitments force an individual to accept the available job rather than desired job. This may lead to stress after some time when an individual is compelled to do an unwilling job. Therefore, how they feel about their job has direct impact on the organization’s productivity and stability (Milliman et al, 2008 cited by Saraswathy Munusamy).

Some studies have empirically explained that there is strong relationship between job stress and employee motivation (Wani 2013). It is known that excessive work-related stress affects adversely the performance of the employees. A study carried out by Olaniyi (2013) found that in the hospitality industry stress is a common element which demotivates the employees resulting in poor performance. Fatigue and job stress are also common amongst tea plantation Workers (Ahmmed and Hossain, 2016). Therefore, this study attempts to see the nature of relationship between job related stress and motivation in the context of plantation workers.

**Hypothesis 3:** There is a negative relationship between job stress and employee motivation

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a convenient sampling method based on the access to the areas selected for data collection. Primary data were collected from three different Regional Plantation Companies (RPC). A total of five estates and five factories were selected from a mix of high grown and low grown areas of tea estates located in Hatton, Kotagala and Yatiyantota. Data were collected during April 2018. Field and factory workers directly involved in plucking and blending of tea leaves were considered as the population for the study. This category of workers is the live wire for the plantation industry, whose level of motivation will have a direct and immediate impact on the level of output and performance of plantation companies. The total worker population of these estates is 2,291. The sample size identified was 125 composed of 25 respondents from each estate comprising ten from the factory and fifteen from the field. Finally,
120 workers (96%) participated in the study.

The researcher conducted structured interviews administered face to face, and the questionnaire contained closed questions. Respondents were selected from the employees who were present on the day of visit to the site and who were willing to participate in the study. The questions were interpreted to the respondents and the answered were recorded manually. Questionnaire was divided into two parts, the first containing demographic details and 25 questions on motivation, working environment, pay and benefits and job stress. The statements were quantified using a five-point Likert scale.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

PROFILE OF THE SAMPLE

Most of the tea plantation workers are females who reside in the same estate where they are employed. Of the 120 respondents 68.3% are females and 31.7% are males. Most of the respondents (87.5%) are married and 43.3% respondents have work experience of 6 to 15 years in the job. It is found that many employees (63%) are in the age group of 26 to 45 years. Educational achievements of the workers are generally low; 80% of the respondents have obtained only primary education in the estate schools. Also, 19 respondents which is 15.8% of the sample have not attended school and only 5 respondents have secondary education. It was found that that the majority of the respondents (85.8%) are working for 8 hours per day and 10% of the respondents are working up to 10 hours. In terms of income, 67.5% of the employees reported earning a wage in the range of Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 15,000 a month. The wage depends on the number of days the respondents go for work, the quantity of leaves plucked by the tea-pluckers and the number of hours worked by the factory workers.

FACTORS INFLUENCING MOTIVATION

Working Environment

To analyse how working environment affects employee motivation the study examined four dimensions that are supervisory support, physical working conditions, work load and flexible working hours. Ten indicators were designed to measure the influence of working environment. Weather is a critical factor which influences the working environment in tea estates. Severe weather conditions affect attitudes of workers toward
their job. Provision of safety tools and equipment is considered as a measure to help cope with the weather conditions. It is required to provide boots, baskets, cloth suitable for hot and rainy days and other necessary tools to carry out the work. Satisfaction of physical working condition is another indicator for consideration such as the harm caused by leeches. The role of supervisor is also important because they are expected to provide training to the workers on the work carried out by the employees both in the field and the factory.

It is found that there is a low positive correlation \( r = 0.345 \) between working environment and motivation. This shows that the level of satisfaction is low in relation to the working environment. The significance level of the working environment on motivation is 0.01 which means only 1% of confidence level between these two variables. The respondents mentioned that “we do not stop work during rain or hot sun, because we have to meet the target, this affects our health as time goes”. There were more concerns about the physical working condition, and the safety measures provided by the company. A critical aspect is the physical harm caused by the leeches, implying the lack of proper measures in place to minimize the risks. The hypothesis that work environment has positive relationship with motivation is supported but with a weak relationship.
Table 1: Correlation of the variables

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<tr>
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<th>Motivation Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Working Environment</th>
<th>Pay and Benefits Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Job Stress Pearson Correlation</th>
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<td>Motivation</td>
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**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**PAY AND BENEFITS**

This study attempted to find out how much influence pay and benefits can have on worker’s motivation by measuring it through structure of wages offered by company, wage increment interval and the other benefits from the company. The pay structure of the workers in the Regional Plantation Companies are governed by the collective agreement on wages, entered between the Employers Federation of Ceylon and the main trade unions. This collective agreement is signed once in two years. Once the collective agreement is signed the estates coming under Regional Plantation Companies should pay the wages based on the terms reached in the collective agreement.

It is found that there is a low positive correlation (r = 0.369)
between pay and benefits and motivation. The level of satisfaction of the workers about their pay and benefits is low. The significance level of the pay and benefits on motivation is 0.01 which means only 1% of confidence level between these two variables. The hypothesis that pay and benefits have positive relationship with motivation is supported but the relationship is weak.

The empirical studies in other similar contexts reveal that there is a strong relationship between motivation and pay and benefits among the workers in the tea plantation industry. Korir (2006) found that pay and benefits motivate the employees who work as tea pluckers in this industry. Though the literature confirms that there is a strong relationship between pay and benefits and motivation, this study has found a weak relationship. The reason gathered from the respondents is that although the pay increase should take place every two years through the collective agreement, it does not happen as agreed. The revision of salary remains pending even after the lapse of the two years period. Expressions such as “Salary is hardly adequate to maintain the family; salary increase should take place every two years but it doesn’t happen” indicate unattractive pay and benefits. This leads to a feeling of disinclination to work, absenteeism or cutting the working hours.

**DEMOVATING FACTOR: JOB STRESS**

Working for long hours, clarity of responsibilities and duties related to work, boredom in doing the same job routinely, job sharing and work breaks were taken as tools to measure the job stress. In this industry normally, a working day constitutes eight hours, and like other industries, overtime is payable for work over eight hours. The tea pluckers are entitled to an incentive pay if they pluck more tea leaves than the norm fixed by the management.

Correlation between these two variables is weak ($r = 0.100$). The significance level of the job stress on motivation is 0.276 which is greater than 0.05. This means that the relationship is insignificant. The hypothesis that job stress has negative relationship with motivation is not supported. Empirical studies found that there is a strong negative relationship between motivation and job stress among the employees. But this study found that there is a weak positive relationship. This implies job stress is not a significant factor influencing motivation negatively. Previous studies on the nexus between job stress and motivation...
were done on employees of the clerical, managerial or executive levels. There are less studies on operational level employees such as the plantation workers.

It is also significant to see how gender plays a role in the division of work in the plantations. Female workers are more in numbers than the male workers. Female task is mainly plucking the tea leaves, specifically plucking tea buds with two adjacent leaves with their fingers softly. Men in the field are involved mostly task works such as pruning and weed controlling (Adassuriya and Athauda, 2010), and they complete their tasks early, mostly within half a day and leave early from the workplace after receiving the stipulated wage, while females mostly work for eight hours to achieve their target fixed for the day. Men rarely work extra hours to earn additional income. This also implies unattractive incentives to work.

Compared to the previous situation, the flexibility introduced to worker participation also have some impact on the productivity. Some respondents expressed their views saying ‘if they (workers) like they come for work and the management cannot compel them to work’. This implies that there is less compulsion for the workers by the management. Some respondents revealed that ‘the workers come for work only ten to fifteen days per month whereas they must work a minimum of twenty two days to receive the attendance incentive’. The lack of participation of workers seem to be the result of poor incentive structure put in place by the companies. Even though there are incentives provided by the companies, workers do not seem to be attracted by those benefits. This, to some extent, could lead to interpreting tea work as irregular in nature, thereby making measurement of job stress complex. On the other hand, the female workers in this industry also do not seem to have other viable alternative opportunities to shift their job leading to the question of what livelihood options are pursued by women outside the plantations. Other reasons for not exploiting overtime benefits include women’s dual responsibility at home such as collecting firewood for cooking after work, and to caring for the children and sending them to school. Some workers interpreted that ‘they (females) are doing this for many years and they have no difficulties to do this because they are accustomed to perform this tasks with ease’ making the idea of stress less relevant in this context.
5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study attempted to understand the factors that influence worker motivation in the tea plantations. A limited number of researches have been conducted in this industry as such there is a need for a study to explain how worker motivation can be related to a specific context like the tea plantation. Further the empirical researches available are also on issues of social development, gender equity, labour out-migrant and labour productivity related to this industry. It is perceived that the factors which influence motivation in the plantation industry may be different to that of the other industries mainly due to the specific nature of the industry. However, the findings of this study indicates that issues of out-migration, labour productivity and labour unrest can be viewed from the motivation perspective.

Two motivational factors namely working environment and pay and benefits and one demotivation factor namely job stress were studied to examine their relationship to motivation.

Both motivational factors have positive but weak relationship to motivation. The demotivating factor also gives a weak relationship. However, the findings suggest that the two aspects of working environment and pay and benefits can be considered as important areas of intervention to improve worker productivity and satisfaction, because of the positive relationship exhibited. The worker agitation in the industry for a long time has been associated with these two factors, demanding better working conditions and pay. The evidences generated through this study provide further justification for critically looking at worker motivation in the industry. Specific areas of intervention include, enhanced pay to meet the normal living standards and timely disbursement of additional monitory benefits, which can significantly improve worker output and motivation at operational level. This implies meeting their pressing immediate economic needs. Other areas of improvement include ensuring safety of the workers in the field by investing in basic safety measures such as special clothing, appropriate footwear and safety equipment that could significantly improve willingness of workers to spend more time in the field.

Another area of improvement is training and career prospects. As found in the study, there are very limited opportunities for training and career advancement that drive particularly young people away from the industry. Lack of
modernization of the employment categories with colonial period connotations such as ‘kanganee’ needs serious rethinking. Modernization of the operational level categories could attract fresh labour in to the industry.

The findings also suggest the need to examine other factors such as psychological, social, leadership and non-financial benefits that could explain motivation among the plantation workers. Research could be extended further by studying a large sample from a wider geographic area and more indicators on different factors. This study was focused on the workers attached to the regional plantation companies, whereas there are other settings such as tea small holding sector and government owned estate sector to study and to understand variations in the factors affecting motivation.

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