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Support for HR found to boost employee commitment and performance

Based on an interview with Elise Marescaux on her paper* “Developmental HRM, employee well-being and performance: The moderating role of developing leadership,” coauthored with Sophie De Winne and Anneleen Forrier (European Management Review, 2018).

Do HR practices improve employee wellbeing and employee performance? New research by Elise Marescaux shows that supervisor support can make or break the success of developmental HR practices. She finds a link between support of HR by supervisors and more committed, productive employees.

Biography

Elise Marescaux is Assistant Professor, Human Resources Management at IÉSEG School of Management since September 2015. She received her PhD in Business Economics in 2013 from KU Leuven in Belgium. Among other things, her research focuses on how organizations can positively influence employees through Human Resource Management.

Methodology

Marescaux, De Winne and Forrier devised a survey to understand more about company developmental HR practices and supervisor behaviors and how these affect employee wellbeing and performance. Team supervisors were also asked to report on their employee performance. A total of 426 employees spread across 70 teams of 7 Belgian organizations took part. The organizations were from different industries, ranging from a hospital to a consulting company which made the data sample highly heterogeneous. The data was quantitatively analyzed through structural equation modelling which revealed that employee wellbeing increases when supervisors are supportive of developmental HR practices and actively help employees develop.

Companies invest heavily in HR practices to increase employee productivity – and ultimately company revenue. But what do we know about the success of HR practices when it comes to improving employee wellbeing and productivity? The answer is very little. “Some studies show that HR practices reduce stress and increase commitment and performance, while others show the opposite,” says Elise Marescaux. To understand the truth behind this, she set out to discover what lies behind these puzzling inconsistencies.

Can supervisors influence the success of HR practices?

Marescaux and co-workers suspected that supervisors play an important role when it comes to HR success. In their study, they decided to focus on developmental HR processes that aim to help employees develop skills for their current or future jobs through training, promotion opportunities,

career counselling and appraisals. Certain supervisors exhibit development leadership: they support their employees through coaching and advice, inspiring them to develop and encouraging them to engage with the developmental HR opportunities available. Others, however, do not. This prompted Marescaux to ask the question, “Can the behavior of supervisors support or undermine the HR practices provided by the organization?”

Wellbeing linked to commitment and exhaustion levels

To answer this, the team devised a survey to understand more about company developmental HR practices and supervisor behaviors and their effects on employee wellbeing. Focus was given to how committed to the organization employees feel as this is thought to be an important aspect of wellbeing that increases performance. In addition, employees were asked about feelings of exhaustion as this can be indicative of stress levels. Supervisors also reported on employee behavior and performance.

HR success in the hands of supervisors

“Overall, we found that developmental HR practices increase employee wellbeing,” says Marescaux. “When an organization offers more training and self-development options, employees feel more committed and are less exhausted. But we also find that supervisors play a key role in ensuring the success of HR processes.” The study revealed that practices, such as career counseling and development appraisals, only improve wellbeing when supported by a developmental leader. In the absence of such leadership, the HR practices actually reduce wellbeing. “Going through career counselling or an appraisal can be stressful if your supervisor sees it as a waste of time and doesn’t take it seriously,” Marescaux explains.

In conclusion, Marescaux’s study shows that HR practices can only be sustainable and reach goals with the support of supervisors: “The HR system and protocols in place can be well developed and have great potential but if supervisors do not encourage employees to use them, the return on company investment will be minimal,” she says. It appears that supervisors are the linchpin for HR practices: their support is critical to ensuring investment in HR pays off.

Practical applications

To ensure that HR practices create value for companies, the key role that supervisors play in their success needs to be understood by organisations and managers. “Supervisors must be involved in HR decisions,” Marescaux urges. “They need to be trained to ensure that HR practices are implemented correctly and in a way that provides the greatest benefits to the organisation.” To enable this, HR departments need to interact and communicate with supervisors and emphasize the importance of their role. This will ensure that they are motivated and have the skills to get employees to interact well with HR practices. She adds, “Employees should be able to reach out to supervisors for support so that they can get the most from HR practices and develop their skillset.”

Surprising lack of correlation between wellbeing and performance

The study also unexpectedly revealed limited evidence for the idea that increased wellbeing increases employee performance, except for one measure of wellbeing: commitment. The study did confirm that employees who are more committed to their companies perform better. But,

surprisingly, no significant link was found between exhaustion levels and short-term performance: “In the long-term, exhaustion may result in burnout with a negative impact on organizational performance, but our results show that it doesn’t have a direct impact in the short term,” reports Marescaux.

**“Developmental HRM, employee well-being and performance: The moderating role of developing leadership,” co-authored with Sophie De Winne and Anneleen Forrier from KU Leuven (European Management Review, 2018).*

About IÉSEG School of Management: Established in 1964, IÉSEG School of Management is one of the top business schools in France. As a French Grande École and member of the *Conférence des Grandes Écoles*, IÉSEG is one of the most prestigious higher education institutions in the country. It has also been awarded the triple crown of international accreditations: AACSB, AMBA, and EQUIS.

The School currently has 5 150 students at its two campuses; the historic campus in Lille and at Paris at La Défense, Europe’s biggest business hub. Bachelor, Master of Science and Post-graduate Programs at IÉSEG are taught in English. IÉSEG collaborates closely with the largest institute of research in Europe, the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). 81% of IÉSEG’s permanent faculty is international, and the school has a network of more than 280 partner universities in 69 countries.

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