

STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES AND EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE IN ETHIOPIAN PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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Abstract

This study focuses on exploring the effect of Strategic Human Resource Development Practices (SHRDP) on employee performance as mediated by organizational learning in selected public sector organizations of Ethiopia. With a view to achieving this objective, descriptive and explanatory research design were applied. Moreover, the researcher employed mixed research approach, where qualitative approach is made to be embedded within the quantitative approach. The data were collected by means of questionnaires from a sample of 392 employees working in three regional Public Service and Human Resource Development Bureaus. The data analysis was done using SPSS version 27.0. Accordingly, regression analysis was used to determine if the effects of SHRD practices on employee performance is mediated by organizational learning. Particularly, Hayes Process Macro Mediation Analysis and Sobel test were used to determine if organizational learning mediate the relationship. Accordingly, the study found out that SHRD practices has significant effect on employee performance and organizational learning plays mediating role in the relationship between SHRD and employee performance. As the direct, indirect and total effects are all found significant, the mediation is partial. Hence, it is concluded that OL partially mediates the relationship between SHRD practices and employee's individual level performance in the selected public sector organizations. Finally, the researchers recommend future researchers to focus on testing the moderating effects of OL in the relationship between SHRDP and employee performance.

Keywords: SHRD, Public Sector, Organizational Learning, Employee Performance.

Background and Justification

Organizations in general, whether it is private or public, operates with and through people as their major job performance depends and judged on the basis of the performance of their human resources. Such competent employees and managers become available only through the systematic human resource development practices in the organization. As explained by Ahuja (1990), HRD is a manufacturer of men that in turn manufactures the goods and services. Therefore, the continuous attraction, development and retention of the human resources become a prerequisite for excellence (competitive advantage) for every organization. In this regard, it is important for modern organizations to deal with their human resources strategically.

The concept of strategic human resource development (SHRD) has been used in many human resource management related researches in the last many decades (Tseng 2008, AHRD 2001, Garavan, Costine and Heraty 1995, Purcell 2003, Fahim 2018). Ongoing analysis within the field focuses on how human resource development can be aligned to other organizational functions to enhance organizational performance. According to the different HRD studies, people are the main resource influencing organization's performance. According to Tadesse (2016), trained human resource can affect firm profitability since the quality of their service delivery depends on staff competence and performance.

Correspondingly, Wang, Hutchins and Garavan (2009) explained that integrating HRD with the organizations strategy and utilizing a particular set of HRD policies and practices would improve workers knowledge and skill, and consequently organizational performance. Dealing with HRD strategically requires a new way of thinking and interacting among different units/sections of an organization.

For the purpose of this study, the term SHRD means long-term planning of the total system and environment in which education, training and development takes place. The emphasis is on continuous development of employees for the attainment of organizational goals. This implies that one of the key tasks, perhaps the most important, of public sector human resource management is to strategically plan for human resource development in line with the overall strategic plan of the organization and the changing public demands. However, According

to Tessema, et al. (2015), in many public organizations, only little attention is provided to human resource development mechanisms and approaches. In most cases, HRD departments are vulnerable to reduction and even elimination because the top management often does not value them.

Recently, strategic human resource development (SHRD) has received significant attention by academia and practitioners as a way of connecting human resource development programs and policies to long-term objectives of organizations. HRD plan must be anchored on the organization's strategic goals and directions. Alignment of HRD with organizational strategic priorities has always been an issue in the HRD field (Swanson and Holton 2009, Mavin and Bryans 2000, Lundgren and Torraco 2020). For such study, nowhere is this more important than in the public sector where rigorous quality measures require constant performance improvement; while at the same time public organizations are expected to do more with less. However, most HRD practitioners of public sector organizations do not know how to successfully align the HRD efforts with organizational needs or what is involved in the process because the research lags behind practice. Ultimately, the literature reports a general skepticism about the alignment between HRD and organizational strategic priorities (Lundgren and Torraco 2020). It is this misalignment that led the author research on the topic.

The role of SHRD in improving organizational learning and performance has also become an important issue of research and policy debate in recent years (Alagaraja Meera 2012, Thoman and Lloyd 2018). Accordingly, the adoption of strategic models of HRD has also become a relevant issue for public sector organizations in Ethiopia. Recently, the Ethiopian public service is experiencing a time of dynamic change. The heightened call for optimum citizen satisfaction is causing a shift of consciousness among government organizations from merely performing its duties to providing excellent service that impact on its constituents. This paradigm shift requires public organizations to continually develop its workforce to keep them apace with the increasing demand for a more responsive, accessible, courteous, and efficient public service. Despite the demand from the public, the Ethiopian public sector organizations, as reported by Gebrekidan, are suffering from inefficiency and poor service delivery because of less attention given to HRD (Gebrekidan 2011, Gates and Langevin 2010).

Although there were attempts of offering training for the development of technical skills and reform initiatives, public sector organizations have yet to incorporate SHRD practices into the workplace. Integration of SHRD practices is essential to organizational efficiency, effectiveness, learning, and the creation of a sustainable learning culture (Garavan, Shanahan, et al. 2016, Hamadamin and Atan 2019). There are numerous research studies on SHRD. However, only few papers have studied empirically whether the relationship between SHRD practices and organizational performance is mediated by other variables.

More importantly, almost all of the studies concerning the impacts of SHRM practices on firms' performance have been conducted in the developed countries like US and the UK and in private manufacturing and industry sector (Garavan, Shanahan, et al. 2016, Fahim 2018, Hamadamin and Atan 2019, Potnuru and Sahoo 2021, Graha, et al. 2019, Shokkat, Shajan and Pathak 2019). In light of this, review of the existing literature indicates that no comprehensive attempt has been made to study the SHRD practices and its effect on organizational performance in Ethiopian public sector organizations. Thus, this study is an attempt towards studying the overall strategic human resource development practices and its effect on organizational performance in the selected public-sector organizations to fill the practical and theoretical gaps.

Literature

Public sector human resource development has got strategic significance and attention from both the practitioners and academia (Simachew 2020). One of the reasons for this is the increased recognition that people are considered as the important source of sustained competitive advantage (Wright and McWilliams 2014, Gebrekidan 2011). In Ethiopian context, the public service is experiencing a time of dynamic change. The heightened call for optimum citizen satisfaction is causing a shift of consciousness among public organizations and its workforce from merely performing its duties and functions to providing excellent service delivery process that influence its constituents (Gebrekidan 2011). This paradigm shift requires public organizations to strategically and continually develop its work force to keep them apace with the increasing demand.

Currently, there is a need for an integrated and synchronized approach to HRD in the public sector. Accordingly, many public organizations today design their own SHRD programs. In Ethiopia, FDRE Civil Service Commission and Regional Civil Service Commissions or Regional Public Service Bureaus do these programs. The Federal Civil Service Commission of Ethiopia was legally established with the objective of realizing a meritorious, efficient, and productive civil service, in accordance with the law. The power and duties of the commission includes issuing the general criteria on education and work experience necessary for civil service positions; ensuring that the recruitment, placement, promotion, transfer, training and observance of discipline of employees in accordance with the law (Proclamation No. 8/1995 1995).

According to the Federal Civil Servants Proclamation No. 515/2007 and Proclamation No. 1064/2017, a civil servant shall be trained to improve her/his capability and attain better performance or to prepare her/him for higher responsibility based on career development. The proclamation explicitly tells that government institutions shall have the duty to identify the training needs of the institution and the civil servants and to prepare plans and budget for training and thereby ensure that civil servants receive the necessary training and furnish information thereon to the Agency. This mandate is given to the Ethiopian Civil Service Commission and Regional Civil Service Bureau. With this, the mission strives to create effective and efficient civil service in order to serve nations, public and citizens based on the principles of integrity, transparency and accountability to implement the democratic development government policies and objective (FDRE Civil Service Commission 2020).

One of the major mandates given to the civil service commission by the proclamation No.1097/2018 is to comprehensively consolidate country wide civil servants human resource information system based on the mandate it organize, periodically update, collect, compile and disseminate annual national civil service human resource statistical data. Within the Commission, the Human Resource Information and statistics System Directorate is given the mandate to execute the above indicated duties and responsibilities. This statistical document included Federal, Regional states and the two cities' administrations government organizations. It focused on very useful information, which provides for entries. It contains two parts that show demographic and personal data of employees (Proclamation No. 1097/2018 2018).

There are two perspectives in HRD – the learning perspective and performance perspective. According to the learning perspective, learning should be a primary focus of HRD, and organizations that adopt such a focus will have a more satisfied and productive workforce and will be more effective. This perspective focuses on change through learning and sees HRD as the field of study and practice responsible for fostering long-term, work-related learning capacity at the individual, group, and organizational levels in organizations (Vinesh 2014, Graha, et al. 2019, Potnuru and Sahoo 2021). HRD is thus primarily concerned with increasing the learning capacity of individuals, groups, collectives, and organizations through the development and application of learning-based interventions for purpose of optimizing human and organizational growth and effectiveness (Chalofsky, Rocco and Morris 2014, AHRD 2001).

However, the performance perspective maintains that HRD will only be perceived as having strategic value to the organization if it has the capability to connect the unique value of employee expertise with the strategic goals of the organization (Jacobs and Christopher 2003, Thoman and Lloyd 2018). Performance advocates have also seen little chance that HRD will gain power and influence in organizations by ignoring the core performance outcomes that organizations wish to achieve. By being both learning and performance advocates, HRD stands to gain the most influence in the organizational system. If the field of HRD focuses only on learning or individuals, then it is likely to end up marginalized as a staff support group (Cokins 2009, Lyons 2016). Hence, SHRD need to be geared towards improving organizational performance.

The mediating role of organizational learning in the relation between independent and dependent variables has occupied a good amount of research during the last decades. A study conducted by Liao and Wu (2009), support the mediating role of organizational learning in the relationship between knowledge management and organizational performance. Similarly, Aragon, Jimenez and Valle (2014) proved that training does not have a direct effect on organizational performance but an indirect effect by improving other organizational outcomes of which organizational learning is one. Another study from selected IT companies in Chennai city India revealed that there is a robust relationship between the impact of training on organizational performance, and learning mediates the impact of training on organizational performance (Saikumari, Subramani and Akbar 2018). According to a study conducted by Aragon, Jimenez and Valle (2014), training, mediated by organizational learning, have significant effect on organizational performance. i.e., organizational learning plays mediating role between training and organizational performance. However, only few papers have studied empirically the relationship between SHRD practices and employee performance.

Methods and Model

This particular investigation is aimed at explaining the mediating effect of organizational learning in the relationship between strategic human resource development practices and employee performance. In order to suit the problem statement, this study utilized exploratory and descriptive research design with mixed research approach. The study, being explanatory in nature, identified three variables in the relationship between SHRD and employee perceived performance. Based on prior theoretical and empirical literatures in the field of SHRD, nine SHRD (independent) variables were identified: integration with organizational missions and goals, top management support, environmental scanning, HRD plans and policies, line manager commitment and involvement, the existence of complementary HRM activities, expanded trainer role, recognition of culture, and

emphasis on evaluation. Additionally, organizational learning (individual and group) is used as a mediating variable that links the relationship between SHRD practices and employee performance. A sample of 392 employees from the three regional Public Service and Human Resource Development Bureaus (Addis Ababa, Oromia, and Benishangul Gumuz) were taken proportionally. Data were gathered through structured questionnaire and key informant interview, and analyzed using SPSS 24.00 and presses model.

In order to show the relationship between the study independent, dependent and mediating variables, a conceptual model is proposed (as shown in figure 1). The proposed framework shows SHRDP as independent variable, OL as the mediating variable, and employee performance as the dependent or outcome variable of the study. Figure 1(a) shows the total effect portion of the model path-c, while figure 1(b) presents the direct effect and the indirect mediation effects of the proposed model path-a, path-b and path-c'.

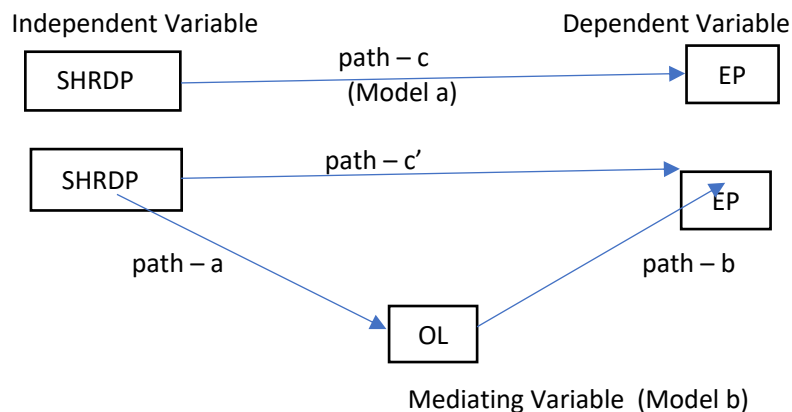


Figure 1: Conceptual mediation model: (a) Total effect model and (b) Direct and indirect effects model.

Result and Discussion

Mediation analysis started in 1920 by Sewall Wright. Wright used the method by path coefficients and proposed indirect and direct causal relationships for the genetically derived color variations in guinea pigs (wright 1920). A variable is considered a mediator to the degree to which it carries the influence of a given independent variable (IV) to a given dependent variable (DV). According to Hayes (2013), mediation analysis assume that the independent variable (X) affects the mediator (M), which in turn, affects the dependent variable.

After a brief review of pertinent literatures on statistical tests for mediation, the authors of this research used Hayes Process Macro Mediation Analysis and the Sobel test. Further, the authors performed a number of assumptions tests that should be met before performing a mediation analysis. Accordingly, the dependent, independent, and mediator variables are a continuous scale, the data do not show multicollinearity, there is no spurious outliers, and the distribution of the variables should be approximately normal.

1.1 Hayes Process Macro Mediation Analysis

Effects of SHRD on Organizational Learning (path-a)

Result of the effects of SHRD (IV) on Organizational Learning (MV) is presented in table 1. The coefficient obtained on path-a, is 8.4735 and the test of statistical coefficient $t = 8.8297$, while $p = 0.0000$ ($p < 0.05$). The lower limit confidence interval (LLCI) is 0.1381 and the upper limit confidence interval (ULCI) is 0.2142. The output, based on the p -value ($p < 0.05$) and both LLCI and ULCI values $\neq 0$, indicates significant effects between the SHRD (IV) and Organizational Learning (MV) thus satisfying first condition of mediation (Baron and Kenny 1986, A. Hayes, Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A Regression-Based Approach. 2013).

OUTCOME VARIABLE: Organizational Learning (OL)

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.4283	.1835	14.0433	77.9631	1.0000	347.0000	.0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	8.4735	1.5556	5.4470	.0000	5.4139	11.5332
SHRDP	.1752	.0198	8.8297	.0000	.1361	.2142

Table 1: Effects of the relationship along a-path.**Direct and indirect effects of the study model (path-b and path-c')**

The mediation coefficient along path-b is 0.2701, $p = 0.0000$ ($p < 0.05$), test of statistical significance $t = 7.7764$ while lower and upper confidence interval (LLCI and ULCI) obtained along path-b are 0.2018 and 0.3385 respectively. The result indicates that there is a significant effects and has fulfilled second condition of mediation (Baron and Kenny 1986). In addition, the second result as presented in table 2 provides path-c' coefficient is 0.4549, $p = 0.0000$ ($p < 0.05$), LLCI and ULCI obtained are 0.2878 and 0.6220 respectively. P-value < 0.05 which has significant effects along path-c', Consequently, the result obtained has fulfilled the condition of mediation by obtaining significant effects between IV and DV after adding MV in the model as presented in table 2 (Baron and Kenny 1986, A. Hayes, Introduction to Mediation, Moderation, and Conditional Process Analysis: A Regression-Based Approach. 2013).

OUTCOME VARIABLE: Individual level performance

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.5535	.3064	35.1663	76.4296	2.0000	346.0000	.0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	20.4173	2.5648	7.9606	.0000	15.3727	25.4618
SHRD	.2701	.0347	7.7764	.0000	.2018	.3385
OL	.4549	.0850	5.3547	.0000	.2878	.6220

Test(s) of X by M interaction:

F	df1	df2	p
.0550	1.0000	345.0000	.8147

Table 2: Direct and indirect effects (path-b and path-c').**Total effects between SHRD and Employee Performance (path-c)**

The coefficient for the total effect in the model obtained is 0.3498 p -value = 0.0000 ($p < 0.05$) and a test of statistical significance t (10.7245) while LLCI and ULCI are 0.2857 and 0.4140 respectively. The result indicates significant effects; thus, the model satisfies the condition of the mediation model as presented in table 3 (Baron and Kenny 1986).

OUTCOME VARIABLE: Individual level performance

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
.4989	.2489	37.9708	115.0141	1.0000	347.0000	.0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	24.2717	2.5580	9.4886	.0000	19.2406	29.3028
SHRD	.3498	.0326	10.7245	.0000	.2857	.4140

Table 3: Total effect (path-c)**1.2 Sobel Test**

Sobel test is one of most widely known test for mediation analysis (Sobel 1982, 1986). After testing if all the assumptions to apply Sobel test were fulfilled, we used an on-line calculator for the Sobel test to identify if a mediator variable (OL) significantly carries the influence of an independent variable (SHRD) to a dependent variable (Employee Performance). Though other tests (Aroian and Goodman test) were performed, Sobel test was used dominantly for it relies on the assumption of normality unlike the Aroian and Goodman tests. For $p < .05$, the criterion z value is the usual 1.96; any z value greater than this would be interpreted as support for the hypothesis of mediation (Woody 2011). In our case, the Sobel test statistics is 6.58 which is greater than 1.96 and the t -values for both the effect of IV on MV and MV on DV are significant (8.830 and 9.881 respectively). The other important

parameter here is the p-value, which in this case is less than 0.05. Therefore, we can conclude that the indirect effect between SHRD and EP is statistically significant ($p\text{-value} \leq 0.05$). A Sobel test statistic of 6.58 also indicates that the mediator variable significantly mediates the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. Accordingly, the mediator variable organizational learning mediates the relationship between SHRD and employee performance.

	Input:		Test statistic:	p-value:
ta	8.83	Sobel test:	6.584	0
tb	8.88	Aroian test:	6.565	0
		Goodman test:	6.602	0

Table 4: Sobel Test confirmatory result for the study model.

Conclusions

In recent times, mediation analysis and confirmation of mediation effects’ occurrence in a model is judged based on indirect effects i.e. effects along path-a, and path-b (A. Hayes 2013). Statistically, indirect effects are the difference between total effects (path-c) and direct effects in the model, and the result should be equal to the product of path-a, and path-b (Hayes and & Preacher 2014). i.e. mediation or indirect effects $c - c' = (0.3498 - 0.2701) = 0.0797$. Then again mediating or indirect effects = $a * b = (0.1752 * 0.4549) = 0.0797$. Equally, the mediating or indirect effect automatically generated by the PROCESS macro software is 0.0797 (as shown in table 5). The occurrence of mediation effects in the study model is further confirmed with Sobel-Test and this was intended to further confirm and validate the first result obtained via Bootstrap Confidence Interval method as statistically recommended (MacKinnon, Lockwood and Williams 2004).

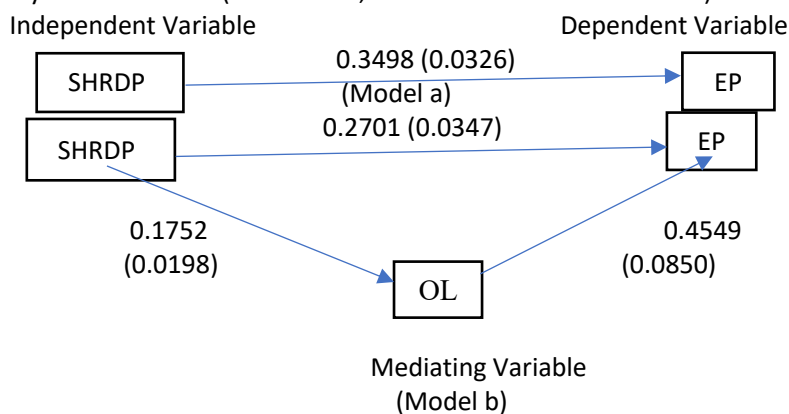


Figure 2: Final mediation model of the study: (a) Total effect model and (b) Direct and indirect effects model.

Total effect of X on Y					
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
.3498	.0326	10.7245	.0000	.2857	.4140

Direct effect of X on Y					
Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
.2701	.0347	7.7764	.0000	.2018	.3385

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:				
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
OL	.0797	.0180	.0460	.1172

Table 5: Total, Direct, and Indirect effects of X on Y.

This study aimed to determine if OL mediates the relationship between SHRD (IV) and Employee performance (DV) in the Ethiopian public sector organizations. Accordingly, the result indicated that, organizational learning

has partially mediated the effects of SHRD on employee performance. As the direct, indirect and total effects are all significant, the mediation is found to be partial. Hence, Ethiopian public sector organizations need to improve their SHRD practices and the organizational learning if they want the individual level performance increase. The research recommends that future researchers should focus on testing the developed model for moderating effects.

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