



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, IT AND MANAGEMENT

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DOES EMPOWERMENT MODERATE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PERCEIVED OVERQUALIFICATION AND JOB ATTITUDES?

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, issue of unemployment and underemployment has been fueled by the changes in both economic and globalization especially in developing countries. The present study was designed to examine the role of empowerment of the relationship between perceived overqualification of employees and attitudes of job satisfaction, performance and intention to remain. A total of 256 employees were surveyed from 21 organisations located in Sri Lanka. The results showed that overqualification was negatively related to job satisfaction and intentions to remain, and positively related to performance. As hypothesized, empowerment moderated the relationship by ameliorating the negative effects of perceived overqualification on job satisfaction, intentions to remain. Empowerment did not affect the positive relationship overqualification with job performance. Implications, limitations and ramifications of our findings for future research are also discussed.

KEYWORDS

Overqualification, empowerment, job attitudes.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, the younger generation's level of education has improved through the extension of free and compulsory education, although this has not corresponded to better job opportunities in Sri Lanka. The increase of education and the relative scarcity of qualified jobs available for them make the underemployment. However, the supply of these qualified workers has outpaced the growth in demand for higher educated labour in such a way that many individuals are forced to accept a job that requires less skill than they actually obtained. This fact, along with the high unemployment rates, makes it particularly difficult for young people to hold a qualified job and once they have finished formal education typically involves the acceptance of jobs for which they are overqualified (Buchel et.al., 2004). Consequently, overqualification has emerged and become a problem. As a result of the emergence and magnitude of the overqualification phenomenon, a sharp increase in responsibility for growing worries and attention in the labour market has been taken place. While the study on unemployment has regained the attention of organisational scholars over the past decade (e.g. Warr et.al., 1988), the issue of underemployment has remained largely ignored. As Zvonkovic (1988) notes, politicians and the popular press have made a low unemployment rate the symbol of economic well being. Largely ignored have been the economic and emotional problems of those who are underemployed in jobs requiring significantly less education and work experience than they possess (Kaufman, 1982; Newman, 1988). High level of unemployment and underemployment rate has significantly contributed to change governments in Sri Lanka especially in 1960s and 1970s. It was one of the main root causes of the emergence of political violence (Karunaratne, 2006).

Perceived overqualification is defined as "a situation where individuals feel that their skills and abilities are not fully utilized" (Khan & Morrow, 1991) or "as an individual's perception that he is working in an inferior, lesser, or lower quality of type of employment" (Feldman, 1996). While underemployment may be a societal problem, management has generally not considered "too much education" or "underutilization of skills" among their employees to be a problem. Employers continue to hire people with higher levels of education than job content requires (Howe, 1988). Moreover, job requirements are rarely, if ever, set to screen out individuals who are overqualified for the job (Feather & O'Brien, 1986).

The logic underlying these studies is that increased education results in higher employee expectations and preferences for different values, and, subsequently the presence of unmet expectations, unrewarded value preferences, or lack of skill utilization influence on employees' attitudes and behaviors, such as high level of job dissatisfaction, low level of job involvement, feelings of being unappreciated, low mental health, and absence of career routes (Newman, 1988; Feldman & Turnley, 1995; Johnson & Johnson, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 2000; Johnson et.al., 2002; Maynard et.al., 2006; Verhaest & Omey, 2006). Finally, underemployment has potentially serious consequences given its association with higher turnover rates (Buzawa, 1984) and its identification as a source of job related stress (Kaufman, 1982). Overqualification is a clear signal of reduced employee commitment. Most executives believe that employee commitment is a critical factor in determining whether a company is successful (e.g., Cappelli, 1999). Therefore, it stands to reason that underemployment may ultimately hinder organizational effectiveness. Unfortunately, because of the paucity of research on underemployment, our current understanding of this construct and its relations is still inadequate.

A majority of the research conducted on overqualification has been in Western countries including Canada (e.g., Sadava et al., 2000) and Western Europe (e.g., Verhaest & Omey, 2006). Overqualification is even more widespread in developing countries (Gorg & Strobl, 2003), and yet few overqualification studies have been conducted outside of the West. Present study has been chosen to conduct in Sri Lanka. In addition, to date, most of the research on overqualification has focused on effect of overqualification. But this study specially designs to identify empowerment as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction, intentions to remain and job performance, and would explicate how organisations can benefit from employing workers who perceive overqualification. This research represents a contribution to the existing underemployment literature. The objective of this study is to examine moderating effect of empowerment of the relationship between overqualification and job satisfaction, intentions to remain and job performance. Therefore, this study supports to be maintained overqualified employees' positive attitudes.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Underemployment is defined somehow as "an inferior, lesser, or lower quality type of employment". There are five dimensions of underemployment: a) Person possesses more formal education than the job requires, b) Person involuntarily employed in field outside area of formal education, c) more skills or experience than required by the job, d) Person involuntarily engaged in part-time, temporary, or intermittent employment, e) low pay, relative to either a previous job or to others with similar educational backgrounds. The many of the dimensions of underemployment are analogously related to the overqualification (Feldman, 1996).

Perceived Overqualification is defined as "the extent to which employed individuals perceive that they possess surplus job qualification and have limited opportunities to acquire and use new job related skills" (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Such a scenario exists when individuals perceive that they have more education, skills, or experience than is required to perform one's job. Overqualification may be determined by both the objective characteristics and the subjective interpretations of the employment situation. However, perceived overqualification is distinct from actual qualification. Although actual overqualification can be objectively measured on the basis of job analysis data, measures of perceived overqualification often suspect because of measurement issues. Nevertheless, workers' perceptions of their jobs are meaningful interpretations of the work environment.

Quinn and Mandilovitch (1975) found that their subjective measure of underemployment –the number of years of education that the employee felt was necessary for the job–was a significant predictor of job satisfaction, with those who were the most overqualified for their jobs reporting the most dissatisfaction. The researchers pointed out that this operationalisation of overqualification demonstrated a stronger inverse relationship with job satisfaction than with any of the objective measure. Johnson and Johnson (1992) formulated a multi item measure of underemployment, asking directly about perceptions of overqualification.

The relationship between overqualification and job satisfaction has captured the greatest research attention. A number of studies have evaluated this relationship by equating overqualification with job satisfaction. The logic underlying these studies is that increased education results in higher employee expectations and preferences for different values, and, subsequently, lower job satisfaction (e.g., Qumn & Mandilovitch, 1975; Mottaz, 1986; Johnson & Johnson, 1992). Unfortunately such studies imply that higher levels of education result in job dissatisfaction without actually demonstrating the presence of unmet expectations, unrewarded value preferences, or lack of skill utilization, an implication that is not supported by the literature (Hamilton & Wright, 1981; Lawler, 1985). Drawing on the review of the literature described above, it is hypothesized that:

H₁: Overqualification is likely to be associated with lower job satisfaction

Overqualified individuals tend to report greater intentions to leave their jobs and engage in job search behavior, relative to non underemployed individuals (Feldman & Turnley, 1995; Holtom et al., 2002; Verhaest & Omev, 2006). In his meta-analysis, Thorsteinson (2003) found no difference in turnover intentions between part-time and full-time employees. Maynard and his colleagues (2006) found that employees who perceive themselves as overqualified for their jobs are less likely to report intentions to remain at their jobs. Therefore, there is little evidence for an association overqualification and turnover intentions though these relations have often been hypothesized (e.g., Feldman, 1996). Drawing on the review of the literature described above, it is hypothesized that:

H₂: Overqualification is likely to be associated with lower intentions to remain

Past research indicates a positive relationship between perceived overqualification and job performance. In 2008, Fine and Nevo surveyed among call center employees and found that perceived overqualification was positively related to supervisor ratings of performance. Holtom et al. (2002) established a positive relationship with supervisor ratings in a sample of retail employees. Perceptions of overqualification of employee is to possess skills exceeding job requirement, in general sense, which should lead to higher performance. Drawing on the review of the literature described above, it is hypothesized that:

H₃: Overqualification is likely to be associated with higher job performance

Different researchers argued the way to deal with perceived overqualification. Khan and Morrow (1991) argued that job enrichment could be a way to deal with perceived overqualification. Battu et.al., (2000) argued that employers should offer employees greater initiative to deal with the negative effects of overqualification on employee morale. In the current study, empowerment was introduced as a moderator of the relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction, intentions to remain and job performance. In fact, concepts relating to empowerment have been proposed as moderators of perceived overqualification in the past.

In the sense of Conger and Kanungo (1988), empowerment is the motivational concept of self-efficacy. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) argued that empowerment is multifaceted and that its essence cannot be captured by a single concept. They defined empowerment more broadly as “increased intrinsic task motivation manifested in a set of four cognitions reflecting an individual's orientation to his or her work role: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact”. At its core the concept of empowerment involves increased individual motivation at work through the delegation of authority to the lowest level in an organization where a competent decision can be made (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Empirical support has begun to accumulate regarding the relationship of employee empowerment to important work related outcomes (Sparrowe, 1994; Spreitzer, 1995; Spreitzer et.al., 1997; Liden et.al., 2000). Empowerment signals to employees that the organisation trusts their judgment and competence (Eisenberger et.al., 1999; Chen & Aryee, 2007), which may convey to employees that they have high status within the organization. Thus, the relationships between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction, intention to remain and job performance should be alleviated for employees who perceive high levels of empowerment.

H_{3a}: Empowerment will moderate the negative relationship between perceived overqualification and job satisfaction

H_{3b}: Empowerment will moderate the negative relationship between perceived overqualification and intentions to remain

H_{3c}: Empowerment will moderate the positive relationship between overqualification and job performance

METHODS

Participants

The participants in the study consisted of 256 employees working from 21 organisations in Sri Lanka. Of a total of 300 questionnaires directly distributed to employees, 256 were returned for a response rate of 85 per cent. Sixty-nine per cent of the participants were between 30 and 49 years of age; 90 per cent were male, and 85 per cent were married. The sample was consisted of 61 % male (N=156) and 39 % female (N=100) employees. Sixty one per cent of the sample were younger than 35 years of age, with a range of 21 to 54 and 53 per cent were single. Fifty nine percent of the respondents in the sample indicated degree holders and higher professional qualification; 22 percent indicated attainment of A/L qualification; balance of 19 percent completed O/L qualification. On average job tenure was reported 5.57 years.

Measures

Perceived overqualification was measured using four items originally developed by Johnson and his colleagues in 2002. Respondents were asked to report their level of agreement on a five point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item was “My formal education overqualifies me for my present job”. In the current study, the Chronbach alpha for job satisfaction was 0.83.

Job satisfaction was measured using five items originally developed by Brayfield and Rothe (1951) called as Job Satisfaction Inventory (JSI). Despite the age of this measure, it has still been used widely in recent literature, postgraduate dissertations (e.g., Moorman, 1993; Patel, 1995; Wu & Short, 1996; Aryee et al., 1999; Soler, 2000; Leong, 2001). Further in 2006, Lambert and his colleagues. also used Job Satisfaction Inventory questionnaire to measure job satisfaction in their survey of work family conflict on correctional staff. There are five questions were used to measure job satisfaction, one of them was reverse scored. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). An example is: “My job is like a hobby to me”. In the current study, the Chronbach alpha for job satisfaction was 0.75.

There are five questions were used to measure *job performance* which is originally developed by Bright in 2007.. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Unsatisfactory) to 5 (Excellent). One of them was reverse scored. An example is: “I perform well compared to other employees in my work place”. In the current study, the Chronbach alpha for job performance was 0.77.

Intentions to remain was measured using three items originally developed by Cammann et al. 1983. Items were scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample item was “I rarely think about quitting”. Cronbach's alpha reliability was .76.

Empowerment was measured using the 12-item scale developed by Spreitzer (1995). Four dimensions of empowerment (meaning, self-determination, competence, and impact) combined into the form of the overall empowerment construct (Spreitzer, 1995). A sample item was “I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my job”. In the current study, the Chronbach alpha for empowerment was 0.80.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Means, standard deviations, and inter correlations among variables are provided in Table 1. They reported mean score of 4.12 (*SD* =0.42), indicating that high level of overqualification. Participants were also asked a series of questions about their satisfaction. The mean response was 3.96 (*SD*= 0.32), indicating high level of job satisfaction. Results indicated that employees reported mean score of 3.72 and 4.02 for the intentions to remain the job and job performance respectively. Mean value of reported empowerment was 3.11 (*SD* = 0.22), showing moderate level of empowerment.

TABLE 1: MEAN, STANDARD DEVIATION, AND CORRELATION MATRIX

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1 Overqualification	4.12	0.42	1.00				
2 Job Satisfaction	3.96	0.32	-0.37*	1.00			
3 Intentions to remain	3.72	0.19	-0.39*	0.21*	1.00		
4 Job Performance	4.02	0.21	0.43**	0.41*	0.36*	1.00	
5 Empowerment	3.11	0.22	0.43*	0.46*	0.28*	0.31*	1.00

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed).

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (1-tailed).

As expected, overqualification was significantly negatively correlated with job satisfaction ($r = -.37, p < .05$), intentions to remain ($r = -.39, p < .01$), and job performance ($r = .43, p < .01$).

Empowerment was tested as moderator of the relationship between overqualification and job satisfaction, intentions to remain and job performance by using hierarchical regression analysis. In this analysis, overqualification was entered as a block at the first step, and the empowerment was entered in the second step. In the next step, the centering procedure was used, suggested by Aiken and West for regression analysis using interaction terms (Martins et al., 2002). The overqualification x empowerment interaction term was entered at the third step.

TABLE 2: REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF THE MODERATING EFFECTS OF EMPOWERMENT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OVERQUALIFICATION AND JOB SATISFACTION

Step		ΔF	df	R	ΔR^2	Beta
Step 1	Overqualification					-.27*
		13.96*	1,254	0.32	0.21	
Step 2	Empowerment					0.33*
		09.13*	1,253	0.45	0.13	
Step 3	overqualification x empowerment					0.02*
		2.38*	1,252	0.49	0.04	

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

As shown in the table, results indicated that there was a significant R^2 change value (.21; F change = 13.96, $p = .03$) at step 1. In the second step, again there was a significant R^2 change value (.13; F change = 09.13, $p = .03$). In the third steps, R^2 change value was statistically significant still when the interaction term was entered (.04; F change = 2.38, $p = .04$). These results were consistent with Hypothesis 3a.

Follow up procedures recommended by Tabachnick and Fidell cited in Treistman (2004) were employed to establish the form of the interaction and its correspondence to the pattern predicted by the present hypothesis. To aid in interpreting the results, a graph was created with the predicted mean outcomes for four conditions. These conditions included low empowerment / low overqualification, low empowerment / high overqualification, high empowerment / low overqualification, and empowerment / high overqualification. Based on a regression equation (Tabachnick and Fidell cited in Treistman, 2004)) using the low or high conditions for overqualification and empowerment, it was possible to derive a predicted score of job satisfaction for the four conditions. The predicted job satisfaction scores for the four conditions were presented in the Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: MODERATING EFFECTS OF EMPOWERMENT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OVERQUALIFICATION AND JOB SATISFACTION

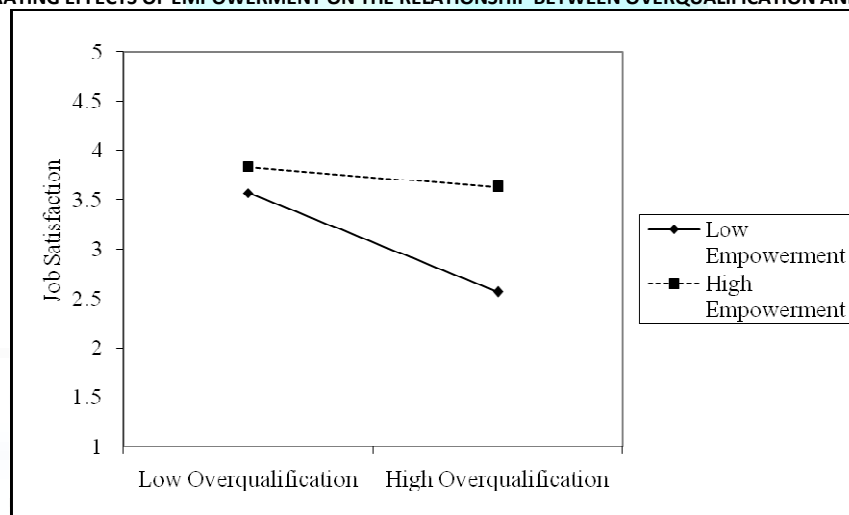


Figure 1 shows the results for the interaction of moderator between overqualification and job satisfaction. As shown in the figure job satisfaction is low when the empowerment is low but the amount of overqualification is high. However, when the empowerment is high and the amount of overqualification is provided is also high, the job satisfaction is slightly negative than low level overqualification at high level of empowerment. Finally, when the empowerment is low, employees actually have lower levels of satisfaction.

Therefore, empowerment appears to moderate the relationship such that higher levels of empowerment are predictive of a positive relationship between overqualification and job satisfaction, whereas relatively lower levels of empowerment are predictive of a negative relationship between overqualification and job satisfaction. Hypothesis 3a was supported.

TABLE 3: REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF THE MODERATING EFFECTS OF EMPOWERMENT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OVERQUALIFICATION AND INTENTIONS TO REMAIN

Step		ΔF	df	R	ΔR^2	Beta
Step 1	Overqualification	16.97*	1,254	0.21	0.11	-.29*
Step 2	Empowerment	10.17	1,253	0.30	0.09	0.19*
Step 3	overqualification x empowerment	3.17**	1,252	0.33	0.03	0.17*

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

As shown in the table, results indicated that there was a significant R^2 change value (.11; F change = 16.97, $p = .03$) at step 1. In the second step, again there was a significant R^2 change value (.09; F change = 10.17, $p = .04$). In the third steps, R^2 change value was statistically significant again when the interaction term was entered (.03; F change = 3.17, $p = .04$). Therefore empowerment does play as moderator between overqualification and intentions to remain.

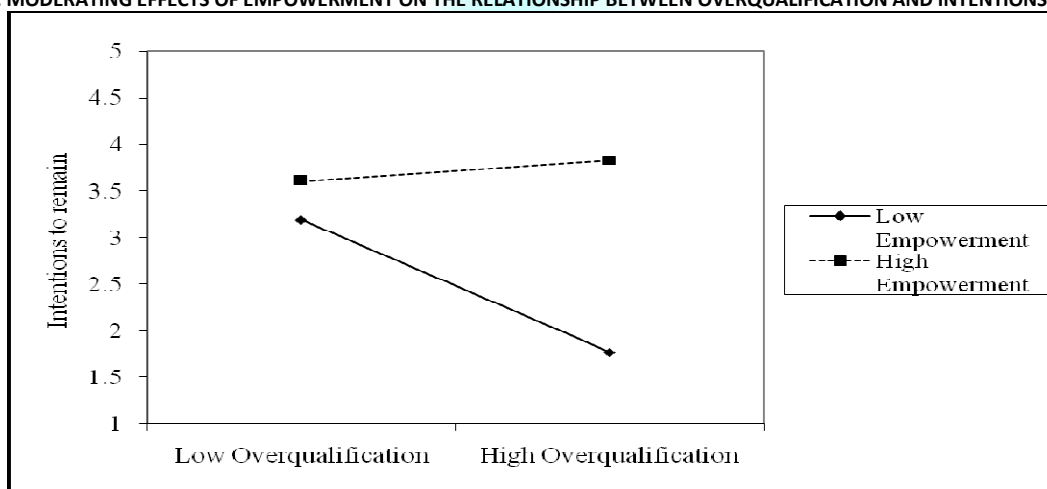
FIGURE 2: MODERATING EFFECTS OF EMPOWERMENT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OVERQUALIFICATION AND INTENTIONS TO REMAIN

Figure 2 shows the results for the interaction of moderator between overqualification and job satisfaction. As shown in the figure intentions to remain is low when the empowerment is low but the amount of overqualification is high. However, when the empowerment is high and the amount of overqualification is provided is also high, the intentions to remain is positive than low level overqualification at high level of empowerment. Finally, when the empowerment is low, employees actually have lower levels of intentions to remain.

Therefore, empowerment appears to moderate the relationship such that higher levels of empowerment are predictive of a positive relationship between overqualification and intentions to remain, whereas relatively lower levels of empowerment are predictive of a negative relationship between overqualification and intentions to remain. Hypothesis 3_b was supported.

TABLE 4 REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF THE MODERATING EFFECTS OF EMPOWERMENT ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN OVERQUALIFICATION AND JOB SATISFACTION.

Step		$F \Delta$	df	R	$R^2 \Delta$	Beta
Step 1	Overqualification	14.31*	1,254	0.37	0.28	.32*
Step 2	Empowerment	11.43*	1,253	0.48	0.11	0.22*
Step 3	overqualification x empowerment	4.54	1,252	0.50	0.02	0.37

** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

As shown in the table, results indicated that there was a significant R^2 change value (.28; F change = 14.31, $p = .04$) at step 1. In the second step, again there was a significant R^2 change value (.11; F change = 10.43, $p = .04$). In the third steps, R^2 change value was statistically significant again when the interaction term was entered (.02; F change = 4.54, $p = .21$). Therefore the results did not support to prove moderating role of empowerment between overqualification and job performance. Hence hypothesis 3_c was rejected.

CONCLUSION

Results supported that perceptions of overqualification were negatively related to job satisfaction and intentions to remain only when employees reported low levels of empowerment. It can be noted that overqualified employees experience negative consequences only when they do not feel empowered. In addition, overqualified employees reported high levels of performance regardless of empowerment which is consistent with past research (e.g., Fine & Nevo, 2008; Holtom et al., 2002). Study found that empowerment moderated the negative effects of perceived overqualification on job satisfaction and intentions to remain, but not job performance.

These findings have implications for the management of organisations. It is certain that overqualified employees exist in contemporary workplaces. This study empirically proves that the negative consequences of perceived overqualification are preventable. It seems that empowering employees is an effective way in which organizations can benefit from the overqualified employees and organisation can maintain them as members of the organization longer. Our findings indicate that there are distinct advantages to hiring employees who perceive that they are overqualified. It was found that these employees may make valuable

contributions to the organization by performing at higher levels, so although they may stay for a shorter period, their time in the organization may be valuable. Though the present study provides number of insights, there were some limitations that have to be pointed out. As the research design of this study was cross sectional one, it is impossible to infer a causal relationship. Undertaking research at one period in time can only reflect that period in time. A greater focus on longitudinal research designs may give a better indication in the area of research. Job performance was measured from the employees' perspective. Future research should obtain data from both supervisors and employees to more objectively measure the construct. In regard to overqualification, deeper investigation needs to take place in the changing forms of management techniques. The melting pot of overqualification spheres provides managers of organisations new challenges.

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