SUPERVISOR'S ROLE IN TRAINING PROGRAMS AS A MANAGER OF LEARNING PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT. According to the training literature, a supervisor's role in training programs has two major elements: supervisor support and supervisor communication. The ability of supervisors to play effective roles in training programs may increase employees' motivation to learn. The nature of this relationship is interesting, but the role of supervisor's role as a predicting variable is less emphasized in a training program models. Therefore, this study was conducted to examine the effect of supervisor's role in training programs on motivation to learn using 152 usable questionnaires gathered from non-academic employees who have worked in a technological based public university, Malaysia. The outcomes of stepwise regression analysis showed that the supervisor support and supervisor communication significantly associated with motivation to learn. Statistically, this result demonstrates that supervisor's role in training programs does act as an important predictor of motivation to learn in the organizational sample. In addition, discussion, implication and conclusion are elaborated.

Key words: supervisor's role in training programs, motivation to learn, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

Supervisors are considered as the first level of management who are given major duties and responsibilities to lead work groups in organizations [Goldstein, Ford 2002, Noe 2010]. In the administration of training programs, supervisors usually refer to the management team and experienced employees to ensure that the implementation of training activities will achieve the set objectives [Yamnill, McLean 2001, DeSimone et al. 2002]. Their role is often seen as a critical training climate factor that may support or resist employees to enter, participate and learn necessary knowledge, up to date skills, new abilities and positive attitudes in training programs [Blanchard, Thacker 2007, Noe 2010]. Interestingly, extant research in training climate reveals that the ability of supervisors to provide adequate support and use comfortable communication about training programs may lead to an increased employees' motivation to learn in organizations [Baldwin, Magjuka 1991, McGraw 1993].

Although the nature of this relationship is interesting, not much information has explained about the role of supervisor's role as an important predicting variable in training program research literature [Chiaburu and Takleab 2005, Tai 2006]. Many scholars argue that the role of supervisor's role as a predicting variable is given less emphasized in previous studies because they has much described supervisor role characteristics and given little attention on how and why the characteristics of

supervisor's role influencing motivation to learn in the workplace training program models. As a result, findings of such studies have not provided sufficient evidence to be used as guidelines by practitioners in designing appropriate strategies for improving the effectiveness of staff training and development program in an era of global competition [Tsai, Tai, 2003, Blanchard, Thacker 2007]. Hence, it motivates the researchers to further explore this relationship. The aim of this paper is to examine: (i) the link between supervisor support and motivation to learn, and (ii) the link between supervisor communication and motivation to learn.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Explanation of the constructs

This study highlights two important constructs, namely supervisor's role and motivation to learn. According to human resource management scholars like Facteau et al. [1995], Chiaburu and Takleab [2005] and Ismail et al. [2010] state that supervisor's role has two major features: supervisor support and supervisor communication Firstly, supervisor support is often related to a supervisor who provides encouragement and opportunities to improve employee performance in organizations [Goldstein, Ford 2002, Noe 2010]. Secondly, supervisor communication is often viewed as the activity or process of expressing ideas or feelings while giving people information, as well as exchanging ideas and information between a person or a group through symbols, actions, written or spoken words in order to impart information and ideas effectively [Lumsden, Lumsden 1993, Harris et al. 2000]. Besides that, many organizational behaviour scholars, such as Knowles [1989], Blanchard, Thacker [2007] and Noe [2010] state that the motivation to learn consists of two major components: motivation and learning. Motivation is often defined as direction, persistence and amount of effort that may be expanded by an individual to achieve his/her particular objective. Learning is usually viewed from the human, cognitive and behaviour perspectives. In a training program model, many scholars view that supervisor support, supervisor communication and motivation to learn are different constructs, but highly interrelated.

Theoretical and empirical evidence between the supervisor's role and motivation

This study is consistent with the notion of motivation to learn theories. First, Locke and Latham's [1990] goal setting theory postulates that goals direct individuals to perform a task. The application of this theory in training programs shows that the ability of a supervisor to encourage employees learning a proper technique and providing clear explanations about the procedures of attaining the goals will strongly increase employees' motivation to learn [Brown et al. 2001, Goldstein, Ford 2002]. Second, Adams' [1965] equity theory states that fair or unfair treatment has a significant impact on individual's attitude and behaviour. The application of this theory in training management shows that employees who receive sufficient support from their supervisors while applying and attending training programs will perceive equity. In this regard, if individuals feel that they are fairly treated and supported by their supervisors, this will subsequently invoke their motivation to learn. [Mathieu et al. 1992, Chiaburu, Takleab 2005]. Finally, Vrooms' [1973] expectancy theory highlights that an individual will perform certain actions if he/she perceives such actions may bring valued outcomes. Its application shows that the ability of a supervisor to openly and honestly communicate the value of attending training programs and its importance of learning new competencies will strongly increase employees' motivation to learn.

Several studies have shown the positive effect of supervisor's role in training programs on motivation to learn. For example, several studies about supervisor's role in training programs based on a sample of 45 trainees in UK organizations [Axtell, Maitlis 1997], and 100 technical employees in North Kuching City Hall, Malaysia [Ismail et al. 2008] generally showed that properly implemented supervisor's role in training programs had invoked employees' motivation to learn up to date knowledge and skills. Specifically, two surveys about supervisor communication in training programs

were carried out based on a sample of 126 employees in Northern Taiwan [Tai 2006], and 100 technical employees in North Kuching City Hall, Malaysia [Ismail et al. 2007]. Meanwhile, three surveys about supervisor support in training programs were conducted based on a sample of 179 trainees and 32 supervisors at certain US organizations [Nijman 2004], 119 employees who attended training program in a large organization in USA [Chiaburu, Takleab 2005], and 100 technical employees in North Kuching City Hall, Malaysia [Ismail et al. 2007]. Their findings advocate that the willingness of supervisors to provide better explanations about the training plans and the ability of supervisors to properly provide training supports had invoked employees' motivation to learn.

Conceptual framework and research hypothesis

The literature has been used as foundation to develop a conceptual framework for this study as shown in Figure 1.

Independent Variable **Dependent Variable**

Supervisor Role Characteristics:
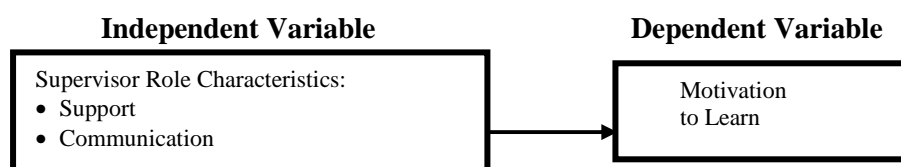- Support
- Communication

Motivation
to Learn

Fig. 1. Conceptual framework
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Based on the framework, it seems reasonable to assume that the ability of supervisors to play proper roles in training programs will affect Malaysian public university employees as this has influenced overseas employees. Motivation to learn theories further suggest that the ability of supervisors to provide sufficient support and practice comfortable communication will strongly motivate employees to learn necessary knowledge, new skills and positive attitudes in training programs. Therefore, it can be hypothesized that:

> *H1:*   *There is a positive relationship between supervisor support and motivation to learn*

> *H2:*   *There is a positive relationship between supervisor communication and motivation to learn*

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study used a cross-sectional research design, which allowed the researchers to integrate training management literature, the in-depth interview, the pilot study and the actual survey as a main procedure to gather data for this study. At the initial stage of this study, in-depth interviews were conducted before and during the pilot study. Before conducting the pilot study, an in-depth interview was conducted involving two experienced supporting administrative staff. Then during the pilot study, another in-depth interview was done involving an assistant human resource manager, head of Training Unit, and eight experienced supporting staff who work in the organization. They are selected based on purposive sampling where the employees have good knowledge and experience about the design and administration of training programs. Information gathered from such employees helped the researchers to understand the nature of supervisor's role, motivation to learn characteristics, job performance features, as well as the relationship between such variables in the target organization. After transcribing, categorizing and comparing the information with relevant theoretical and empirical evidence, the triangulated outcomes were used as a guideline to develop the content of the survey

questionnaire for the pilot study. Next, a session was initiated for discussing the items in survey questionnaire with the above participants in order to verify the content and format of the questionnaire for the actual study. The back translation technique was used to translate the survey questionnaires in Malay and English and this may increase the validity and reliability of the instrument [Van Maanen 1983, Wright 1996].

Measures

The survey questionnaire consisted of four sections. Firstly, demographic information had 9 items. Second, supervisor support had 17 items that were derived from the training research literature [Chiaburu, Takleab 2005, Ismail et al. 2007]. Thirdly, supervisor communication had 13 items that were derived from the transfer of training literature [Yamnill, McLean 2001; Ismail et al. 2007]. Fourthly, motivation to learn had 12 items that were based on the training program literature [Noe 2010, Rodríguez, Gregory 2005]. All the items used in the questionnaire were measured using a 7-item scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' (1) to 'strongly agree' (7). Demographic variables were used as the controlling variable because this study also focused on employees' attitude.

Unit of analysis and Sampling

The targeted population for this study was 574 non-academic employees who have worked in a Malaysian public university. After considering the organizational rules, a convenience sampling technique was used to distribute the questionnaire to all 574 employees who willing to participate through the Human Resource office. Of the number, 152 usable copies of the questionnaire were returned to the researchers, yielding a response rate of 26.4 percent. The survey questions were answered by participants based on their consent and voluntary basis. The number of this sample exceeds the minimum sample of 30 participants as required by probability sampling technique, showing that it may be analyzed using inferential statistics [Leedy, Ormrod 2005, Sekaran 2008].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The demographic profile of the respondents is as follows: The most respondent characteristics were male (65.1%), aged ranging from 20 to 39 years old (37.5%), MCE/SPM holders (56.6%), length of service with less than 6 years (48.7%), training attended in own organization (46.7%), and those who had learning experience in technical field, management field and administrative field (34.2%). The results of validity show that three factors were extracted, which were related to the three tested variables: supervisor support (3 items), supervisor communication (5 items), and motivation to learn (4 items). Relying on Hair et al. [2010] guidelines, these statistical analyses showed that: (1) all variables exceeded the acceptable standard of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's value of 0.6, (2) all variables were significant in Bartlett's test of sphericity, (3) all variables had eigenvalues larger than 1, and (4) the items for each variable exceeded factor loadings of 0.50 [Hair et al. 2010]. All research variables were also found exceeded the acceptable standard of reliability analysis of 0.70 [Nunally, Bernstein 1994]. As a whole, these results confirm that the measurement scales met the acceptable standard of validity and reliability.

Table 1 shows the results of Pearson correlation analysis and descriptive statistics. The mean values for the variables are from 3.3 to 4.0, signifying that the levels of supervisor's support, supervisor communication, and motivation to learn ranging from moderately high (3) to highest level (7). The correlation coefficients for the relationship between the independent variables (supervisor support and supervisor communication) and the dependent variable (motivation to learn) were less than 0.90, indicating that the data were not affected by serious collinearity problem [Hair et al. 2010]. An examination of multicollinearity in the coefficients table shows that the tolerance value for the relationship between the independent variables (i.e. supervisor support and supervisor communication) and the dependent variable (i.e. motivation to learn) was 0.51, and 0.41, respectively. These tolerance

values were more than the established tolerance value of 0.20 (as a rule of thumb), indicating the variables were not affected by multicollinearity problems [Fox 1991, Tabachnick et al. 2007].

Table 1. Pearson correlation analysis and descriptive statistics
Tabela 1. Analiza korelacji Pearsona i statystyki opisowe

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Pearson Correlation Analysis		
			1	2	3
1. Supervisor Support	3.3	0.42	1		
2. Supervisor Communication	3.7	0.37	.51**	1	
3. Motivation to Learn	4.0	0.41	.45**	.41**	1

Note: Significant at $p* < 0.05; **p < 0.01$

To better understand the relationship between the two supervisory elements and motivation to learn, a-two predictors multiple regression linear regression (MLR) model was proposed. The two-predictor variables are supervisor support (X_1) and supervisor communication (X_2). Based on the stepwise method used, all the two-predictor variables were found to be of significance in explaining motivation to learn. As depicted in Table 3, the estimated model is as in the following equation: Y (MTL) $= 1.556 + 0.510X_1 + 0.410X_2 + e$. The R^2-squared of 0.433 implies that the two predictor variables explain about 43.3 percent of the variance/variation in the motivation learn. This indicates that the supervisor support and supervisor communication act as important predictor of motivation to learn in the organizational sample.

Table 2. Estimates of coefficients for the regression model
Tabela 2. Oszacowanie współczynników dla modelu regresji

	B (unstandardized Coefficients)	Std error	Beta (standardized Coefficients)	*t*	*p*-value
Constant	1.556	0.152		13.136	0.0001
Supervisor Support	0.510	0.037	0.554	6.105	0.0001
Supervisor Communication	0.410	0.028	0.436	4.354	0.0001

Notes: $R = 0.658$; $R^2 = 0.433$; Adj. $R^2 = 0.430$

Specifically, Table 3 shows that the largest beta coefficient (0.510) for supervisor support. This means that this variable makes the strongest unique contribution to explaining the dependent variable (motivation to learn), when the variance explained by the other predictor variable in the model is controlled for. The Beta value of supervisor communication is the second highest (0.410). Thus, H1 and H2 that relates the two supervisor role characteristics with motivation to learn are fully supported. Therefore, it can be argued that the two supervisory elements are directly involved in improvements in employee motivation to learn. This also suggests that the greater the extent to which these two elements are present, the greater will be the motivation to learn among the employees. Moreover, the findings also indicate that the most important supervisory element for motivation to learn is supervisor support (b= 0.510), which was significant at the 0.0001 (p < 0.05) levels.

The implications of this study can be divided into three major aspects: theoretical contribution, robustness of research methodology, and contribution to practitioners. In term of theoretical contribution, the findings of this study show that the ability of supervisors to implement adequate support and comfortable communication style has increased employees' motivation to learn in the studied organization. This result has supported and broadened training research literature mostly published in western countries [Axtell, Maitlis 1997, Baldwin, Magjuka 1991, McGraw 1993,

Chiaburu, Takleab 2005]. With respect to the robustness of the research methodology, the survey questionnaire used in this study had met the acceptable standards of validity and reliability analyses. Hence, this could lead to the production of accurate and reliable findings.

Regarding practical contributions, the findings of this study can be used as a guideline by human resource managers to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of training programs in government of owned universities. This objective may be achieved if management implements several important suggestions: firstly, customize training contents and methods according to university needs and expectations. For example, the content of training programs for management employees should impart advanced human skills that may help them to understand individuals' cognitive, emotion and psychomotor. Management employees will feel ease to apply such training contents if professional trainers are hired to guide management employees in implementing interpersonal communication skills, managing change and conflict, as well as practising problem solving techniques in the workplace. Secondly, allow supervisors to be involved in higher-level training committees so that they may clarify the needs and expectations of majority employees at the grass root level. Information gathered from such employees may be used to establish appropriate training modules that can support organizational and human resource management's strategies and goals. Thirdly, change in the university human resource policies from hiring employees based on conforming to organization policies and procedures to hiring employees based on creativity and innovations. This new hiring perspective will help university management to hire employees who possess higher levels of knowledge, experience and competencies. Their capabilities can be used to train operational employees in terms of attitude and working styles, as well as to handle employees' demands with better treatment like showing more respect, be honest and accountable. Finally, improve the type, level and/or amount of compensation and benefits program for supervisors based on current market needs in order to motivate them to accomplish organizational strategy and goals.

The outcomes of stepwise regression analysis confirmed that supervisor's role (i.e. supervisor support and supervisor communication) significantly associated with motivation to learn, which fully explains that the ability of supervisors to properly adequate support and use comfortable communication may increase employees' motivation to learn necessary knowledge, up to date skills, new abilities and positive attitudes in training programs. This finding is consistent with organizational training research literature mostly published in Western organizational settings. Therefore, current research and practice within training management models needs to consider supervisor support and supervisor communication as a vital aspect of the organizational training system where it could increase individuals' motivation to learn in training programs. Hence, these positive outcomes may lead employees to sustain and achieve organisational competitiveness in an era of global competition.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The results of this study should consider the following limitations. Firstly, the data was only taken once during the duration of this study. Therefore, it did not capture the developmental issues such as intra-individual change and restrictions of making inference to participants and/or causal connections between variables of interest. Secondly, this study only focused on particular elements of a supervisor's role and neglected other important factors (e.g. employee's readiness, leadership styles of the supervisor and supervisors training framing). Thirdly, although a substantial amount of variance in dependent measures explained by the significant predictors is identified, there are still a number of unexplainable factors that can be incorporated to identify the causal relationship among variables and their relative explanatory power [Tabachnick et al. 2001]. Finally, the sample for this study was taken using a convenient sampling technique in a single public university. These limitations may decrease the ability of generalizing the results of this study to other university settings.

The above limitations were adjudged to be unavoidable. However, some of them that accompanied this study could be overcome in future research if firstly, the organizational and personal characteristics that may act as a potential variable and can influence the effectiveness of supervisor's

role in training programs should be further explored, which would help to provide meaningful perspectives for understanding the individual differences and similarities that affect motivation to learn. Secondly, the weaknesses of cross-sectional research design may be overcome if longitudinal studies are used to collect data and describe the patterns of change and the direction and magnitude of causal relationships between variables of interest. Thirdly, the findings of this study may produce different results if this study is done in more than one university. Finally, as an extension of the motivation to learn, future researchers should consider other theoretical constructs of organizational climate (e.g. transfer of competency, training policy and procedures, facilities, budget and employee readiness) because they have been widely recognized as an important link between supervisor support and training outcomes [Yamnil & McClean 2001, Blanchard, Thacker 2007, Ismail et al. 2007].

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study confirm that supervisor's role (supervisor support and supervisor communication) does act as an important predictor of motivation to learn in the organizational sample. In this sense, the two study hypotheses (H1 and H2) have been supported. In the context of this study, supervisors have provided adequate support (e.g., encourage employees to attend training programs and apply newly acquired knowledge and skills that they gain from training programs in their jobs) and used comfortable communication style (e.g. provide feedback, encourage discussion and openly deliver information on training) when dealing with training programs. This practice has increased employees' motivation to learn necessary knowledge, up to date skills, new skills and positive attitudes in the organization.

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ROLA NADZORUJĄCEGO W PROGRAMACH SZKOLENIOWYCH JAKO MENADŻERA PROGRAMU NAUCZANIA

STRESZCZENIE. Zgodnie z literaturą dotycząca zagadnień szkoleniowych, rola nadzorującego w programach szkoleniowych składa się z dwóch głównych elementów: wsparcie nadzorującego i komunikacji nadzorującego. Umiejętność efektywnego wypełniania obu tych elementów przez prowadzących szkolenie może zwiększyć motywację pracowników do nauki. Charakter tej wzajemnej zależności jest interesujący, ale na rolę nadzorującego jako przewidywalnej zmiennej w modelach programu szkoleniowego jest kładziony zwykle mniejszy nacisk. Z tego powodu przeprowadzono badania w celu określenia wpływu roli nadzorującego w programach szkoleniowych na motywację do nauki. Posłużono się ankietą przeprowadzoną wśród 152 pracowników pozaakademickich, którzy pracowali w technicznej uczelni publicznej w Malezji. Wyniki analizy regresji wykazały, że wsparcie nadzorującego i komunikacji nadzorującego są istotnie związane z motywacją do nauki. Wyniki statystyczne wykazały, że rola nadzorującego w programach szkoleniowych jest ważnym predykatorem motywacji do nauki w próbie organizacyjnej. Przedstawiono dyskusję oraz wnioski tych badań.

Słowa kluczowe: rola nadzorującego w programach szkoleniowych, motywacji do nauki, Malezja.

DIE ROLLE DES VORGESETZTEN IN AUSBILDUNGSPROGRAMME ALS LEHRPLAN-MANAGER

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG. Nach Angaben der Literatur über die Ausbildung, die Rolle des Vorgesetzten hat zwei wichtige Elemente: die Unterstützung des Vorgesetzten und die Kommunikation des Vorgesetzten. Die Fähigkeit des Vorgesetzten zur effektiven Durchführung dieser beiden Elemente kann die Motivation der Arbeitnehmer zu lernen erhöhen. Die Natur dieser Beziehung ist interessant, aber auf die Rolle des Vorgesetzten als berechenbare Variable in einem Ausbildungsprogramm-Modelle ist weniger Wert gelegt. Aus diesem Grund wurde diese Studie durchgeführt, um die Wirkung der Rolle des Vorgesetzten in Ausbildungsprogramme auf die Lernmotivation zu bestimmen. Der Fragebogen wurde unter 152 nicht-akademische Mitarbeiter, die in den technischen staatlichen Hochschulen in Malaysia gearbeitet haben, durchgeführt. Die Ergebnisse der Regressionsanalyse zeigten, dass die Unterstützung des Vorgesetzten und die Kommunikation des Vorgesetzten wesentlich mit der Lernmotivation verbunden sind. Statistische Ergebnisse zeigten, dass die Rolle des Vorgesetzten in den Ausbildungsprogramme ein wichtiger Prädiktor für Lernmotivation in die Stichprobe ist. Zusätzlich sind die Diskussion und Schlussfolgerungen aus diesen Studien präsentiert.

Codewörter: Rolle des Vorgesetzten in Ausbildungsprogramme, Motivation zu lernen, Malaysia.

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