Designing Interventions to Enhance Employee Engagement among Administrative Employees at Heilongjiang International University

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Abstract

With the rapid development of economy and increasingly fierce market competition, higher education institutions are also facing the increasingly complex environment. Employee engagement, as one of the important concepts of human resources, has emerged as a critical success factor in today's competitive marketplace. The purpose of this research is to determine the influential factors affecting employee engagement in order to design interventions for enhancing employee engagement. The study was conducted at a higher education institution—Heilongjiang International University (HIU), a private university established in 1993. The administrative employees were chosen as the research targets to answer the questionnaire and participate in the interview. Mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative were used in this research. The multiple linear regression was applied as the analytical tool for investigating the influence of independent variables on dependent variables. Content analysis was used as the tool to analyze the qualitative data to validate the statistical analysis. From the results four out of five hypotheses are supported by the data analysis, which indicate that factors including career growth, coworker support, supervisor support and performance feedback have significant influence on employee engagement. Interventions are designed accordingly to improve employee engagement based on the results. The findings can provide both theoretical and practical value in the field of higher education organization management.

Introduction

With the rapid development of economy and increasingly fierce market competition, having high quality human resources has become the focus and the most fundamental competitive advantage among organizations. In the past, organizations tended to focus on traditional human resources practices such as compensation and performance appraisals but the present and future of work have evolved around the job performers themselves. Employee engagement, as one of the important concepts of human resources, has emerged as a key

business driver for success in today's competitive marketplace. Moreover, global competitiveness among organizations has made employee engagement a hot discussion topic in recent years. Building an engaged workforce can be one of the strategic initiatives for an organization to maintain success.

Nowadays, employee engagement is widely used and explored in the corporate world, but has been hardly studied in the educational area (Robinson, et al., 2004). Higher education institutions are facing the increasingly complex environment including the increased demand for access to its services, reduced number of student recruitment and increased internationalization and market competition (Rees-Johnstone, 2020). Consequently, administrative work in higher education has become more complex, and the workforce is required to execute this administrative work.

The research is a case study at a higher education institution, Heilongjiang International University (HIU), a private university established in 1993, located in Harbin, the northeast of China. There are 19 administrative departments, 10 academic faculties and schools covering 31 majors currently in HIU. At present, the university is running stable, but in such a steady and relaxed working environment that makes some employees passively do their work and experience burnout at work. The SWOT analysis was used to assess and diagnose the reasons for such behaviors. From the analysis, it showed that one of the weaknesses of the organization is low employee engagement at work. The current situation also revealed other factors contributing to these behaviors such as unclear working goal when performing the work task, less career development opportunities, poor support, encouragement and concern for employees, lack of communication and teamwork among employees and lack of effective feedback between management and employees. If these phenomena exist for long, it will directly have an impact on the management of the university and may indirectly affect the teaching quality and student recruitment. Therefore, analyzing the factors affecting employee engagement and proposing an effective intervention plan to improve employee engagement is an important issue that the university leaders should currently be concerned about.

In addition, paying more attention to employee engagement of administrative staff is of essential for private universities to improve their management level and comprehensive competitiveness. In other words, the improvement of employee engagement for administrative staff will make the university maintain sustainable development and high-quality education. The objective of this research is to determine the factors affecting employee engagement and suggest interventions to improve employee engagement. The determination of factors underlying this research were based on the diagnosis of the focal organization and application of engagement models.

Literature Review

Goal Setting

The principles of goal setting, which were developed in the mid-1960s by Edwin Locke, provide practical accounts of motivation in both managerial and academic contexts. In the mid-1960s, Edwin Locke developed the principles of goal setting in the managerial and academic context. A goal is the objective of the action that people desire to achieve or obtain consciously

(Locke & Latham, 2002, 2006). Ogbeiwi (2018) mentioned that goal setting is the useful and basic component of organizational management which is also a popular concept in work planning and assessment of the organization. Grant (2020) proposed that the aim of goal setting is to motivate and guide people to move forward to the goal through the designed action plan. Some researchers showed that goal setting is the primary factor which has an influence on organizational commitment and has got positive relation with employee engagement at work place (Knight et al., 2001; Latham & Yukl, 1975). According to Sennett (2021), career goal setting refers to set goals towards promotions, learning new skills, creativity, education and many other various ways to improve career life. Setting a career goal is about guiding the development direction of employees and noting the steps required to achieve the goal.

Career Growth

Graen et al. (1997) indicated that career growth is the working series speed that helps in promoting team enhancement and pursuing individual growth. The research also emphasized that career development could be beneficial for job mobility among organizations and lead to individual values to increase in their career life. Weng et al. (2017) stated that career growth can be divided into three dimensions, which include career goal progress, professional ability development and remuneration growth of the organization. Referring to Bai and Liu (2018), career growth was described as the individual opportunity to achieve career development in an organization through taking on challenging tasks and undertaking more responsibilities on work. Nevertheless, the researchers also revealed that these concepts for career growth are not comprehensive enough to take into account the mobility problem of employee.

Supervisor Support

Hui et al. (2004) showed that researchers in China have shown great interests in the relationship between supervisor and subordinate recently. Supervisor support can be defined as the general beliefs of employees concerning the degree to which supervisors value their contributions and care about their quality of life (Bhanthumnavin,2003). Achour et al. (2017) explained that supervisor support as the managers or leaders provide support to employees on emotional and instrumental aspect to balance work and family responsibilities. Azmy (2019) stated that supervisor support is needed for employees to build confidence and responsibility so as to achieve employees' success in work. Mohamed and Ali (2016) presented that effective supervisor support can be viewed as a higher-order, multi-dimensional construct which consists of self-awareness, balanced processing of information, relational transparency and internalized moral standards.

Coworker Support

Susskind et al. (2003) defined coworker support as the extent to which employees believe that their colleagues are willing to provide them with work-related assistance in order to help them perform their service-based duties. Susskind et al. (2003) also indicated that the perceived support of coworkers is crucial to the accomplishment of work task but it has more impact than just tangible issues in the work place such as morale. Schneider (1987) states that

coworker support refers to the people who work and interact with each other in the same organization every day which can be implied as a kind of work environment. Parris (2003) described that coworker support may be an important source of support in the organizational context especially when accomplishing tasks that require interaction among employees.

Performance Feedback

Hale (2005) defined performance feedback as the information about how employees performed in comparison with what was expected. Kariuki and Makori (2015) defined performance feedback as the degree to which clear information and direction are provided to employees about the effectiveness of their work performance, which can be positive or negative, but it is best when it is balanced appropriately. According to Voraphani and Chungviwatanant (2019), in the business context, performance feedback should be regarded as a system which needs to be incorporated into organizational culture; it is not only mainly reported to management but also reported to responsible persons. A study by Kariuki and Makori (2015) also pointed out that performance feedback in the workplace should be carried out frequently rather than deferred until the annual evaluation meeting.

Employee Engagement

Kahn (1990) introduced the concept of employee engagement and stated that individuals employ and present themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally throughout the work role performance in engagement. According to Lanphear (2004), employee engagement is regarded as the connection or the bond between employees and organization. Furthermore, employees are willing to go the extra mile when employees care about the job or work task. Wiley (2010) defined employee engagement as the extent to which people are motivated to give contribution to organization in order to achieve success and a willingness to go beyond basic requirements to complete tasks and goals. Janetius et al. (2016) pointed that employee engagement is the emotional attachment and commitment to their work, colleagues and organizations, which deeply affects the level of performance, commitment and loyalty. Konrad (2009) stated that employee engagement consisted of three components: a cognitive, an emotional, and a behavioral aspect. Soane et al. (2012) proposed that employee engagement had three dimensions: intellectual engagement, affective engagement, and social engagement.

Engagement Models

Job Demand-Resource Model

The Job Demand-Resources Model (JD-R model) is applied in this research (see Figure 1). It specifies how employee well-being may be produced by two specific sets of working conditions (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). The first set of working conditions concerns job demands that represent the job characteristics, and the second set of working conditions refers to the extent to which the job offers resources to individual employees. The JD-R model showed that job resources are functional in achieving goals at work which are the aspects for the physical, psychological, social or organizational level, and the associated

physiological and psychological cost is reduced and individual growth, learning and personal development are stimulated (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). In addition, Bakker et al. (2007) proposed the following levels of resources:

—the organization level, such as remuneration, opportunities for career development etc.

—the interpersonal and social relations level, such as the support from supervisor, coworker, etc.

—the organization of work level, such as role clarity, participation in decision making, etc.

—the task level, such as the feedback for work performance, skill variety, etc.

Figure 1

Job Demand-Resource Model: JD-R Model
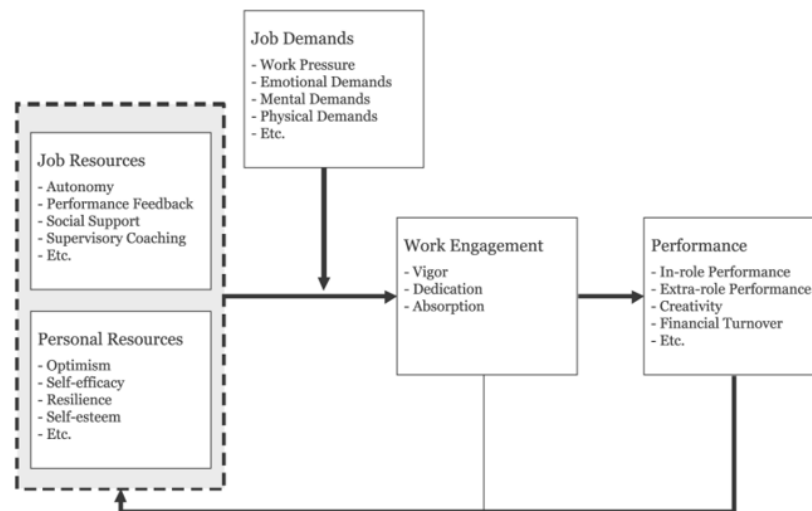
Hewitt Model of Employee Engagement

Figure 2 shows an engagement model which is proposed by human resources firm Aon Hewitt, defining various dimensions that help in engaging employees. This model suggests that the 19 engagement drivers consist of the following six dimensions: Work, People, Opportunities, Compensation, Policies and Practices, Reward and Quality of Life. Hewitt argued that the engagement drivers work when they are interrelated, but do not operate when separated. The given model goes beyond measuring people's satisfaction and gives priority to the aspects of improvement. Therefore, organizations can focus on the areas with the highest potential for improvement and not necessarily on the area with the lowest satisfaction (Mohanty & Choudhury, 2018)

Figure 2

Engagement Drivers as Identified by Aon Hewitt

Conceptual Framework

Based on the analysis of the focal organization and related literature review, the conceptual framework was established. In this conceptual framework, the dependent variable is employee engagement, and the independent variables are composed of goal setting, career growth, supervisor support, coworker support and performance feedback, which assume to have the positive influence on employee engagement for administrative staff at the focal organization (refer to Figure 3).

Figure 3

Conceptual Framework
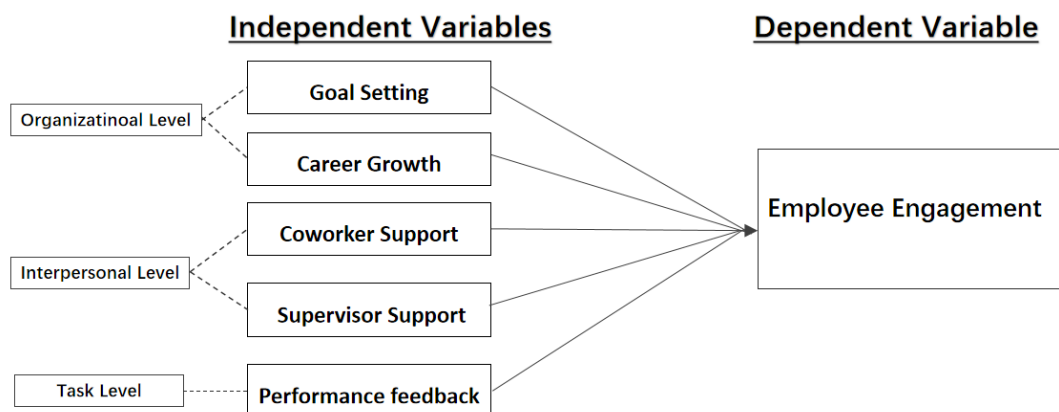
Research Hypothesis

Based on the conceptual framework, the following hypotheses were developed:

Hypothesis 1: Goal setting has a significant influence on employee engagement.

Hypothesis 2: Career growth has a significant influence on employee engagement.

Hypothesis 3: Coworker support has a significant influence on employee engagement.

Hypothesis 4: Supervisor support has a significant influence on employee engagement.

Hypothesis 5: Performance feedback has a significant influence on employee engagement.

Research Methodology

Research Design

With the purpose of investigating employee engagement at Heilongjiang International University, mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative were used in the research. The questionnaire was administered to 200 respondents through online self-administered survey platform called Wenjuanxing, after running the validity and reliability test. The multiple linear regression was used as the analytical tool to investigate the influence of independent variables on the dependents variable. A semi-structured interview with 10 employees was conducted with some questions supporting the questionnaire. Content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data from interview by two coders.

Sample Population and Sampling Procedure

The total population of this research is the entire 268 administrative employees in the focal organization. For efficient data collection, convenience sampling as one of the methods of non-random sampling was applied as sampling procedure. Two hundred administrative employees were chosen as the research respondents who were requested to answer the questionnaire. The 200 employees are from the Principal's Office, Personnel Department, Admission and Recruitment Department, Student's Affairs Department, Teaching Affairs Department, International Office, General Affairs Department, Quality Control and Assessment Center, IT Department, Security Department, Public Relations Department, Assets Department and Finance Department. All 200 employees have administrative positions.

As for the interview, 10 employees were chosen as the interviewees by purposive sampling, by considering the job position and the years of experience. Ten employees were chosen from five different departments, including two from principal's office, two from personnel department, two from admission and recruitment department, two from student's affairs department and two from teaching affairs department. Among the interviewees, five of them are the head of the department and the other five are the staff. All these interviewees are with more than 5 years of working experience, which indicates a more stable working status and certain level of loyalty to the focal organization.

Design of the Questionnaire

The set of questions was designed to assess the influence of Goal Setting, Career Growth, Co-worker Support, Supervisor Support, Performance Feedback on Employee Engagement. There was a total of 28 items in the survey questionnaire: 19 items for the independent variables and 9 items for the dependent variable. The Five Likert scale was applied in the questionnaire to rate the 28 items into five levels from (1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree (2) Neutral (4) Agree (5) Strongly agree. The set of questions for variables was selected and derived from several related literature.

Results of Validity and Reliability Test

The Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC)and Cronbach's Alpha are the tools to test for the validity and reliability of the research instrument. The judgmental opinion of five experts were solicited for IOC to test the validity of the questionnaire; the IOC rating should be 0.67 or higher. All the items on the questionnaire have received the mean score of over 0.8 from five experts, which means the items are acceptable. Table 1 illustrates the rating results of IOC.

Table 1

Results of IOC Rating

Variables	Item	Expert 1	Expert 2	Expert 3	Expert 4	Expert 5	Average Rating
Goal Setting	Q1	1	1	1	0	1	0.8
	Q2	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q3	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q4	1	1	1	1	1	1
Career Growth	Q5	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q6	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q7	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q8	1	1	1	1	1	1
Coworker Support	Q9	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q10	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q11	1	1	1	1	1	1
Supervisor Support	Q12	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q13	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q14	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q15	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q16	1	1	1	1	1	1
Performance Feedback	Q17	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q18	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q19	1	1	1	1	1	1
Employee Engagement (Intellectual)	Q20	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q21	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q22	1	1	1	1	1	1
Employee Engagement (Social)	Q23	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q24	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q25	1	1	1	1	1	1
	Q26	1	1	1	1	1	1

| Employee Engagement (Affective) | Q27 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| | Q28 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |

For the reliability testing, the questionnaire was given to 30 respondents as pilot test and the SPSS calculated for Cronbach's Alpha. The result showed that the values of all variables were greater than 0.7 which was considered as acceptable level. Table 2

presents the Cronbach's Alpha results.

Table 2

Result of Cronbach's Alpha

Variables	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Goal Setting	4	0.814
Career Growth	4	0.925
Coworker Support	3	0.891
Supervisor Support	5	0.945
Performance Feedback	3	0.881
Employee Engagement	9	0.948

Results and Discussion

Demographic Profile

There was a total of 200 respondents who answered the questionnaire and 10 respondents for the interview. The majority of respondents were female, which represented 72.5% of total respondents. The 200 research respondents and 10 interviewees were the employees with administrative position at different departments in the focal organization. Among the 200 respondents, 21% were supervisor and 79% of respondents were the staff. All 200 respondents were administered the questionnaires regarding Employee Engagement. Eighty-four percent of respondents were over 30 years old, 61.5% were with more than five years working experience at HIU, 21% of the respondents held the management position.

Results of Quantitative Analysis

The purpose of running multiple linear regression was to test the hypotheses regarding the influence of independent variables on the dependent variable. Table 3 shows the results of MLR.

Table 3

Results of Multiple Linear Regression

Variable	Beta (β)	Sig.	VIF
Goal Setting (GS)	.088	.074	2.583
Career Growth (CG)	.217 (3rd)	.000	2.211
Coworker Support (CS)	.279 (2nd)	.000	3.248
Supervisor Support (SS)	.285 (1st)	.000	4.773
Performance Feedback (PF)	.154 (4th)	.011	3.804
R Square	0.819		
Adjusted R Square	0.814		

The outcome from MLR revealed that R square at 0.819 indicates that 81.9% of the listed independents variables could explain the dependent variable. The sig.value of less than 0.05 means there is significant influence of the independent variables on the dependent variable. Therefore, 4 out of 5 independent variables had the significant influence on employee engagement. Supervisor support has the greatest influence on employee engagement with 28.5%, followed by coworker support (27.9%), career growth (21.7%) and performance feedback (15.4%).

Results of Qualitative Analysis

A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect employee's personal opinion regarding some questions in the questionnaire. The qualitative data from interview helps to get additional information and support findings of the questionnaire. Content analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data from interview and it was conducted by two coders. The themes that emerged from the qualitative results of each main variable are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Summary of Interview Results

Variables	Common Themes	Statement
Goal setting	Important but may not be highly related to engagement process	The employees may still positively be engaged when the goal is not very clear, as long as they think they are learning and the atmosphere is acceptable.
Career Growth	Motivation to get engaged Opportunities for learning skills	It is definitely a motivation to get engaged when the employees can have the opportunities to learn new skills and knowledge for career growth.
Coworker Support	Important when needed Crucial to the accomplishment of work task	It greatly influences the engagement when the coworker support is in great demand and their colleagues are willing to provide them with work-related assistance. It is important for the accomplishment of work task.
Supervisor Support	Leadership Build confidence and responsibility	Employees feel helpless and loss when the employees cannot feel the supervisor support, when they have to face the challenges and responsibility alone.
Performance Feedback	Ways of showing the feedback Present information but not to judge	What the employees really hope is a positive friendly correction with encouragement, which can make them improve and engage more.
Employee Engagement (Intellectual, Social, Affective)	Job responsibility Working atmosphere Satisfaction and loyalty	It is the basic duty to be intellectually engaged. It is not difficult to achieve. A good relationship with colleagues and leaders can create nice atmosphere for engagement. It is a long-term and gradual process to develop this affective engagement and is challenging for every organization.

Goal setting can be seen as a controversial issue related to employee engagement. The interviewees hold different opinions on this topic. Three of the interviewees believe that an appropriate goal setting can make them more engaged. However, 6 of the interviewees argued that the goal setting cannot be the consideration of engagement to some extent as the link between actions and working goals is hard to connect. Goal setting will also be a decisive factor when employees agree with the job content, however, it is not highly related to the engagement process. The employees may still be positively engaged when the goal is not very clear, as long as they think they are learning and the atmosphere is acceptable. These results supported the outcome from multiple linear regression.

Career growth is a common agreement among 10 interviewees. They all believe that career growth opportunity will enhance their engagement. Particularly for employees working in the higher education institution, they value career growth more than others.

Coworker support can be seen as a dynamic factor. It depends on the extent employees rely on their coworker. Eight of the interviewees stated that it will greatly influence their engagement at work when the support from coworker is great but it is difficult to achieve. Building relationship with coworkers seems to be a challenging issue for employees working at higher education institutions.

Supervisor support is crucial and agreed by every interviewee. A strong leadership will definitely influence the employee engagement. Eight employees expressed that they feel helpless and loss when they cannot feel the supervisor support, when they have to face the challenges and responsibility alone.

Performance feedback is a controversial issue. Seven interviewees explain that it depends on the method of giving performance feedback. They understand that performance feedback is necessarily beneficial, but what they really hope is a positive friendly correction with encouragement, which can make them more willing to improve. Correction with criticism or complaint makes them frustrated, and may lower their engagement.

The 10 interviewees also discussed the three dimensions of engagement which are intellectual engagement, social engagement and affective engagement. They believe that the intellectual engagement can be seen as their commitment to the job responsibility, that is something they should do. However, the development of social engagement and affective engagement is a gradual process, and it do require organizations to investigate. The intellectual engagement keeps the organization operate well, however, the social and affective engagement can provide employee satisfaction and build emotional loyalty. These two factors can contribute to the long-term development of an organization.

Results of Hypotheses Testing

Based on the results from quantitative and qualitative analysis, the comparative findings are shown in Table 5. According to the results of multiple linear regression, 4 out of 5 independent variables had significant influence on employee engagement. From the content analysis of the interview, the result also supported the findings from multiple linear regression. The MLR results confirmed that only H1 is not supported, while the other hypotheses are supported by the statistical and analytical results.

Table 5

Summary of Quantitative and Qualitative result

IVs	Quantitative result	Themes from Qualitative result
Goal Setting (GS)	H1 is not supported	Important but may not be highly related to engagement process
Career Growth (CG)	H2 is supported	Motivation to get engaged Opportunities for learning skills
Coworker Support (CS)	H3 is supported	Important when needed Crucial to the accomplishment of work task
Supervisor Support (SS)	H4 is supported	Leadership Build confidence and responsibility

Performance Feedback (PF)	H5 is supported	Ways of showing the feedback Present information but not to judge

H1: Goal setting has no significant influence on employee engagement.
H2: Career growth has a significant influence on employee engagement.
H3: Coworker support has a significant influence on employee engagement.
H4: Supervisor support has a significant influence on employee engagement.
H5: Performance feedback has a significant influence on employee engagement.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The research outcomes above give a clear explanation about the factors influencing employee engagement. From the results of quantitative data analysis, four out of five hypotheses are supported by statistical analysis, which indicates that factors including career growth, coworker support, supervisor support and performance feedback are highly related to employee engagement. This is also supported by the study of Phakdeesattayaphong and Chungviwatanant (2014) and Bai and Liu (2018). However, the research findings reveal that goal setting has no significant influence on employee engagement. This is contrast to the research of SheeMun, et al. (2013) which indicated that goal setting has positive influence on employee engagement. It might be explained by the link between actions and working goals which are hard to connect effectively because even if the goal is set, it might have little influence on engagement to some extent. The results of multiple linear regression also reveal that supervisor support has the greatest influential effect on employee engagement with the Beta value of 28.5%, followed by coworker support (27.9%), career growth (21.7%) and performance feedback (15.4%). In addition, the findings are supported by the qualitative data given that interviewees show controversial concerns regarding the influence of goal setting on employee engagement, with the desires to improve employee engagement and believe that engagement can be affected by the opportunities for career growth with the support from supervisors and coworkers, and the work performance feedback.

Based on the findings about influential factors affecting employee engagement, the following interventions are suggested to enhance employee engagement among administrative employee in the focal organization:

Table 6

Proposed Intervention Plan

Independent Variables	Detailed Intervention Plan	Objectives	Duration
Career Growth	1. Designing career skills training sessions to participants and involving reflections exercises. The session themes are: (1) Who Am I and What Am I Good At? (2)My Passion and	To stimulate career competencies and make employees grow personally and professionally	5 weeks

	Future (3)My Network and Action Plan (4)My Possibilities and My show (5) Reflection. 2. Holding Career development workshops to discuss about how far the employees could grow in the univerisity and where they could move. 3. The employees are encourgaed to practice with career skills and reflect on their experience in the work place.		
Coworker Support	1. Holding supportive coworker workshops, encourage sharing and provide support with each other. 2. Team building activities to build trust, collaboration and teamwork among employees. 3. Noting the progress on a weekly basis, especially the barriers or obstacles encountered.	To foster support from colleagues and strengthen employee relations in the workplace.	4 weeks
Supervisor Support	1. Designing Ice-breaker activities for the department heads and selected employees to brainstorming the factors affecting supervisor support. 2. Developing a supervisor skills training programme for the management level and allow the heads of the departments to learn ways and skills to support subordinates. 3.Holding regular formal and informal meetings, giving employees the opportunity to express their ideas, and creating opportunities to contact and connect with others.	To learn how to better support and motivate employees at work	4 weeks
Performance Feedback	1. Designing workshops to discuss about how to make performance feedback valuable for staff. 2.Role playing on giving feedback by using performance feedback strategy. The questions were used for giving feedback to subordinates: what went well? What to improve? Ideas to think about.	To learn and practice how to give effective and constructive feedback for work performance.	6 weeks

	3.Making a frequent feedback plan on a regular basis rather than the end of year performance review.		

Additionally, further study should consider the detailed interventions based on this empirical study and the comparison before and after interventions. Developing employee engagement should not only be the responsibility of human resources, but should also be included in the agenda on the organizational level. It can be improved greatly with structural intervention plan. The research findings can provide both theoretical and practical value in the field of higher education organization management. On the theoretical level, the study contributes to the research field as a reference resource. More importantly on the practical level, the interventions are suggested based on this study.

Few limitations need to be carefully considered. Firstly, the focal organization is a Chinese private university located in northeast of China. Different types of university with different strategies should be taken into account. Secondly, convenience sampling as the sampling procedure can be seen as another factor of limitations. Further studies are required to reinforce the analytical outcomes of this study.

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