

White-Collar Employees for Sustainable Employability

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Contributor: Burcu Mucan Özcan , Suleyman Emre Ozcan , Umut Burak Geyikci , Asena Gülova , Fatih Mehmet Sancak

This research evaluated a training intervention aimed at increasing the personal development curves of the ABC company's white-collar employees and developing presentation preparation techniques.

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1. Introduction

Businesses must adapt to the changing world. In particular, it is critical to develop and retain a creative and talented workforce to gain a sustainable competitive advantage in the digital age. The innovation activity of enterprises that achieve sustainability involves not only the release of new products or services but also constant changes within the organization ^[1]. The key to achieving social sustainability is human development, including education, training, a positive work environment, fair pay, and a sound corporate culture ^[2]. Since employee performance determines a business's success or failure, managers pay more and more attention to investing in employee training and development. This highlights the importance of investing in learning to improve organizational performance ^[3]. Employee performance and commitment to the business can be increased by various motivating factors, such as organizing programs to meet the needs of the employees, creating reward and incentive mechanisms, and creating training opportunities. According to the modern management approach, for the workforce to be efficient and effective, it is necessary to perceive the employee as a person who wishes to satisfy needs and meet expectations, not as a machine ^[4]. Hence, it is necessary to train employees to improve their performance. Employee performance and job satisfaction are powerful tools for continuously developing and improving organizational performance to achieve strategic objectives ^[5].

Although for years a good wage policy has been one of the strategies used to improve employee performance and increase the organization's competitiveness, it is no longer a sufficient element on its own. For instance, Vincent (2020) ^[6] stated that training makes employees feel like they are a part of that institution, awakens a sense of belonging in all employees, creates professional development, and improves the employees' skills while providing a knowledgeable workforce that makes fewer mistakes. ABC is one of the companies that say, "Our employees are our most valuable asset". Accordingly, the company, which understands the importance of human capital, approached academics from Manisa Celal Bayar University to support its efforts to invest in this capital.

The intervention involved white-collar employees preparing a presentation about improving themselves in the competencies they identified according to the 10/20/70 learning rule. After the presentations had been evaluated by academicians and business managers, one-on-one interviews were conducted with the participants to reveal the benefits and deficiencies of the study. The intervention was important for these white-collar employees because the evaluations involved academicians and the employees' presentations contributed to their annual performance review.

2. Classification of Employees

The previous literature classifies employees into two main groups [7][8], white-collar and blue-collar, which often define the working class based on inequalities between workplaces. White-collar personnel in senior management play important roles in making strategic and long-term decisions. In middle management, white-collar personnel are involved in making medium-term decisions, while lower-level management makes short-term, daily, weekly, monthly, or annual decisions about repetitive and routine work [9]. White-collar workers do not engage in "more physically demanding" activities but are often better paid than blue-collar workers who perform manual labor [10]. Traditionally, these workers were referred to as "white collar" because they were more likely to wear white collars. A blue-collar worker is defined as someone who performs more physical labor, such as manufacturing, mining, mechanical engineering, repair, and technological applications [10].

3. Sustainable Employability

Sustainability has become a key issue in recent years. According to the United Nations, sustainable development requires an integrated approach that takes into consideration environmental concerns along with economic development (<https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/sustainability> (accessed on 12 December 2020)). A significant part of the economic development of developed countries is based on production [11]. However, increased production creates problems due to higher energy consumption and carbon emissions, and exploitation of natural, social, and human resources in organizations. Therefore, sustainability has become associated with a broader range of issues, including economic and social elements [12].

Employability, the first aspect of labor participation, refers to an individual's ability to adequately perform work in their current and future jobs [13]. According to the British Industry, employability means that the individual possesses the qualities and competencies required to meet the changing needs of employers and customers and thereby realize their own aspirations and potential in work [14]. Sustainable employability refers to the extent to which workers are able and willing to remain working now and in the future [12]. To enhance sustainable labor participation it is important to understand the factors that contribute to workers' employability, vitality, and work ability. One important factor that can contribute to sustainable employability is employee development and training, which create bonds between organizations and employees.

As in most professions, businesses have expectations for continuing education, learning, and careers so that employees can maintain their current positions and continue their development. Therefore, people pursue self-development strategies that allow them to perform their current jobs well while creating and maximizing opportunities for future employment ^[15].

4. Employee Development, Training, and Effects on Performance

Many businesses strive to develop their employees because this investment is vital to maintain and develop the skills, knowledge, and abilities of both individual employees and the organization as a whole ^[16]. Given the ever-changing needs of individuals and organizations, personal development offers a promising strategy to train employees and managers ^[17]. Hence, one of the most important functions of an enterprise's human resources department is to encourage employee development: the more employees develop, the more satisfied they are with their jobs and the more committed they will be to their jobs, which in turn will improve their performance, thereby enabling the organization to function more effectively ^[18]. The situation is similar regarding employee training. Employee training refers to an organization's planned attempt to facilitate employees' learning of work-related knowledge, skills, and behaviors ^[19] or the acquisition and development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes so that employees can perform their jobs effectively ^[20]. Businesses that aim to gain a competitive advantage realize the importance of training for improving employee performance. Empirical studies have demonstrated the positive effect of employee training on organizational performance ^[21]. Ideally, the more employees are trained and the more satisfied they are with their jobs and environmental conditions, the more they can help improve their organization's performance. Here, organizational performance shows how effectively and efficiently managers use corporate resources to satisfy customers and achieve corporate goals and objectives ^[20].

Hameed and Waheed (2011) ^[18] identify two focuses of employee development: personal development and self-learning. These concepts show that employee development should be recognized by employees who are willing to learn. Hence, the effectiveness of workplace learning is closely linked to the effectiveness of learning types.

Learning can be divided into two types: formal and informal. Formal learning is structured learning outside the work environment, i.e., 'out of work', usually in classroom-based formal education settings. This type of learning mostly consists of planned learning activities to help individuals acquire the specific knowledge, awareness, and skills needed for doing their jobs well ^[22]. Informal learning generally describes any learning that does not involve a formally organized learning program or activity ^[23]. It can be conceptualized according to four organizing principles: occurring outside classroom-based formal education environments; involving either intentional or incidental learning; being based on practice and judgment; and learning through mentoring and teamwork. Informal learning tends to be considered more important and effective, and therefore 'superior' to formal classroom-based learning ^[3]. This suggests that the choice of learning strategy is critical to job performance, with informal learning being of particular importance ^[24]. In the present study, the ABC company selected a competency area from the organization's white-collar employees to develop those skills open to development through self-learning, i.e., the informal learning method, using the 10/20/70 model.

A number of studies have evaluated the contribution of employee development to businesses. Iamsomboon et al. (2018) [25] found that organizational training not only increases employees' knowledge and skills but also raises employee satisfaction, innovation, and productivity. Similarly, Vincent (2020) reported that training makes employees feel that they are a part of the organization, creates a sense of belonging, improves their skills, enables professional development, and creates a knowledgeable workforce that makes fewer mistakes [6]. Hot (2017) [4] determined that there is a linear relationship between increased training and employee and organizational performance. More specifically, training increases employees' awareness, self-confidence, job satisfaction, professional knowledge, skills, and competencies. This personal development of the employees in turn improves their performance. The findings showed that, in order to increase organizational performance, businesses must prioritize many kinds of activities to develop human resources, especially education.

Other studies have identified the skills needed for white-collar employees. Özsoy and Gürbüzöğlu (2019) [26] found that those responsible for recruiting white-collar employees state that white-collar employee or employee candidates should possess communication skills, be knowledgeable, positive, honest, self-confident, show perceptiveness, and work in harmony with others. However, Özsoy and Gürbüzöğlu also underlined that more studies are needed on the specific skills required in white-collar workers, and recommended drawing on qualitative as well as quantitative methods. Waner (1995) found that both academics and professionals suggest that work-related writing skills, oral and interpersonal skills, basic English skills, and other communication skills are important for white-collar employees [27]. Hence, to attract job seekers, employers should at least offer training and development opportunities, even if they cannot offer secure long-term job opportunities [28].

Along with training, employee retention has become an important issue for businesses. Businesses that invest in employee training should also strive not to lose their employees. Mutanga et al. (2020) identified the various factors that either attract employees to stay or force them to leave an employer [29]. The former include good pay, job security, flexibility, advantages, productive working conditions, mental challenges in the job, and growth and promotion prospects. The latter include low wages, a bad management style, bad working conditions, weak interpersonal relations due to the poor work environment and management style, lack of recognition, and lack of career opportunities [29]. Training and development programs can help improve interpersonal relations.

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