

## High Involvement in the public sector

Rebecca Kirkham, School of Management, Victoria University of Wellington

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High involvement work practices (HIWP) are not a new concept. Since at least the 1930s, human resources and management professionals have recognised that involving workers in the direction of their organisation can have a positive influence on morale and ultimately on organisational performance. By supporting the psychological and social needs of workers, organisations can improve productivity by motivating workers to expend discretionary effort in the interests of organisational goals (Kaufman, 2007).

Furthermore, organisations that recognise employees' expertise on how best to perform their jobs are well placed to utilise the skills and abilities that employees already have (Boxall & Macky, 2009). Research suggests that this may satisfy workers' higher-level needs, such as that for esteem through recognition, and understanding this relationship between involvement and outcomes is important.

However, much of the high involvement research has concentrated on the private sector. Through political and economic reforms in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the provision of public services has become increasingly subject to ways of doing business that originated, and continue to be practiced, in private industry. This includes both expectations around performance and ways of managing people.

### The study

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between HIWP and employee outcomes, such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment, in the core New Zealand public service. It also investigated whether certain demographic factors might influence this relationship and proposed a structural model to test this.

The data were originally gathered as part of the 2013 Workplace Dynamics Survey conducted by the New Zealand Public Service Association (PSA) and Victoria University of Wellington (Plimmer et al., 2013). Participants, all of whom were PSA members, were asked a variety of questions about their work, workplace and themselves. For the purposes of this current study, the sample was then limited to only those members of the core public sector who reported that they had no managerial responsibilities.

The data were used to conduct structural equation modelling to explicate the relationship between HIWP and employee outcomes. Moderating factors such as age, gender, and level of educational attainment were then introduced to the proposed structural model.

## Results

This study largely supported the broader theory around high involvement and its positive influence on employee outcomes, as advanced by Lawler (1986), and Vandenberg, Richardson & Eastman (1999). The model suggested that HIWP, as measured by items associated with power, information, rewards, and knowledge (*PIRK*) working collectively, can have a positive effect on employees' reported job satisfaction together with organisational commitment.

Results indicated that employees feel they have reasonable levels of empowerment for their work, but poor experiences regarding information about processes, quality, customer feedback, event and business results, and very poor experiences of the links between rewards and business results and growth in capability and contribution. Organisations wishing to enhance employee outcomes (and, consequently, organisational effectiveness) could consider how to enhance employees' experiences of information and rewards to better complement the relatively high levels of empowerment.

As with other psychological phenomena, the context and the role of the individual are important in understanding responses to high involvement. In this study, age was found to influence the relationship between *PIRK* and employee outcomes, with the strongest influence occurring for older workers. Education level was also found to have a positive effect on this relationship.

Employment length had some effect on *PIRK* for men, but income had a strong effect on men's experience of the employee outcomes tested. Employment length, although not income, had an effect on both *PIRK* and on employee outcomes for women. Women in the sample generally had spent less time with their current employer than both the public sector average and the men in the sample, and this may have influenced their knowledge about their organisation's work and employment practices.

## Recommendations

The influence of factors such as age, education level, and gender, as well as gender's interaction with employment length and income, are worthy of further research, and may also have implications for practice. Much of the public service population is female and tends to be clustered in lower-paid occupations (despite being comparatively well educated on average), as evidenced by studies of the enduring gender pay gap. The workforce is also aging. Managers, HR professionals and workforce planners should carefully consider how the composition of the public service is changing, the effects these changes may have on employees' experiences of HIWP and outcomes, and how best to manage future recruitment and retention accordingly. This is particularly pertinent with regards to links between performance and rewards.

Furthermore, longitudinal studies may be beneficial to observe change over time. The 2013 survey was a snapshot in time, and given government employment policy shifts over the last five years, as well as increased PSA support for HIWP (PSA, 2014), it is important to understand whether and how substantive change has occurred.

Finally, the terminology of HIWP and associated concepts is not widely understood outside of academia. Developing categories of associated practices could help to generate interest and understanding, particularly for managers seeking practical ways of putting high involvement into practice. A New Zealand lexicon would be useful, to reflect some of the social and cultural considerations in this country, particularly in a field that is largely dominated by research from overseas.

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