



The performance of work relationships: A case study on the example of the profession of development engineer in France

Context and research question

This work addresses the link between the performance (functions and effects) of work relationships and workplace health in modern work contexts. Using the example of the profession of development engineer in France, it raises the question of the nature of work relationship performance against the backdrop of permanent change regarding the organisation of enterprises and work, its conditioning factors and its connection with workplace health and well-being.

With reference to the sociology of organisations presented by Niklas Luhmann (1976), work relationships are defined as the specific social relationships workers maintain by virtue of their membership in a purposeful organisation. There are different types of work relationships, which are primarily mediated by the function the worker exercises within the organisation. Intra-organisational relationships include relationships with superiors, peers, subordinates and network members. Extra-organisational relationships consist of relationships with suppliers, business partners and customers.

The performance of work relationships was examined using a theoretical concept originating from social network and social support research (Hollstein 2001; 2002; 2008). According to this, the performance of social relationships is understood as the set of positive and negative, potential and actual effects that a social relationship exerts upon its participating actors.

Methodological approach

The research subject was empirically investigated in a case study conducted in the division of utility vehicle engineering of a French automobile manufacturer located in the region Île de France. The company exhibited typical features of a modern organisation. The case study was conducted using a triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods in its “weak” form (Flick 2011: 140; Caillaud/Flick 2016). The performance of work relationships was assessed with the use of an empirically and literature-based range of relevant positive and negative contents of work relationships. The conditioning factors of work relationship performance included the characteristics of the different types of relationships, the structural conditions in which work relationships take place as well as the socio-professional profile of the respondents. The health of the engineers was operationalized with the use of the category “health and well-being” in the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (Dupret *et al.* 2012/2013). The quantitative study was based on a questionnaire addressed to the development engineers working in the division of utility vehicle engineering. The qualitative study comprised guided interviews with development engineers and expert interviews with different company actors. The results of the quantitative study were analysed by means of explorative multivariate and descriptive statistical methods, the results of the qualitative study by means of an analytical grid derived from the results of the quantitative study.

Summary of main results

Within the investigated group, it is possible to distinguish between three patterns of workplace relationship performance: a *deficient and negative profile*, characterised by a deficit of positive and the presence of negative aspects of workplace relationship performance, a *positive profile*, characterised by the presence of exclusively positive aspects of work relationship performance and an *ambivalent profile*, exhibiting positive and negative aspects of work relationship performance.

The performance of work relationships depends on the socio-professional characteristics of the respondents, the properties of the different types of workplace relationships and the structural conditions in which workplace relationships take place.

Deficient and negative performance of work relationships is prevalent in the category of the graduated engineers, who bear a great deal of technical responsibility within the project organisation, and who are to a great extent subject to the pressure induced by work organisation. They typically emanate from relational formats, characterised by a low degree of formalisation, a high level of functional dependence and contradictory targets. The deficient and negative performance of work relationships is further correlated to a disembedding of workplace relationships from immediate work and interaction contexts, a perceived deterioration of working, career and employment conditions as well as an economic exchange pattern with the company.

Positive performance of work relationships is significant for engineers at an advanced career level, having obtained the profession by way of in-house professional training and assumed management functions in the vertical line of the organisational structure. They are associated with relationships that take place aside from the project work and which do not manifest a pronounced antagonistic relational structure. Positive performance of work relationships is additionally linked to a structural framework characterised by space-time stability and immediate and regular contacts with significant relationship partners. It is also conditioned by satisfying working and career conditions and a social exchange relationship with the company.

Concerning the question of the link between the performance of work relationships and employee health, the results indicate that the performance of work relationships is not directly related to the workers' health but exerts an influence on their well-being. *Deficient and negative performance* of work relationships correlates with an increased occurrence of stress and irritability. *Positive performance* is associated with the absence of any signs of psychological unease and *ambivalent performance* is connected with an increased appearance of stress.

Contextualisation of the research findings

The findings of the study support the importance of workplace relationships for the experience of work and well-being at the workplace, as expressed by other authors. By referring to the general category of performance, they also broaden the perspective to the range of effects work relationships exert upon workers and the way in which these effects interplay. The results highlight the influence of organisationally determined relational structures and framework conditions on the content of work relationship performance and therefore the potential emanating from the organisation of companies and work.

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