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Mediator Analysis of Cognitive Engagement among Employees in Indian New Ventures: Relationship between Total Rewards and Work Happiness

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Abstract

The study seeks to evaluate the association between total rewards and work happiness in Indian new ventures (start-ups) and with the theoretical underpinning of Vroom-expectancy, social exchange and job resources theory to investigate whether cognitive engagement acts as a mediator for the proposed relationship. Qualitative phase utilized 16 in-depth interviews, while quantitative phase utilized survey of 209 employees working in Indian start-ups. Direct and indirect effects of the proposed relationships were measured using regression analysis and Sobel and Bootstrapping respectively. Findings from employee's perspective revealed that employees working in new ventures expect ownership, flexibility and career growth opportunities at work. They feel happy if they get challenging and interesting work. Cognitive engagement fully mediates the relationship between total rewards and work happiness. Study's findings suggest that Founders and HR professionals should be concerned about work design and career development of employees. A reward mechanism can be designed which may support in engagement and retention of talent in new ventures.

Keywords: Automobile Industry, Employee Creativity, Organizational Initiatives, Organizational Innovation, Structural Equation Modeling.

1. Introduction

Today's world of work is witnessing a drastic change in terms of revolution of the organizations and the nature of the work. The nature of the organizations are changing with the opening of start-ups or new ventures every year. NASSCOM (2016) survey indicates that by 2020 India will be home to 10,500 new technology based (tech) ventures. The change in the nature of work witnesses change in its content and process. Processes and work environment of new ventures are informal and reactive by nature (Barrett and Mayson, 2008; Marlow et.al, 2010). In addition to the struggle to grow and accomplishment of success, new ventures also confront challenges in terms of attraction, engagement of motivation of employees (Tansky *et al.*, 2006). A study conducted by (Ouimet and Zarutskie, 2014) documented high attrition rate of key talent in the new age businesses. Also suggested that cost of high attrition is linked with both tangible (i.e. recruitment and selection) and intangible costs (i.e. quality shortfalls and the loss of productivity etc.) (Pregolato *et al.*, 2017). One critical area in human resource management (HRM) such as compensation and rewards have been shown to affect an individual's decision to join, learn and stay with the firm (Rumpel and Medcof, 2006; Haltiwanger *et al.*, 2012). New ventures view their compensation system through total rewards perspective which could be a source of

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competitive advantage and difficult to imitate by others (Barney, 2000). Past evidences suggest that substantial researches have been done on rewards and its consequences in context to large organisations (Beheshti and Lollar, 2003; Thomas and Webb, 2003) with little focus on young firms (Kuratko *et al.*, 2001). Accordingly, using data from employees working in Indian new ventures, we explored the possible mediating role of cognitive engagement in the association linking total rewards and work happiness. The cognitive engagement literature has been hypothesized as mediating mechanism and is embedded in two sub-dimensions: attention and absorption (Rothbard, 2003). The total rewards (job resources) model assumes employee cognitive engagement as a driving force of the employees' state of mind. Lee *et al.*, (2016) suggested that limited research exists that evaluates cognitive engagement as a way via which job resources influence employee's state of mind. In spite of the appreciation of research on organizational rewards and employee work happiness, sparse research has examined organizational rewards phenomenon and its effects on mind state (work happiness) of organizational members explicitly, especially in Indian technology based young firms.

Hence, the following research question has been addressed to fill above mentioned research gaps is:

RQ: *How total rewards influence employee work happiness in Indian new ventures?*

2. Need and Context for the Study

New ventures also known as Start-ups, young firms and often considered entrepreneurial ventures, "create value and contribute in the growth of economy by generating new ideas and implementing them in market (Schramm, 2004). Employees working with start-ups need to be engage and passionate for firm success, specifically at the time of growth stage. India is the 3rd largest startup ecosystem globally and expected to grow by 2.2 times till 2020. Around one lakh talent is currently employed in start-ups and expected to grow 210-250 thousand by 2020. Therefore, their success heavily rely on employees abilities, performance and application of HRM (Cooper and Burke, 2011). The management of human resources in young firms is different from the management of human resources in established firms (Barrett and Mayson, 2008; Marlow *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, since a few people typically need to cover all the business functions, the employees in these organizations require a wide variety of skills, competencies and positive attitudes of employees. Therefore, conventional strategies of human resource development appear to be less applicable in entrepreneurial ventures. Founders need to look for different ways that assist in developing their employees that fit within their firms' contingencies and strategies. Therefore, in the current emerging economy, attracting, engaging and retaining passionate employees working in young firms has been increasingly identified as a critical factor for firm's success (Thunnissen *et al.*, 2013).

3. Theoretical Framework and Development of Hypotheses

Total Rewards and Work Happiness

Rewards

According to Bowen (2000), rewards refer to something which is given or received in return for a success or accomplishment of goals such as working conditions, pay and development opportunities. It is financial and non-financial reward offered or communicated in the work place concerning the achievement or success of an employee such as encouragement, appreciations and positive feedback (Yousaf *et al.*, 2014).

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Work happiness

Work happiness, refers to the experience of positive feelings coupled with high work and life satisfaction (Fisher, 2010). The goal of creating happiness among employees at workplace can be achieved through an effective job resources (total rewards system) (Bakker and Demerouti, 2013). An important assumption of Vroom's (1964) theory suggests that work happiness depends on employees' expectations about their ability to accomplish assigned tasks and receive desired rewards. An employee's attitude for better performance depends on the hope that the efforts spent on accomplishment of task will lead to better performance of start-up, which will bring reward and appreciation for work (Sauerermann, 2015). Thus, we expect that:

H1: *Total rewards will be positively related to work happiness.*

Total Rewards and Cognitive Engagement

According to Rothbard (2001) cognitive engagement includes both attention (level or amount of focus and concentration) and absorption in work. Strom (2014) documented that employees' engagement level varies with their perceptions of the benefits they receive from a role. Additionally, a sense of return on efforts spent on accomplishment of task can come from total rewards (Kurzban *et al.*, 2014). Social exchange theory also suggests that when individuals receive rewards from their employer, they feel obliged to act in response with higher levels of involvement in work (Karatepe, 2013). Thus, we hypothesize that:

H2: *Total rewards will be positively related to cognitive engagement.*

Cognitive Engagement and Work Happiness

Being cognitively engaged in work can make a person feel energized and generates positive feelings at workplace (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). The more employees are absorbed and attentive in their jobs, the higher the overall perception of well-being will be. More specifically, employees will have better self-image, have better relationships with people around them, control themselves in their work and life, and have strong life purpose and sense of growth. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H3: *Cognitive engagement will be positively related to work happiness.*

The Mediating Role of Cognitive Engagement

The attitude-engagement model states that internalization of individuals is linked to individual's positive feelings and work satisfaction via their engagement levels. Engagement (cognitive engagement in this case) (Greene and Miller, 1996) in assigned tasks leads to accomplishment of goals, which creates positive feelings (such as work happiness). When employees invest their cognitive resources in task and get successful, it encourages them to internalize jobs and ready to do challenging tasks (Chi and Wylie, 2014). This gives them work satisfaction and happiness at work. Therefore, the link between internalization of job and positive feelings will be mediated by their engagement levels (Smillie *et al.*, 2016). Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H4: *Cognitive engagement plays the mediating role between total rewards and work happiness.*

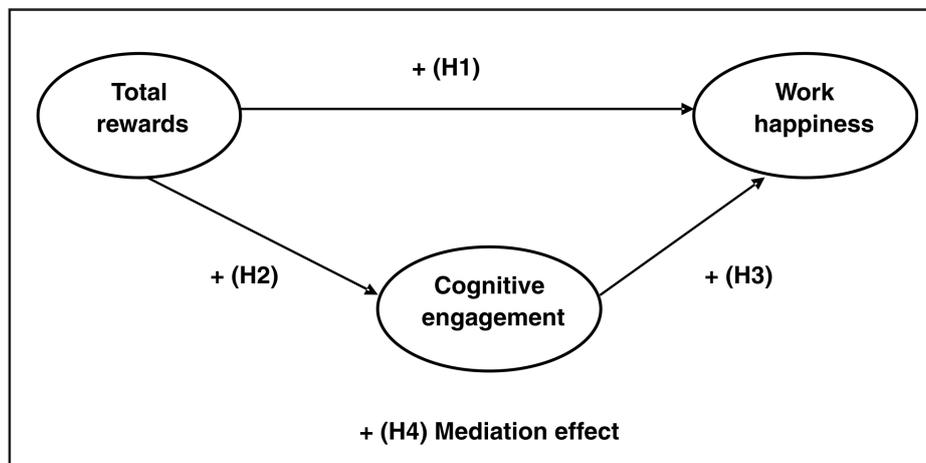


Figure 1: Theoretical Model for Predicting Influence of Total Rewards on Employee Work Happiness

4. Research Methodology: A Mixed-Method Approach

Research Design and Research Strategy

This study utilized a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods referred to as mixed-methods design (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Tashakkori, 2009; Creswell, 2011). The nature of the research question was primarily confirmatory, therefore, a quantitative research design was utilized. Also, according to the nature of the research questions and the requirement of triangulation for confirmatory and completeness objectives, concurrent embedded mixed method design was used for the study (Ruffin *et al.*, 2009; Creswell, 2011).

5. Concurrent Embedded Mixed Method Design

In our study the concurrent embedded mixed-method design utilized quantitative study (Phase-1) as the primary research method and the qualitative study (phase -2) as a secondary method embedded in the primary method (Creswell, 2011). Unlike sequential exploratory and explanatory mixed method designs, the results of one research method was not utilized as the input for the other phase. In fact, both the methods tried to investigate the same research question in their best possible ways using their own sample and techniques. The findings of both the methods were then triangulated to derive the robust conclusions.

Sample and Procedure

Participants were selected through Theoretical sampling (Patton, 1990). For the purpose of the study, we referred to a population of firms in India having age less than five years. This list of companies was prepared from NASSCOM list of new ventures by looking at their age and the verticals they were engaged in. The goal was to interview at least three participants from each company and/or until there was saturation in participant responses, meaning thereby that same ideas were presented with no new information being discussed (Charmaz, 2006). Sarasvathy's (2004) suggestion was followed for population selection, the sample for this study was defined as young, independently founded firms which were less than five years old, new ventures in India. Firms having at least one employee were considered for final selection. Unit of analysis for the study is individual level. A survey of 209 employees working in Indian new ventures was conducted.

Measurement Alpha (α) value (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003) was found much above the psychometric norm of 0.70 (Nunnally, 1967) and are demonstrated in Table 1.

6. Independent Variable: Total Rewards

Extrinsic rewards: In order to measure satisfaction with extrinsic rewards, two scales developed by Malhotra *et al.* (2007) were combined. Combination of both scales measured employee satisfaction with compensation and fringe benefits to form a five-item scale. E.g.: ‘*I am satisfied with the amount of pay I receive for the job I do*’ and ‘*I am satisfied with the fringe benefits package offered by my organization*’.

Social rewards: In order to measure satisfaction with supervision, a six items scale developed by House and Dessler (1974) was used. E.g.: ‘*My supervisor treats all the workers as his/her equal*’. To measure co-worker support, scale of four items developed by Malhotra *et al.*'s (2007) scale was used. E.g.: ‘*My co-workers are helpful to me in getting my job done*’.

Intrinsic rewards: *Autonomy* was measured by Hackman and Oldham's (1976) three-item scale using the job diagnostic survey. E.g.: ‘*The job allows me to use personal initiative in carrying out the work*’. *Job meaningfulness* was measured using Hackman and Oldham's (1980) five item scale. *Psychological ownership to job* was measured using 7-item scale developed by Van Dyne and Pierce (2004). E.g.: ‘*This is MY job*’. *Work flexibility* was Hawkins and Miller (1996) for work flexibility. *Skill variety* was measured using Huczynski and Buchanan's (2001). Finally, *Career opportunities* was measured using Madjar *et al.*'s (2002) scale.

Cognitive engagement was measured using the 9 items scale developed by Rothbards (2001). It includes both attention (level or amount of focus and concentration) and absorption. Finally, *Work happiness* was measured using 5 items Lyubomirsky and Lepper's (1999) subjective happiness scale.

Pilot study: Reliability and validity of instruments

To develop instruments for the study, we followed the steps recommended for scale development (DeVellis, 2003). Accordingly, first we adapted scales and validated them with in-depth interviews insights and literature for content validity. Second, we assessed reliability and construct validity by pre-testing the measurements (Bolton, 1993) with founders and employees working in new ventures. We also conducted pilot study on a sample size of 45 employees working in new ventures.

Table 1: Reliability of the Instruments

Instruments	Reference	Sub-measurements	No. of Indicators in the instruments	Indicators used for data collection	Reliability
Total rewards	Combination of different constructs	30	30	30	0.80
Cognitive engagement	Adopted-Rothbard (2001)	2	9	9	0.83
Work happiness	(Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1997)	-	4	4	0.81

7. Results- Phase 1: Quantitative Study

Descriptive Statistics

The means, standard deviations and the correlations among the hypothesized constructs are given in Table 2. The mean and standard deviation of the variables are within the range suggested by Tsiang (1974). The results of correlations suggest accepted conditions for measuring the proposed relationship.

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations and Correlations of the Proposed Constructs

Constructs	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Total rewards	3.81	0.781	-		
2. Cognitive engagement	3.27	0.734	0.44**	0.32**	0.35**
3. Work happiness	2.57	0.671	0.34**	0.45**	0.29**

Note: N=209, ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) and Common Method Bias

In order to measure fit of our data with the proposed measurement model (following the fitness criteria suggested by Arbuckle and Wothke (1999), we carried out CFA by using AMOS 20.0 version. The findings of the CFA (mentioned in Table 3) for the proposed measurement model documented a good fit to the data.

Discriminant Validity

For measuring distinctiveness among the proposed variables, we compared two alternative models against the proposed measurement model. The three-factor model (i.e. proposed model) demonstrated a significant better fit comparative to the other models.

Additionally, to address the concerns of common method variance, the Harman single-factor test was used (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Results documented only 33 percent of variance for a single factor. Therefore, it suggested that common method bias was not a concern.

Table 3: Results of CFA

	Model fit indices					
	χ^2	Df	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	IFI
Total rewards	145.3	67	0.05	0.96	0.94	0.96
Cognitive engagement	123	67	0.05	0.96	0.96	0.96
Work happiness	41.6	31	0.06	0.96	0.943	0.96
Three-factor model	1042.8	651	0.05	0.93	0.91	0.93
Two-factor model	1661.06	652	0.07	0.73	0.83	0.73
One-factor model	2808.1	661	0.126	0.40	0.37	0.40

Notes: Three-factor model of the study included proposed measurement model; two-factor model included items of total rewards and cognitive engagement; one-factor model included items of total rewards, cognitive engagement, and work happiness

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Hypotheses Testing

Direct Effects

H1, H2 and H3 were tested using series of linear regression analyses (see results in Table 4). The results supported all three hypotheses.

Model 1: relationship between Total rewards and work happiness.

Model 2: relationship between Total rewards and cognitive engagement.

Model 3: relationship between Cognitive engagement and work happiness.

Table 4: Linear Regression Results

Independent variable	Model1: DV: Work happiness	Model 2: DV: Cognitive engagement	Model 3: DV: Work happiness
<i>Direct effects</i>			
Total rewards	0.30**	0.41**	—
Cognitive engagement			0.46
R²	0.032	0.038	0.138
Adj R²	0.033	0.028	0.134
ANOVA F	10.01**	11.69**	26.01***

Notes: **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Mediating Effects

Table 5 presented the outline of the findings of Sobel and bootstrapping testing. H4 proposed that cognitive engagement will mediate the association between total rewards and work happiness. The cognitive engagement had effect on work happiness and the effect of the work happiness dropped after adding cognitive engagement in the proposed measurement model (Preacher and Leonardelli, 2006). Therefore, to examine the mediating role of cognitive engagement, Sobel test was conducted (Preacher and Hayes, 2004; Preacher and Leonardelli, 2006). Also, to find out the range of indirect effects, bootstrapping analysis of 5,000 bootstrap samples with 95% confidence intervals (CIs) was conducted (McKinnon *et al.*, 2004; Williams and McKinnon, 2008). Sobel and bootstrapping analyses suggested statistically significant results. Thus, H4 was accepted.

Table 5: DV: Work Happiness

	Sobel's Normal Theory Tests	95% Bca C.IsBootstrapping	
Indirect effects	Z	Lower	Upper
Cognitive engagement	4.03	0.03	0.15
Note: p<.01. Based on 5000 bootstrapping samples. Bca=bias corrected and accelerated			

8. Results-Phase-2: Qualitative Study

For the second phase of this study, 16 in-depth interviews of employees and founders were conducted. Sample ranged varied in terms of age, experience and organizations so as to cover the diversity of total rewards system adopted. The interviews were conducted till the theoretical saturation was achieved (Creswell, 2011).

Themes

An important contribution of the qualitative phase was to “expose theoretical boundaries and push theoretical insights” (Bansal and Corley, 2012). Miles and huberman’s (1994) three stage process was followed to find codes and themes. First stage includes data reduction and data display, the second stage includes finding codes (via first and second cycle of coding of data) categories and themes. Final stage includes deriving conclusions out of the saturated themes (Refer Table 6).

9. Discussions and Conclusion and Contributions

This study documented two levels of perspectives: one from founders perspective and other from employee’s perspective. Overall, the findings from employee’s perspective show that employees working in new ventures expect ownership, flexibility and career growth opportunities at work. They feel happy if they get challenging and interesting work. From the founders perspective, findings show that Indian new ventures categorize total rewards in three main headings including psychological rewards, monetary and non-monetary rewards. They also consider rewarding employees is an effective tool for retention of employees. If they are able to make their employees happy, consequently they will be able to retain them. They can design reward system by identifying which reward is driving happiness.

Theoretical Contributions

The findings of the study contributes to different theoretical domains. In cognitive engagement literature, it adds in terms of exploring and evaluating job resources or types of rewards that affect new ventures’ employee cognitive engagement and its outcome (work happiness). Therefore, the significant contribution to theory of the study includes studying cognitive engagement as a path via which job resources are related with employee’s state of mind. It contributes to building the social exchange and vroom’s vector theory in the emerging market context. By investigating the relationship between total rewards and cognitive engagement, this study adds in the knowledge about type of rewards that encourages employees to be psychologically and mentally present at work and also to cognitively focus on assigned tasks. Similarly, investigating the relationship between cognitive engagement and work happiness, the study has contributions to the literature of self-concepts which includes self-identification of work satisfaction and generation of positive feelings after accomplishment of work.

Practical Contributions

Study’s findings indicate that Founders and HR professionals should be concerned about career development and work design of employees. Results of qualitative phase (in-depth interviews) indicate that employees’ work happiness at new ventures may changes with career development and learning opportunities given by the new ventures. Thus, HR professionals should find out employees’ growth prospects and try to give opportunities accordingly. Results also indicate that employees working in new ventures prefer meaning and flexibility in their work. Consequently, their job should be designed in a way that includes flexible benefits, psychological ownership and autonomy in work. Furthermore, founders/supervisors should offer more empowerment in decision making. Participation in business decision making will make employees more accountable

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Table 6: A Glance of 1st and 2nd Level Coding and Theoretically Saturated Themes

Participants	Example Quotes	1st cycle coding	2nd cycle coding
1	"We spend a lot of time thinking about our work". "We focus a great deal of attention on our work". "We concentrate a lot on our work". "We pay a lot of attention to our work".	"Attention and focus on assigned work"	cognitive engagement
2	"we enjoy work regardless of what is going on". "We get the most out of everything". "There is a gap between what I would like to do and what I have done".	"Positive feeling and work satisfaction"	Work happiness
Reward components	Subsidiary component	Notes:	
Intrinsic rewards	Psychological ownership	<p>"Start-up employees get to work end to end from designing product architecture to delivering end solution...they get more exposure in terms of contribution towards the product".</p> <p>"You get ownership of work you are doing ...so we feel motivated to do task in a best way. ..bec you are the person who is responsible if it gets delayed. One more point is you get to guide people and doing that process you also learn so many things"</p>	
	Job meaningfulness	<p>The work itself, is not of routine and repetitive nature", is important to the work of in the firm.....service it provides and that is what I find satisfying".</p>	
	Work/life balance/Work flexibility	<p>yeah...see flexibility ...work from home is allowed..so flexibility has also many parameters...for some people work from home is a flexibility ...for some people understanding is a flexibility. Like if have some issue I will communicate or right now I can take this thing..so this independence is a flexibility...so for me independence is a flexibility.</p>	
	Career opportunities	<p>"Employees (particularly junior) identified opportunities for personal development as the most important.....component of the employment deal. They expected to gain general working experience, learn about a range..... functions or the start-up process. Aimed to develop specific skills, niche expertise and tacit knowledge, soft skills, as well as improve their sales, negotiation, leadership, team working and problem solving".</p>	
	Autonomy	<p>"More freedom/flexibility in terms of scheduling their own working hours. Working from home. Opportunity to structure work around other commitments"</p>	
Extrinsic rewards	Satisfaction with pay and fringe benefits	<p>"monetary return of efforts and skills at work encouragesmakes us satisfied....."</p> <p>"If I spend whole night on completing some task and if it is of no value....adds no benefits in pay then that will dissatisfy me"</p>	
Social rewards	Satisfaction with supervision	<p>"Behaviour of owner manager is very important factorcan try to make my job as interesting as possible"</p>	
	Co-worker support	<p>"colleagues also affect motivation and satisfaction.....listening and helping in solution of problem plays a great role"</p>	

and responsible for the accomplishment or non-accomplishment of the assigned work. Founders/supervisors may find type of rewards that bring work happiness among employees. They may also identify the enablers (cognitive engagement) that influence rewards and employee work happiness (symbolize employee's intention to stay) relationship. Accordingly, a reward mechanism can be designed which may support in engagement and retention of talent in new ventures.

10. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The findings of the study in terms of exploration and evaluation of job resources (total rewards) and state of mind (work happiness) relationship provide avenues for future work. This study investigated the relationship between total rewards and work happiness via cognitive engagement, but could not investigate these links longitudinally. As the engagement state in given task is not of static nature, it might shift with the evolution of new venture (Ethier and Deaux, 1994). Similarly, positive feelings towards job resources may also change after a period of time. Therefore, it is recommended to future studies to conduct a longitudinal research design, so as to capture the complexities of proposed relationships. Also, the current study is limited to the employees working in Indian startups only. Therefore, it is suggested to generalize findings in other markets also.

The study conducted by Harris *et al.* (2014) advocated that organizational rewards also affect employee attitude and proactive and innovative behaviour. Also, start-ups, business models are based on innovation and agility. Therefore, the relationship among total rewards, innovative work behavior and agility of employees could also be researched in future studies. Future studies can also evaluate the moderating factors of the present study's relationships.

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