

**Unveiling The Double-Edged Effects of High-Performance Work Systems (HPWS) On Employee Performance: A Case Study of a Selected Company in Durban Republic of South Africa**

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**ABSTRACT:** *It has been documented that HPWS has both positive and negative effects on employee performance. However, limited studies are affirming this view therefore the review provides a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of HPWS in organisations. To aim of the study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the applications of HPWS in organisations. Under the research goals, a qualitative research methodology was utilised, specifically using in-depth interviews to collect data. The target population consisted of 6 employees of the organisation studied. These individuals were purposefully selected as they possess the necessary information to assess the perceived effects of HPWS on employee performance in organisations. For data analysis, the qualitative thematic data analysis approach was employed. The usage of thematic analysis in this study is founded on its ability to offer comprehensive and compelling insights into the concept of HPWS. Based on the six-step approach of qualitative thematic analysis, the findings suggest that the combination of employee motivation and strategic human resources management practices with HPWS can enhance employee performance. Nevertheless, it has been noted that improper implementation of HPWS can result in heightened job demands and burnout among employees. Therefore, incorporating an evidence-based approach in implementing HPWS is recommended. The study has a limitation as it solely utilizes a qualitative approach, leading to constraints in terms of statistical measurement. Consequently, it is recommended for future studies to employ quantitative or mixed methods research to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between HPWS and employee performance. This study recommends that human resource management professionals use this research as a catalyst for implementing HPWS in their organisations. It can offer valuable guidance on effectively utilising HPWS as a concept and practical approach in managing human resources within organisations. The study highlights and postulate the importance of motivation and an evidence-based approach to HPWS. The evidence-based approach can be acknowledged as a contemporary approach to human resource management in organisations.*

**KEYWORDS:** high-performance work system HPWS, employee performance, employee motivation, job demand, and job burnout.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Organisations worldwide are now faced with the imperative of adapting quickly to the evolving dynamics of their daily operations. Consequently, human resource management practices within these organisations have embraced a new concept known as "high-performance work systems. (HPWS)" This approach entails a deliberate integration of human resource management methods, work structures, and procedures that enhance employee knowledge, skill, dedication, and adaptability. (Appel-baum et al., 2000; Bohlander and Snell, 2007). Rendering to Boxall's findings in 2012, an HPWS is a collection of various human resource management (HRM) practices that are designed to have systematic and synergistic effects. These practices are aimed at selecting, developing, retaining, and motivating employees with enhanced skills in their work-related activities, ultimately resulting in improved employee performance.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The different elements of HPWS have been categorised by Oladapo and Onyeaso (2013) as organisational and job-related human resource practices (HRP) and merit-based human resource (HR) evaluation. Consistent with this assertion, HPWS can impact employees' outcomes in an organisation, leading to significant interest from researchers and practitioners in the field of business for many years (Huselid, 1995). Previous findings have shown both positive and negative effects of HPWS on employee performance, but further insights are needed to identify the positive and negative effects of HPWS. This review intends to provide a comprehensive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses in the applications of (HPWS) in organisations. The subsequent section will delve into empirical studies that demonstrate the positive and negative of HPWS on employee performance.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the present dynamic business environment, organizations are consistently aiming to enhance efficiency and profitability. When effectively managed, the implementation of a high-performance work system can yield remarkable outcomes. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that there are also drawbacks associated with this approach.

### **Strength and Weaknesses of High-Performance Work System**

This study examines the double effect of HPWS on employee and organisational performance. The literature review is divided into two sections: the first section explores the positive outcomes of high-performance working, while the second section discusses the potential drawbacks of the HPWS model on employee performance. Furthermore, the study provides recommendations on the adoption of HPWS in organisations.

### **Strengths of High-Performance Work System (HPWS)**

When discussing the benefits of HPWS, various perspectives are utilised to explore the potential drawbacks of these processes on employee performance. Extensive research has employed brain-storming discussions to outline effective strategies for implementing HPWS, with a focus on fostering support and commitment (Kehoe and Wright, 2013; Messersmith, Patel, Lepak, & Gould-Williams, 2011). Another line of research, rooted in human capital theory, asserts that human capital is the foundation of competitive advantage (Jiang et al., 2012). It posits that HPWS plays a critical role in attracting, developing, and retaining talented individuals, leading to improved organisational performance and financial outcomes (Jiang, Takeuchi, and Lepak, 2013).

Building upon the concept of human resource management, Zhu, Liu, and Chen (2018) propose that HPWS can positively impact organisational performance through the mediation of entrepreneurial orientation. By implementing HPWS and emphasizing structural learning, organisations can effectively function with a high level of performance. Therefore Zhu, Liu, and Chen (2018) highlight the importance of considering the significant dimensions that govern the application of HPWS. They argue that such considerations can enhance organisational commitment and employee relationships, ultimately influencing employees' attitudes and behaviours (Gittell, Seidner, and Wimbush, 2010). Previous research has demonstrated the positive effects of HPWS by suggesting that organisations and employees improve their performance as a result. This improvement stems from the acquisition of innovative knowledge that can be applied in the workplace, enabling organisations to keep up with current market trends (Hughes and Morgan 2007; Wiklund and Shepherd 2005). Consequently, HPWS can foster proactive employee behaviours. Researchers have conducted extensive studies on HPWS from various perspectives. One focus has been on the strategic aspect, examining how HPWS align with overall business strategies and related factors. Authors such as Huselid (1995) emphasise the origins of HPWS in business strategy and underscore their significance in both corporate strategies and human resource management. Another perspective views HPWS as an integrated approach to human resource management, emphasizing the need for internal coherence (Datta, Guthrie, & Wright, 2005; Pfeffer 1996). This perspective recognises that HPWS can offer organisations a competitive advantage by establishing effective systems. A third viewpoint emphasizes the importance of employee involvement in establishing effective HPWS (Edwards and Wright 2001; Guthrie 2001). This perspective asserts that engaged employees are crucial for achieving desired outcomes from HPWS.

### **Weaknesses of High-Performance Work System (HPWS).**

Some of the controversy surrounding the potential adverse effects of HPWS can be attributed to two primary factors: divergent organisational goals and business diversity. Firstly, although the objectives of the organisation and its employees may align to some extent, there are instances where they diverge and may even conflict with one another. Consequently, at times, the personal interests of employees tend to be disregarded within the framework of HPWS. (Van Buren, Greenwood, and Sheehan, 2011).

Research conducted by Gulzar, Moon, Attiq, and Azam (2014) focused on investigating the negative aspects of high-performance systems: analysing psychological and work behaviour disorders among employees. Research findings indicate that employees' perceptions of job satisfaction have a positive correlation with their psychological well-being, including factors such as anxiety, job stress, and an overwhelming sense of responsibility. It is worth noting that these psychological outcomes can subsequently lead to subpar performance levels within the workplace.

Kroon, et.al (2009) suggested contrasting perspectives regarding the impact of HPWS on the perceptions of burnout. This theoretical framework propounds that the implementation of HPWS will lead to heightened job demands and subsequently result in burnout. Consequently, in establishments where employees indicate greater coverage of high-performance work systems, they also report higher levels of job satisfaction; however, this phenomenon is found to be linked with increased stress.

Through the application of the "too much of a good thing" theory, an in-depth analysis was conducted by Yan, Zhao, Zhang, & Sass, (2022) to examine the association between HPWS and job satisfaction. The primary objective was to ascertain if the nonlinear relationship inherent could offer insights to address the inconsistencies observed in previous research findings. The findings of the study, which analysed cross-sectional data from 220 employees in Chinese organisations, as well as longitudinal data from 373 employees, indicate a U-shaped correlation between HPWS and job satisfaction. Furthermore, the results highlight the mediating role of work experience in the relationship between HPWS and job satisfaction. Additionally, it was found that the relationship between HPWS and job satisfaction was negatively influenced by the congruence between employee beliefs and organisational expectations regarding workload.

### **The Nexus Between High-Performance Work System and Employee Performance**

There is a well-founded theoretical foundation for assuming that human resources practices encompassed within the high-performance work systems framework can positively influence employee behaviours and the overall organisational environment, leading to improved employee performance. (Macky and Boxall, 2007). In a study conducted by Li, Naz, Khan, Kusi, and Murad (2019), a quantitative research approach was employed using surveys as instruments to explore the correlation between job satisfaction and job performance. The researchers aimed to evaluate the mediation model and include a significant portion of the equation model. The results indicated that HPWS were found to have a positive impact on employee performance. Moreover, factors such as job satisfaction, perceived organisational support, and employee commitment have been identified as positively and significantly impacting both HPWS and employee performance. Consequently, this research offers supporting evidence for the theory of change in relationships and the fundamental framework of ability, motivation, and principle. The relationship between a high-performance work system and an employee must be widely acknowledged in human resource management literature.

Nadeem, Riaz, and Danish (2019) conducted a study on the relationship between job satisfaction, employee performance, and organisational citizenship behaviour. The findings indicate that HPWS has a positive impact on service performance and public behaviour in the workplace. It is also indicative of improved employee performance, HPWS, and employee benefits. In a separate study, Mehdi, Liao, Muhammad, and Nader (2014) explored the concept of people management concerning high-performance work through online surveys. Their research examined the influence of HPWS on employee productivity and work engagement within organisations. The study concludes that implementing HPWS strategies can enhance employee productivity and efficiency while minimizing costs and providing benefits to employees. Organisations can greatly benefit from investing in the development of their human resources (HR), as it can create value for all stakeholders.

In a study by Yazid, Yahya, Ishak & Achim (2018) self-administered questionnaires were used to understand the relationship between HPWS and organisational performance: the mediating role of employee attitude. Findings suggest that promoting employee engagement and fostering a culture of continuous learning within the organisation can lead to increased positivity and commitment among employees. As a result, it can be concluded that employee motivation and commitment play a significant role in influencing the impact of HPWS on enhancing employee performance.

## **MATERIALS AND METHOD**

According to Gill, Johnson and Clarke (2010), the qualitative research approach is a valuable method used to explore and gain an in-depth understanding of motivations, ideas, and drives. It offers valuable insights into problems and aids in the development of ideas and recommendations for quantitative research. In line with the preceding assertion, the qualitative research approach is employed in the study. The significance of incorporating qualitative research methods in this study stems from their flexible nature, which permits researchers to adjust and refine their approach as the study progresses. This adaptability enhances the accuracy of the data collected and enables the development of valuable insights.

## **RESEARCH STRATEGY AND DATA COLLECTION**

Taking into consideration the ensuing statement Yin (2016) highlighted that a research strategy is an integral part of the planning process as it helps guide the researcher's thoughts and enables them to conduct their research according to their plan. Therefore, for this study interviewing which is a previous qualitative research technique that typically entails engaging participants in discussions and posing open-ended inquiries to obtain valuable insights and supplementary details about a particular subject matter was used. Aligned to the interview approach and the aid of an interview schedule 6 participants (3) from the customer service and another (3) from the sales department of the organisation studied were interviewed to gauge the perceived effect of HPWS on employee performance. Interviewing techniques were deemed crucial for this study as they facilitate in-depth elucidation and enhanced comprehension of the research subject matter and the perspectives and attitudes towards the research issue.

### **Sampling**

Given to Glicken (2003), sampling refers to the procedure of selecting a limited number of participants and gathering their perspectives on what the broader group would convey if the researcher were to ask the same question to all members of the larger group. The non-probability qualitative purposive sampling technique was deemed significant for sampling in this context.

### **Data Analysis**

Bestowing to Start (2006) in Taderdoost (2017), data analysis refers to the procedure of converting gathered data into valuable insights. This involves utilising various methodologies such as modelling and correlation to identify patterns, ultimately aiding in decision-making. Considering the preceding assertion, this study employs a qualitative methodology therefore within the realm of qualitative research, one commonly utilised data analysis approach is thematic analysis which is a qualitative research method frequently employed by researchers for the thorough examination and interpretation of intricate data. It encompasses a systematic examination of dataset accounts, capturing descriptive information. This entails a comprehensive content analysis through meticulous reading and re-reading of transcripts (King,2004; Rice and Ezzy,1999). By conducting a rigorous thematic analysis, researchers can generate valuable and dependable findings (Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017). In the application of the thematic data analysis approach the six phases of qualitative thematic data analysis were employed i) The researcher became acquainted with the gathered data. ii) after familiarisation with the data and steps to generate initial codes iii) allowed for the searching for themes iv) conducting theme evaluations v) developing and naming themes and vi) compile a written report summarizing the findings. The importance of thematic analysis of this study is viewed through the lens of Hayes (1997) stating that thematic analysis is a thorough process in which researchers can identify multiple connections between the data and the evolving themes of the research.

## **FINDINGS**

The objective of this study is to examine the contrasting effect of HPWS on employee performance through a case study of a specific company in the Republic of South Africa. The findings of this study suggest that implementing an HPWS can have both positive and negative outcomes on employee performance, based on an analysis of key factors associated with such systems.

### ***Core Themes Analysed***

#### **Employee Motivation**

From a behavioural standpoint, Lee, Lee and Sohn (2017) indicate that HPWS significantly influence organisational outcomes. When HPWS are designed to foster alignment with company goals, it leads to enhanced performance. Hence, it becomes imperative to encourage and motivate employees to actively contribute towards the organisation's work. Key human

resources practices encompass performance management, competitive compensation, incentives, rewards, benefits, development initiatives, and job security (Jiang et al., 2012).

In line with the preceding assertion respondent, one indicates that *“when employee motivation strategies are implemented workers tend to adapt easily to high-performance work system approaches in the organisation”*. The second respondent stated that *“when employees are motivated team members demonstrate increased commitment to their work as they gain a deeper comprehension and attentiveness regarding the impact of their day-to-day tasks on the financial performance of the organisation. Furthermore, this enhances collaboration and fosters a sense of accountability within the team”*.

### **Strategic Human Resource Management**

Human resource management emphasizes the value of employees, specifically their knowledge, skills, and capabilities. This perspective suggests that businesses should invest and align high-performance work systems with education and training to attract talented and experienced individuals, ultimately gaining a competitive edge (Subramaniam and Youndt, 2005). To achieve this objective, organisations can engage in activities like strategic recruitment, meticulous selection processes, comprehensive training programs, flexible work arrangements, fostering teamwork, encouraging employee cooperation, and promoting knowledge sharing (Jiang et al., 2012). These actions are considered important catalysts for a successful high-performance work system that can enhance organisational performance.

The third respondent suggests that *“proactive human resources management plays a crucial role in cultivating high-performance processes within organisations. By prioritising employee morale and motivation, this approach ultimately leads to positive outcomes in terms of both individual and organisational performance”*.

Respondent four indicates that *“HPWS can be considered as methodologies implemented by human resource management (HRM) managers, which aid organisations in making informed decisions for enhancing performance”*.

### **Increase Job Demand**

Several studies conducted in the field of human resources management have uncovered negative aspects of organisational practices (Han et al., 2020). These studies have found that increasing work demands and improving service quality may result in decreased employee headcount and performance (Ramsay et al., 2000; Jensen et al., 2013; Avgoustaki, 2015; Oppenauer and Van De Voorde, 2016; Wang et al., 2019).

In line with the preceding postulation respondent, five affirms the fact that *“HPWS can result in heightened work demands, leading to an escalated workload and necessitating additional commitment and effort from employees”*.

### **Job Burnout**

Rendering to the research conducted by Kroon et al. (2009), there is a direct correlation between HPWS and job satisfaction and burnout, with job demands acting as a mediator. Additionally, Oppenauer and Van De Voorde (2016) discovered that these practices (high-

performance work systems) are linked to excessive work, which in turn leads to fatigue. The sixth respondent indicated that “*HPWS requires a lot of energy so normally we get tired and burn out completely*”.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of this study was to examine the impact of an HPWS on employee performance. The study focused on identifying the strengths and weaknesses of HPWS and its relationship to employee performance. To gather data, in-depth interviews were conducted as part of a qualitative research approach. The data was analysed using qualitative thematic data analysis. The findings indicate that when combined with employee motivation and strategic human resources management practices, HPWS can have a positive impact on employee performance. However, it was also observed that if not properly implemented, HPWS can lead to increased job demands and burnout among employees. Therefore, integrating an evidence-based approach in implementing HPWS is recommended.

### Implications of the Study

The findings of this study indicate that utilizing HPWS can enhance employee performance through leveraging their experience. The organisations involved in this study should fully adopt HPWS practices while addressing areas in need of improvement such as motivation and training. Special attention should also be given to enhancing the skills and development of HR managers, as well as implementing practices that yield optimal results. Employing effective human resource management and communication techniques can assist in mitigating any issues associated with HPWS. The organisation’s HR managers must establish appropriate HR practices that align with and support HPWS, including policies and plans that uncover the potential of employees when HPWS strategies are implemented.

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