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Configuring optimal contextual performance and task performance in offshore business processing organizations

Abstract

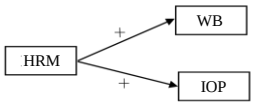
Occupational stress is damaging to employee wellbeing, causes serious illnesses and costs organizations billions of dollars every year. Mutual gains model of human resource management (HRM) recommends that HRM practices should improve both employee well-being and performance. Offshore business processing organizations (BPOs) are renowned to have intense wok environment. The study aimed to deploy mutual gains models in BPOs to determine if positive perceptions of HRM practices (or benevolent HRM attributions) can help employees manage their stress better and improve their task and contextual performance. Furthermore, work gratitude was examined to see if it acted as an intermediary in the relationship between benevolent HRM attributions, employee stress management, task and contextual performance. Primary data of three hundred and sixty-eight respondents was collected from the employees working in BPOs. Structural equation modelling technique was deployed for the testing of causal relationships among constructs. AMOS 24.0 was used for the estimation of theoretical model. Empirical outcomes affirmed strongly knitted theoretical associations among the constructs. This study contributes to literature by proposing a framework which shows how HRM attributions can enhance employee's task performance, contextual performance and improve employee stress management through the mediating influence of work gratitude.

Keywords: *Contextual performance; BPO; stress management; employee well-being; employee performance; task performance; work gratitude*

1. Introduction

Employee stress is a negative and unpleasant emotional experience connected with elements of anxiety, fear, dread, irritation and grief (Hameed and Khwaja, 2022). Work related stress is a significant psychological and physical health risk for employees and it costs organizations hundreds of billions of dollars in sick leaves, medical bills and lost productivity (Kivimäki and Kawachi, 2015; Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Quick and Henderson, 2016). Stress and anxiety levels have been increasing throughout the world during the Covid-19 pandemic, which poses a serious challenge to people's health and mental well-being (Holmes *et al.*, 2020; WHO, 2020). The pandemic has also elevated employees' psychological distress due to increased work demands and different work practices (Hamouche, 2020). Given its psychological and physical health implications, research is urgently required on how stress levels can be reduced in employment settings (Cooper and Quick, 2017; Giorgi *et al.*, 2020; Imperatori, 2017; Tuzovic and Kabadayi, 2020).

Human Resource Management (HRM) practices refer to all those interventions and activities associated with "the management of work and people towards desired ends" (Boxall *et al.,* 2008, p. 1). The desired end for the organization is *high levels of performance* extracted from the employees through deployment of HRM practices (Boon *et al.,* 2019; Wood, 2021). Moreover, HRM practices are also the curators of employee well-being (Beer *et al.,* 1984), and can be launched as part of a preventive or remedial strategy to help reduce stress levels in organizations (Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2019; Weinberg *et al.,* 2010). In particular, the mutual gains HRM framework suggests that HRM practices should be designed and launched with a view to improve employee performance and well-being simultaneously (Guest, 2017; Kochan and Osterman, 1994). Peccei and Van De Voorde (2019) developed various mutual gains frameworks and encouraged researchers to examine how HRM practices can impact employee performance and well-being in a positive manner.



Key: WB= Well-Being, IOP= Individual or Organizational Performance
Figure 1: Mutual Gains Conceptual Model (Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019, p. 541)

In spite of the optimistic picture painted by the mutual gains model, research has primarily focused on how HRM practices can improve employee performance while ignoring employee well-being (Beer *et al.,* 2015; Guest, 2017). Employee well-being has been largely neglected in literature and main focus has been on how HRM can improve financial performance and create competitive advantages for the firm (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2018). Also, scant research on relationship between HRM and employee stress has produced inconclusive and conflicting evidence. While there is some research which shows that HRM practices reduce employee stress (Boxall and Macky, 2014; Macky and Boxall, 2008), other evidence suggests that HRM practices improve employee performance by intensifying work and increasing employee stress levels (Kroon *et al.,* 2009; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2018; Van De Voorde *et al.,* 2012).

The mixed and inconclusive results regarding the relationship between HRM and employee stress suggests the presence of intermediary variables and invites more research in the area (Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019). The time has come to stop treating employees as merely a means to an end (Guest, 2017) and conduct worker-centered studies with a special focus on how HRM practices can reduce employee stress levels (Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2018, 2019). For this purpose, Guest (2017) makes a pertinent observation when he suggests that "organizations are unlikely to promote well-being on ethical grounds alone" (p. 28), therefore HRM-well-being research should develop models which promote *mutual gains* for the employer and employee. Scholars increasingly concur with this viewpoint. For instance, Pagán-Castaño *et al.* (2020) suggest developing *unified frameworks* to explore how HRM can impact employee well-being and

performance, Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė (2019) recommend *sustainable HRM* where HR practices are enacted to improve "profit maximization for the organization and reduce the negative impact on employees" (p. 2). Following these recommendations, this study attempts to develop a mutual gains framework where HRM practices can improve employee performance and enhance their well-being by deploying the model presented in Figure 1 by Peccei and Van De Voorde (2019).

Research on employee stress can examine stress as a state (or distress), stimuli that cause work stress (or stressors), adaptation to stress (or strain), reactions to stress or deployment of coping behaviors (or stress management) (Rutter, 1981). The present study examines well-being in terms of employees' coping ability and work stress management. Coping refers to continual efforts that are deployed by an individual to alleviate and manage various stress inducing phenomena (Orzechowska *et al.*, 2013). HRM practices can be launched by employers as a preventative or remedial strategy to help employees cope with and manage work stress (Murphy, 1995; Weinberg *et al.*, 2010). Therefore, employees' coping and stress management is considered an appropriate variable for examining well-being in employment settings.

Since mutual gains model suggests that HRM practices have an impact on improving employee performance, the present study deploys the construct of "task performance" and "contextual performance" (Katz, 1964; Motowildo *et al.*, 1997). Task performance includes reliability meeting or exceeding performance standards which are required by the job-role; whereas contextual performance denotes an employees' tendency to go above and beyond the call of duty to display innovative behaviors, cooperate with team members, suggest improvements, protect the organization and be a good ambassador to the outsiders (Motowidlo and Van Scotter, 1994). Contextual performance is based on interpersonal and discretionary employee behaviors (as opposed to necessary ones) that contribute to organizational performance through its impact on the psychological, social and cultural context of work (Goodman and Svyantek, 1999; Van Scotter and Motowidlo, 1996). Task performance and collective performance together give a holistic picture of overall employee performance, moreover, most managers take into consideration both prescribed (task-related) and discretionary (contextual) performance while judging the performance of their employees (Motowidlo and Van Scotter, 1994; Motowidlo, 2000). The present study will also seek feedback on employee performance from their respective managers on both task and contextual performance indicators.

The impact of HRM practices on employee performance and well-being is indirect and takes places through mediating affective and attitudinal constructs (Boxall *et al.*, 2016; Guest, 2002). Scholars agree that there is a continuing need to develop the theory on intermediary mechanisms which link HRM to employees' psychological well-being and performance (Boxall *et al.*, 2016; Guest, 2017) as most fruitful yet realistic research in this regard is urgently required (Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019). The present study examines the impact of positive HRM attributions on employee stress

management and performance. Moreover, work gratitude was examined as a novel mediator construct which connects HRM perceptions with employee stress management and performance.

Gratitude is defined as state of *thankfulness* which arises when people recognize that something good has occurred, and the source of the good occurrence lies in the benevolence of a benefactor (Emmons and McCullough, 2004; McCullough *et al.*, 2001). *Work gratitude* is the intentional choice on part of the employees to engage in positive work appraisals and feelings of thankfulness in response to various work practices, situations, and people (Youssef-Morgan *et al.*, 2022). Studies in how gratitude can arise in the workplace are very rare and thus urgently required, as gratitude can be immensely beneficial towards improving employee well-being and performance (Cortini *et al.*, 2019; Di Fabio *et al.*, 2017; Fehr *et al.*, 2017). More specifically, Cain *et al.* (2019) suggested "Researchers need to further understand the conditions under which gratitude can improve employee well-being and organizational functioning" (p. 1). The research study has been conducted in the offshore business processing organizations (BPO~~s~~) of Pakistan. Intense work environment and stress among BPO employees operating in Pakistan has been reported in prior studies (Hussain, *et al.*, 2019; Imran and Zaheer, 2011; Khan, Imran, and Anwar, 2019; Sial, ~~Imran, & Zaheer, 2011~~; Naseem, 2018). Work stress among employees has been also reported in the neighboring Indian BPO sector (Khandelwal, 2020; Kumar and Gupta, 2017; Srinivasa, and Vijayashree, 2020; Rai and Tripathi, 2017). Henceforth, it remained eminent to explore how contextual performance, task performance and stress can be managed among the BPO employees.

2. Literature Review

The following section includes a review and proposed relationships of the constructs deployed in the study.

2.1 HRM Attribution Approach- Employee performance and well-being

HRM attributions construct is built on a *process-based approach* (Sanders *et al.*, 2014), which suggests that researchers should examine the psychological meaning or significance attached by employees to the HRM practices they experience (Sanders and Yang, ~~2015~~2016). There are two primary paradigms deployed in HRM research, the *content-based approach* (CBA) and the *process-based approach* (PBA). Most HRM research has been carried out by selecting a set of HRM practices (or HRM content) and examining their influence on employee performance or well-being (Boon *et al.*, 2019; Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019). CBA is not sufficiently robust to explain how HRM practices impact employee performance or well-being outcomes (Ostroff and Bowen, 2016; Sanders *et al.*, 2014); the reasons for this are stated below

Studies have previously shown that there is a positive relationship between HRM practices and both task and contextual performance of employees (Alfes *et al.*, 2012; Alfes *et al.*, 2013~~b~~; Edgar *et al.*, 2018; Sun *et al.*, 2007). However, most studies do not elaborate *why* HRM practices improve employee performance. Similarly, HRM practices are not intrinsically empowering or

participative, nor automatically beneficial for employee well-being (De Prins *et al.*, ~~2018~~2020; Heery, 2016). Since HRM practices can be both beneficial and determinantal to employee well-being and performance, PBA approach suggests that research needs to examine employee interpretations and understanding of HRM practices (Boselie *et al.*, 2009; Delbridge and Keenoy, 2010; Wang *et al.*, 2020). For instance, employees can perceive even the best HRM practices as exploitative, enacted to increase their job-demands (Imhof and Andresen, 2018; Imperatori, 2017; Jensen and van de Voorde, 2016). The interpretation of HRM practices as exploitative can be determinantal to their performance and increases levels of stress and strain among them (Kroon *et al.*, 2009; Ogbonnaya, 2019; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2018).

In short, the meaning of HRM practices is subjectively perceived and interpreted by employees (Beijer *et al.*, 2019), and it is their own perceptions and interpretations (not the content of HRM practices) that directly influence employee performance and well-being outcomes (Nishii *et al.*, 2008; Shantz *et al.*, 2016). In short, PBA asserts that employee perceptions/interpretations of HRM practices demonstrate a more robust and substantial association with various employee well-being and performance outcomes (Sanders and Yang, ~~2015~~2016; Wang *et al.*, 2020).

The present study deploys the construct of HRM attributions by (Nishii *et al.*, 2008) to examine employee perceptions and interpretations of HRM practices. The HRM attribution construct is based on attribution theory. Attribution theory posits that any social interaction occurs between actors (or initiators of behavior) and observers (or recipients and interpreters of behavior) (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967). After the action has taken place, the observers make an attempt to interpret the actor's motives and intentions behind carrying out the action (or ask themselves, "why the actor behaved in this way) (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967). Taking inspiration from attribution theory, Nishii *et al.* (2008) suggested that the organization/management (i.e., actor) initiates a behavior by introducing certain HRM practices; the employees (or observers) in return make an attempt to interpret management's motives and intent behind enacting those HRM practices' (i.e., ask themselves, why the management has introduced these HRM practices); Nishii *et al.* (2008) called these employee interpretations of management's intent "*HRM attributions*". ~~(Nishii *et al.*, 2008).~~ As suggested by attribution theory (Kelley and Michela, 1980) these employee interpretations (HRM attributions) have a considerable influence on employee emotions, attitudes and behaviors (Sanders and Yang, ~~2015~~2016; Wang *et al.*, 2020).

2.1.1 Benevolent HRM Attributions and Employee Stress Management

Nishii *et al.* (2008) suggested that while interpreting why their management has chosen to introduce the existent HRM practices, employees can attribute either a benevolent or manipulative intent/motive to their management. *Manipulative attributions* are based on employee beliefs that their management has enacted HRM practices to get more work out of them; on the other hand, *benevolent HRM attributions* reflect employee beliefs that their management chose to introduce the existent HRM practices to help improve their well-being. Thus, Benevolent HRM attributions

"reflect a belief that an HR practice was enacted to improve employees' well-being" (Fehr *et al.*, 2017, p. 369). This study has chosen to examine well-being HRM attributions" (or WHRA) as one group of benevolent HRM attributions.

The present study also proposes that HRM practices which are seen by employees as supportive of their performance can also be considered as benevolent HRM attributions. The Cambridge dictionary defines benevolence as "the quality of being kind and helpful" [1]. Benevolence is described as kindness and goodwill towards others (Brandt, 1976; Koutsouvilis, 1976), which can be reflected and received in various shapes e.g., friendship, generosity and various beneficial acts (Beauchamp, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). In organizational context, employees can see their management as benevolent if they believe that their the management displays and acts towards them with a good intent (Mayer *et al.*, 1995). Benevolent leaders are helpful, compassionate and supportive of employees working in their organizations (Karakas and Sarigollu, 2012). Based on this discussion, it follows that if HRM practices are seen by employees as supportive and helpful of their performance, such practices will also be interpreted as demonstrative of their management's benevolent intent towards them.

The second set of benevolent HRM attributions considered by the study are called "performance HRM attributions" (or PHRA); Shantz *et al.* (2016) define PHRA as employee attributions of "HRM practices as primarily intended to support their job performance" (Shantz *et al.*, 2016, p. 173). This indication of support is perceived by employees as a demonstration of positive managerial/organizational intent behind enacting HRM practices "HRM performance attributions signal to employees that they are important and valuable" (Shantz *et al.*, 2016, p. 176)~~(p. 176)~~; such perceptions make employees feel that their organization cares about them, provides them with sufficient resources (work-related and emotional) to perform well because it values their effort (Shantz *et al.*, 2016). It follows that PHRA can result in employee beliefs that their management/organization is a benevolent benefactor for enacting HRM practices that are supportive, caring and indicative of a generous intent towards them.

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This study posits that both WHRA and PHRA can improve employees' stress management ability. Studies suggest that WHRA can lower job strain and improve employee satisfaction (Nishii *et al.*, 2008; Van De Voorde and Beijer, 2015) while PHRA can lower emotional exhaustion among employees (Shantz *et al.*, 2016). The transactional theory of stress states that stress becomes toxic when people feel that they do not have enough resources (technical, emotional, social) to cope with the demands that various stressors pose (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). PHRA can increase people's stress management ability by increasing the perception of job-resources in relation to their job-demands; this effect can be explained by Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001).

[1] https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/benevolence

JD-R theory suggests that job-demands exert psychological (cognitive and emotional), physical and social pressure on employees, whereas, job-resources include the technical, psychological, physical and social support given to employees to help perform their work and stimulate their growth (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). JD-R based studies show that management policies which are viewed as bolstering job-resources improve employee well-being and lower their stress levels (Bakker and de Vries, 2021; Bakker and Demerouti, 2016; Schaufeli, 2017). PHRA convey the managerial intent and philosophy that employees are valued and provided with ample job-resources and support (Shantz *et al.,* 2016); the present study expects that such support-based attributions will increase employees' stress management scores.

WHRA can also help employees manage their stress well, and this effect can be explained through perceived organizational support (POS) theory. POS is an "experience-based attribution concerning the benevolent or malevolent intent of the organization's policies, norms, procedures, and actions as they affect employees" (Eisenberger *et al.,* 2001, p. 42). POS is reflected in employee beliefs about the degree to which their management/organization is invested in their well-being, values their effort and supports them in their contributions (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986). POS is perceived by employees as a kind of organizational altruism reflective of their organization's benevolence (Viot and Benraiss-Noailles, 2019)~~(Viot and Laila, 2019)~~, and such beliefs in the organization's benevolence can help alleviate employee stress and enhance their well-being (Eisenberger *et al.,* 2020). WHRA are also based on employee beliefs that their organization is a benevolent benefactor that cares for their well-being, it follows that such attributions can result in better stress management scores among employees.

H1: *PHRA improve stress management among employees*
H2: *WHRA improve stress management among employees*

2.1.2 Benevolent HRM Attributions, task performance and contextual performance

HRM practices can improve employee task performance and contextual performance through two mechanisms; first, when employees perceive that HRM practices have been enacted to help and support them perform well (or PHRA attributions), second, when they perceive that HRM practices have been enacted to help improve their well-being (or WHRA attributions).

JD-R model can provide a theoretical explanation as to how PHRA can improve employee task and contextual performance. Escalating job demands result in a depletion of physical and mental energy, which is detrimental to employee performance; whereas, providing job resources leads to increased levels of employee engagement, lower stress and motivates task and contextual performance (Bakker and Schaufeli, 2008; Christian *et al.*, 2011; Khwaja and Ahmad, 2013; Schaufeli, 2017). Since PHRA indicate employee perceptions and beliefs that their management

provides them with resources and support to do their job well, it is highly likely that such attributions will improve employee task and contextual performance.

Both JD-R and POS can provide a theoretical explanation for how WHRA can improve employee task and contextual performance. When employees feel that they are devalued or taken advantage of, they motivation for work can be deteriorated (Kahn, 1990). However, when employees believe that their organization values their contributions and is invested in their well-being, they can deploy their maximum emotional, cognitive and physical energies to perform well (Eisenberger *et al.,* 2020; Lesener *et al.,* 2019; Rich *et al.,* 2010). Since WHRA indicate employee perceptions and beliefs that their management is invested in their well-being, it is highly likely that such attributions can improve employees' task and contextual performance.

H3: *PHRA improve employee task and contextual performance*
H4: *WHRA improve employee task and contextual performance*

2.2 Gratitude

Attribution theory suggests that observers (recipients of an action) experience various emotions arising from their thoughts and beliefs about why the actor has acted in a certain manner (or attributing reasons/causality to action) (Weiner, 1985, 2014). Gratitude is also an *attribution-dependent-emotion* that is aroused in the observer (or beneficiary) when the observer believes that a valuable benefit has been obtained from the actor (or benefactor) (McCullough *et al.,* 2002). This kind of gratitude is also called *benefit-triggered or other-directed* gratitude (Ma *et al.,* 2017). Benefit-triggered gratitude is experienced when people feel that they have been recipients of a kind act due to the benevolence of a benefactor (Emmons *et al.,* 2019; Emmons and McCullough, 2004; Manela, 2021).

Beneficiaries (or observers) can experience other-directed gratitude if they believe the benefactor merely *intended* to benefit them, even if the "intended benefit" was not actually received by the beneficiary (McCullough, 2002). This goes to show that the receipt of the *real benefit* is not required to invoke gratitude in the beneficiary. Just a perception or belief that the benefactor is acting from a *benevolent intent* is sufficient for gratitude to arise in the beneficiary (Manela, 2021; McCullough *et al.,* 2001). In work settings, employee perceptions of their management as a benevolent benefactor can trigger gratitude among them (Fehr *et al.,* 2017). More particularly, *Work gratitude* (WG) is the feeling of thankfulness that arises in response to the perceived benevolence of their management/organization behind enacting certain work practices (Youssef-Morgan *et al.,* 2022).

The present study has chosen two HRM attributions that can make employees believe that their organization has introduced HRM practices from a benevolent intent and motive. Employees can perceive that their organization is benevolent if it has enacted HRM practices to support their

performance (PHRA) (Shantz *et al.,* 2016), or help enhance their well-being (WHRA) (Nishii *et al.,* 2008). It is expected that both benevolent HRM attribution will engender increased levels of work gratitude (WG) among employees

H5: *PHRA result to increased levels of WG among employees*

H6: *WHRA result in increased levels of WG among employees*

2.2.1 The relationship between Gratitude and Stress Management

Gratitude is a "universal tendency to respond positively to another's benevolence" (Emmons and Stern, 2013, p. 847). In particular, Arousal of gratitude is specially linked with effective stress coping through positive interpretation of events (Wood *et al.,* 2007). Gratitude is experienced in beneficiaries through the recognition that they have been recipients of a benefactor's kindness and benevolence (McCullough *et al.,* 2001). Such gratitude arouses positively valenced emotion emotions among the beneficiaries (Emmons, 2004), which improves the beneficiary's well-being and reduces stress levels (Portocarrero *et al.,* 2020; Skrzelinska and Ferreira, 2020). More specifically, gratitude is linked with a reduction in perceived stress in occupational settings (Lee *et al.,* 2018; Valikhani *et al.,* 2019). The theoretical explanation for this effect comes from the broaden and build theory of emotions (BBT) (Fredrickson, 2001). BBT postulates that positive emotions create upward spirals, enhance resilience, build emotional and coping resources, thereby reducing negative affect and stress among people (Fredrickson, 2001; Fredrickson and Joiner, 2002). Gratitude like other positive emotions also broadens, builds and enhances people's positive emotions and coping resources (Fredrickson, 2004).

While considerable work has been done to demonstrate the relationship between gratitude and well-being among general populations, such work in occupational settings is rare. Therefore, more researchers have called to examine how work gratitude can influence employee well-being in occupational settings (Cortini *et al.,* 2019; Fehr *et al.,* 2017; Youssef-Morgan *et al.,* 2022). Considering the discussion on gratitude and coping, and the fact that no study has yet examined the impact of work gratitude (WG) on employee stress management levels, this study suggests the following hypotheses.

H7*: WG improves employee stress management*

2.2.2 Relationship between Gratitude, Task and Contextual performance

Employee gratitude has been theorized to positively impact their performance levels but this assumption has not been empirically well examined (Fehr's *et al.,* 2017). Gratitude at work is considered by Di Fabio *et al.* (2017) as "promising means of promoting performance and healthy organizations" (p. 1) "precious resource that sustains performance" (p. 2). In particular, the developers of Work Gratitude (WG) construct have called for research to examine the impact of WG on performance (Youssef-Morgan *et al.,* 2022). The theoretical basis for how gratitude can

impact task and contextual performance is as follows. Beneficiaries experience other-directed gratitude because they believe that their benefactor has given them a benefit from a benevolent motive and intent; consequently, the experience of such gratitude motivates people to reciprocate and return favors to their benefactors (Ma *et al.,* 2017; McCullough *et al.,* 2001; Schaumberg and Flynn, 2009).

In employment settings, when people believe their management has enacted HRM practices from a benevolent intent, the resulting gratitude can invoke a desire in people to deploy their maximum energies to their work, thereby improving their performance levels (Di Fabio *et al.,* 2017; Fehr *et al.,* 2017). This can explain how WG can result in improved employee task performance. However, the explanation of how WG can impact contextual performance is even more interesting. When people are grateful to a benefactor, they don't just return a favor in a transactional manner; instead, grateful people may return a favor of a much greater value than the initial favor received from the benefactor, hence exceeding the basic requirements of reciprocity (Algoe *et al.,* 2008; Bartlett *et al.,* 2012; Schaumberg and Flynn, 2009). The desire to exceed the norm of reciprocity can help explain how grateful employees can go above and beyond the call of duty for their organization, thereby improving their contextual performance.

One study in particular showed that employee gratitude was linked positively to their job performance, however the authors suggested that it was only a *partial inspection of the construct* because performance was measured as a self-reported construct (Cortini *et al.,* 2019). The present study aims to be the first to examine the impact of work gratitude (WG) on task and contextual performance; moreover, both task and contextual performance questionnaires will be determined by getting the employees' supervisors/managers to avoid bias and over-reporting.

H8: *WG has a positive impact on employees' task performance*
H9: *WG has a positive impact on employees' contextual performance*

2.3 Gratitude as a Mediator between Benevolent HRM Attributions, employee stress management, task and contextual performance

The present study has presented the following hypotheses regarding PHRA and WHRA. First, both PHRA AND WHRA improve employee stress management and have a positive impact on employee task and contextual performance. Second, both PHRA and WHRA have a positive impact on work gratitude (WG), which in turn also improves employee stress management and has a positive impact on their task and contextual performance. This presents a possibility that WG mediates the relationship between benevolent HRM attributions (PHRA and WHRA) and employee stress management; moreover, WG also mediates the association between benevolent HRM attributions, task and contextual performance

The mediating effect of WG on the relationship between benevolent HRM attributions and employee stress management, and between benevolent HRM attributions and performance (task

and contextual), is endorsed by social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964). SET describes how social transactions between an employer and employee evolve into mutually beneficial and rewarding relationships (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). At the heart of SET is the *norm of reciprocity* (Gouldner, 1960), which suggests that beneficiaries have an natural desire to respond positively to the kindness of their benefactors. This positive response is both emotional and behavioral, in that it invokes a desire in beneficiaries to reciprocate and return the favors extended by the benefactors (Blau, 1964; Gouldner, 1960). In employment settings, perceptions of a social exchange arises when employees believe that their employers are benevolent, and meet their socio-emotional needs by making them feel respected, valued and cared for (Cropanzano *et al.*, 2017; Cropanzano *et al.*, 2001). Employment relationships based on a social exchange (as opposed to an economic exchange) motivates them to perform better and improves their well-being, as their socio-emotional needs are met (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Eisenberger *et al.*, 2020).

Gratitude enacts a social exchange between a beneficiary and a benefactor (Blau, 1964) as it constructs and reinforces social relationships (Algoe *et al.*, 2008; Gouldner, 1960). PHRA and WHRA are based on employee perceptions that their organization values their contributions, supports them in performing well and invests in their well-being. As proposed by SET, when HRM practices are seen by employees as benevolent (an indication of organizational value, care and support), ~~a).~~ it can lead to an arousal of WG (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Fehr *et al.*, 2017), and ~~b).~~ WG can bolster employees' coping resources, ultimately improving their stress management (Fehr *et al.*, 2017; Lee *et al.*, 2018; Valikhani *et al.*, 2019). Since WG is at the heart of this social exchange, it can also act as a mediator in this relationship. Also, gratitude makes people exceed the basic requirement of reciprocity for grateful beneficiaries are likely to return favors of a greater value than the one they received from the benefactor (Algoe *et al.*, 2008; Ma *et al.*, 2017). Putting in greater effort and improving performance is a chief way through which grateful employees reciprocate the perceived benevolence of their organization (Di Fabio *et al.*, 2017; Fehr *et al.*, 2017; Youssef-Morgan *et al.*, 2022). Since gratitude is also at the heart of this social exchange, it is also expected that WG will act as a mediator in the relationship between both benevolent HRM attributions, task and contextual performance. The theoretically knitted hypotheses are presented in figure 2.

H10: *WG mediates the association between PHRA and employee stress management.*
H11: *WG mediates the association between WHRA and employee stress management.*
H12: *WG mediates the association between PHRA and task performance*
H13: *WG mediates the association between PHRA and contextual performance*
H14: *WG mediates the association between WHRA and task performance*
H15: *WG mediates the association between WHRA and contextual performance*

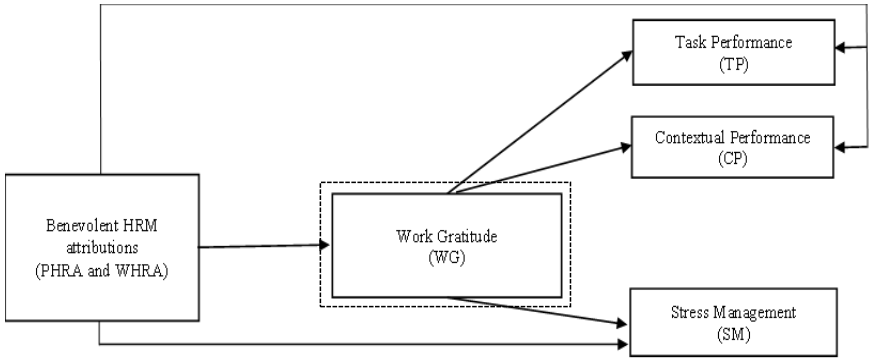

Figure 2: Theoretical Framework

Methodology

Positivism doctrine was deployed using deductive approach as the research design of the study. The data was collected from the employees working in the business process organizations (BPO~~s~~) of Pakistan. The work environment in BPO~~s~~ has been reported to be quite intense as the parent firm wants high returns from the investments (Hussain, *et al.*, 2019; Khan, *et al.*, 2019). Salaries of the employees are market competitive but majority of the BPO~~s~~ have night operation due to the time zone differences. Hence, the employees are bound to work at night as the parent firms head offices are based in the west. Not only working at night itself is a pressure, but also, the firms have been very demanding and task-driven; therefore, employees have to ensure contextual and task performance; along with managing work stress. Considering the aforementioned factors, it was appropriate to collect data from BPO~~s~~ as it has been reported to be high stress inducing employment sectors in the country. Nonprobability convenience sampling was deployed for the collection of data. Structural equation modelling (SEM) technique was executed for data analysis. The data was collected from three hundred and sixty-eight employees as an appropriate sample size of more than 250 is feasible for SEM (Khwaja *et al.*, 2022; Zaman, *et al.*, 2021). Structured questionnaire on a five-point likert scale was adapted, and the items of task performance (TP) were adapted from the study of Turnley *et al.*, (2003); contextual performance (CP) from Goodman and Svyantek, (1999); work gratitude (WG) from Youssef-Morgan, *et al.*, (2022); stress management (SM) from Winwood *et al.*, (2013); performance HRM attributions (PHRA) from Shantz et al. (2016); and Well-being HRM attributions (WHRA) from Nishii's et al. (2008).

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Results

Structural equation modelling (SEM) technique was deployed for the estimation of theoretical research model. Covariance based structural equation modelling (CB-SEM) approach was used as it is considered to be stringent as compared to variance-based structural equation modelling (VB-SEM). For CB-SEM, it is recommended to have sample size of more than 250 respondents (Hair *et al.*, 2017; Khwaja *et al.*, 2022). Before the conduction of SEM path analysis, the determination of data normality, exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), convergent validity and discriminant validity are essential to measure. Once affirmative results are attained of the aforementioned statistical tests, hypotheses are consequently tested.

4.1 Data Normality

The determination of data normality is foremost while conducting CB-SEM. Data normality was conducted using skewness, kurtosis, and standard deviation tests of the constructs. The multivariate normality outcomes revealed that mean values of the SM, CP, WHRA, TP, WG, and PHRA were 2.767, 4.026, 3.700, 3.553, 3.990, and 2.877 respectively, indicating that the responses were above than the mean of 2.5. Standard deviation (SD) results must be between ± 2, and the SD values of the constructs were SM (0.7908), CP (0.6032), WHRA (0.6284), TP (0.7640), WG (0.5540), and PHRA (0.5540), indicating that they are in the permissible range. Mahmood *et al.*, (2019) reflected that kurtosis values must be between ± 3, and skewness values must be between ± 2. Skewness and kurtosis values reported in table 1 highlight that the outcomes were in acceptable range. Thus, the data was found to be normal and there were no normality concerns.

Table 1: ***Normality of the data (N=368)***

Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
SM	2.767	0.7908	0.061	0.127	-0.446	0.254
CP	4.026	0.6032	-0.610	0.127	1.119	0.254
WHRA	3.700	0.6284	-0.632	0.127	1.578	0.254
TP	3.553	0.7640	-0.467	0.127	0.437	0.254
WG	3.990	0.5540	-0.669	0.127	1.102	0.254
PHRA	2.877	0.7402	-0.099	0.127	-0.024	0.254

** SM: Stress Management; CP: Contextual Performance; WBHRA: Well-being human resource attributions; TP: Task Performance; WG: Work Gratitude; PHRA: Performance human resource attributions*

4.2 Measurement Model

Once data normality is attained, it is vital to conduct exploratory factor analysis (EFA) in the co-variance based structural equation modelling. EFA (φ) tests that either the items are loading on their respective factors or not. The loading of items on their respective factors is essential as it ensures that the items adaption process, pre-testing and pilot testing has been done precisely. Furthermore, it is mandatory to have items loadings of more than 0.40 and less than 1 (Khwaja *et al.*, 2020). EFA outcomes of the items were within the permissible range. After EFA, it is essential to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) as it is considered to be the backbone of CB-SEM. CFA loadings (λ) should be greater than 0.3 and less than 1 (Lowry and Gaskin, 2014; Tabassum *et al.*, 2020). CFA values were found to be in the permissible range. Furthermore, Cronbach's alpha (α) for construct reliability is mandatory to determine and its value should be greater than 0.7 and less than 0.95 (Zaman *et al.*, 2022). Cronbach's alpha outcomes of CP was 0.942, SM 0.812, WHRA 0.869, TP 0.926, WG 0.821, and PHRA 0.883. Composite reliability (C.R) should be between 0.7 - 1 and the results indicate that they are in the affirmative range. For convergent validity, average variance extracted (AVE) values were estimated. According to Mahmood *et al.*, (2019), AVE values must be above than 0.50, however, Khwaja *et al.*, (2022) stated AVE of 0.40

is also acceptable if C.R of the construct is greater than 0.70. AVE values of the constructs were CP 0.698, SM 0.521, WHRA 0.607, TP 0.675, WG 0.614, and PHRA 0.610 respectively. Absolute and incremental fit indices are important to determine to check model fitness. Chi-square to degree of freedom ($\chi 2$/df) value emerged to be 1.777 which is acceptable. Other model fitness measures included standardized root mean squared residual (SRMR), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), incremental fit index (IFI), goodness of fit index (GFI), adjusted goodness of fit index (AGFI), confirmatory fit index (CFI), and Tucker-Lewis index (TLI). Table 2 reported CFI value to be 0.960, TLI 0.955, IFI 0.960, GFI 0.889, AGFI 0.887, SRMR 0.029, and RMSEA 0.046, which are all in the permissible range (Bashir *et al.*, 2021).

Table 2: ***Measurement model outcomes (N=368)***

Constructs & Items	**φ**	**λ**	**α**	**C.R**	**AVE**
Contextual Performance (CP)			0.942	0.944	0.698
CP1	0.802	0.837			
CP2	0.826	0.888			
CP3	0.936	0.871			
CP4	0.865	0.854			
CP5	0.953	0.889			
CP6	0.729	0.777			
CP7	0.668	0.717			
Stress Management (SM)			0.812	0.813	0.521
SM1	0.725	0.726			
SM2	0.757	0.747			
SM3	0.710	0.707			
SM4	0.687	0.705			
Well-Being HRM Attributions (WHRA)			0.869	0.882	0.607
WBHRA1	0.836	0.849			
WBHRA2	0.924	0.893			
WBHRA3	0.770	0.778			
WBHRA4	0.725	0.804			
WBHRA5	0.467	0.512			
Task Performance (TP)			0.926	0.928	0.675
TP1	0.655	0.752			
TP2	0.888	0.871			
TP3	0.836	0.852			
TP4	0.894	0.887			
TP5	0.795	0.772			
TP6	0.823	0.785			
Work Gratitude (WG)			0.821	0.826	0.614
WG1	0.814	0.831			
WG2	0.682	0.755			
WG3	0.639	0.762			
Performance HRM Attributions (PHRA)			0.883	0.886	0.610

PHRA1	0.695	0.688
PHRA2	0.948	0.884
PHRA3	0.776	0.787
PHRA4	0.645	0.763
PHRA5	0.765	0.770

Absolute and incremental fit indices

$\chi 2$ = 689.480, df = 388, $\chi 2$/df = 1.777, *P* = 0.000, CFI = 0.960, TLI = 0.955, IFI = 0.960, GFI = 0.889, AGFI = 0.887, SRMR = 0.029, RMSEA = 0.046

*Note. *p<0.05; φ = Factor loadings at 0.40 using EFA; λ = standardized factors loadings using CFA; α = Cronbach's alpha; C.R = Composite Reliability; AVE = average variance extracted*

Multicollinearity and discriminant validity results are reported in table 3. The results indicate that all standardized factor loadings for all items are significant and AVE was greater than the square of the correlations between factors; thus, there is no discriminant validity concern in the data. (Khwaja *et al.,* 2019; Zaman *et al.,* 2022).

Table 3: ***Multicollinearity & Discriminant Validity (N = 368)***

	CP	TP	WBHRA	PHRA	SM	WG
CP	**0.835**					
TP	0.501	**0.821**				
WBHRA	0.560	0.419	**0.779**			
PHRA	0.356	0.532	0.299	**0.781**		
SM	0.327	0.339	0.195	0.400	**0.722**	
WG	0.578	0.528	0.682	0.407	0.320	**0.783**

4.3 Path Modelling

For the testing of established hypotheses, path analysis was conducted in which the fifteen established hypotheses were tested. Path analysis report path coefficients/beta (β) values, t-stats, significance value (p) and standard error (S.E). For the acceptance of hypotheses, p value must be less than 0.05 and t-stats must be greater than 1.96. H1-H9 were direct paths without any mediator, and the outcomes attained were in the permissible range. H10-H15 were indirect relationships with mediators and the outcomes attained were also in the acceptable range. Table 4 depicts hypotheses results, in which all the established hypotheses have been accepted.

Table 4: ***Results of Hypotheses***

Hypotheses	Relationships	β	*S.E*	*t*-stats	*p*-values	Results
H1	PHRA → SM	0.420	0.060	7.034	0.000	Accepted
H2	WHRA → SM	0.122	0.043	2.837	0.000	Accepted
H3	PHRA → CP	0.130	0.046	2.833	0.000	Accepted

H4	WHRA → CP	0.268	0.056	4.753	0.000	Accepted
H5	PHRA → WG	0.219	0.032	6.915	0.000	Accepted
H6	WHRA → WG	0.570	0.029	19.77	0.000	Accepted
H7	WG → SM	0.376	0.093	4.059	0.000	Accepted
H8	WG → TP	0.495	0.082	6.069	0.000	Accepted
H9	WG → CP	0.422	0.071	5.929	0.000	Accepted
H10	PHRA → WG → SM	0.170	0.047	3.617	0.000	Accepted
H11	WHRA → WG → SM	0.201	0.055	3.655	0.000	Accepted
H12	PHRA → WG → TP	0.182	0.035	5.200	0.000	Accepted
H13	PHRA → WG → CP	0.189	0.041	4.587	0.000	Accepted
H14	WHRA → WG → TP	0.254	0.054	4.704	0.000	Accepted
H15	WHRA → WG → CP	0.250	0.051	4.902	0.000	Accepted

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing inspiration from Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967) and HRM Attributions construct (Nishii's *et al.*, 2008), the present study built an HRM mutual gains framework where two categories of positive perceptions of HRM practices (benevolent HRM attributions) were considered (Fehr *et al.*, 2017). PHRA (or performance HRM attributions) are based on employee beliefs that HRM practices are introduced by management to help them do their job well (Shantz *et al.*, 2016), while WHRA (well-being HRM attributions) make employees believe that HRM practices were introduced by their organization to help improve their well-being (Nishii's *et al.*, 2008). The model was tested in Pakistan's highly stress prone BPO sector. Results indicated that both benevolent HRM attributions increased employees stress management scores and improved their task and contextual performance. Also, a novel mediator *Work Gratitude* (WG) was examined for the first time in the study. The results showed that the impact of both benevolent HRM attributions on employee stress management and performance was mediated by WG.

~~5.1. Theoretical Implications~~

Despite the mutual gains model which recommended that HRM practices should be enacted to improve employee performance and well-being outcomes (Beer *et al.*, 1984; Peccei *et al.*, 2013), both the academic research and practice of HRM has singularly focused on the pursuit of employee performance while neglecting employee well-being (Beer *et al.*, 2015; Guest, 2017; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2019). The mutual gains model is also opposed by the conflicting outcomes model (Van De Voorde *et al.*, 2012), which shows that in their relentless pursuit of performance, HRM practices can intensify work and increase job-demands, thus resulting in deteriorated employee well-being and increased stress and strain (Kroon *et al.*, 2009; Ogbonnaya, 2018; Ogbonnaya and Messersmith, 2019; ~~and Messersmith, 2018, 2019;~~ Van De Voorde *et al.*, 2012).

Occupational stress creates a lose-lose scenario for both employees and organizations. Health harm to workers due to stress is well documented, as is the loss of billions of dollars to organizations in lost productivity, sick leave, and medical bills. Given the Covid-19 pandemic and the reported rise of stress and anxiety among the occupational populations, it is necessary for researchers and practitioners to find ways through which employee stress can be ameliorated and managed through both proactive and remedial measures. Conflicting evidence in the HRM well-being literature,

particularly the stream of research showing how HRM practices lead to work intensity and stress, requires researchers to continue examining *how* HRM affects well-being.

The present study was conducted in response to the calls made by researchers to build theoretically robust and practically applicable mutual gains frameworks through which HRM practices can help improve employee well-being and performance (Guest, 2017; Peccei and Van De Voorde, 2019; Stankevičiūtė and Savanevičienė, 2018, 2019). This study adds to the literature by demonstrating how benevolent HRM attributions create a mutually beneficial scenario for the employers and employees. Findings of this study lend support to the idea that the impact of HRM on employee outcomes is not determined by the *inherent virtues or vices* of HRM practices themselves (Sanders *et al.,* 2014). Instead, the impact of HRM practices on employee well-being or performance depends on whether employees perceive them to be caring, supportive and benevolent. The findings have shown that the meaning and significance of HRM practices is interpreted by employees. It is the subjective interpretation of HRM that can reveal the content of the elusive *black box* (Boselie *et al.,* 2005), which obscures the relationship between HRM and performance, as well as HRM and employee well-being (Nishii's *et al.,* 2008; Sanders *et al.,* 2014).

The black box also hides the *key intervening variables* through which HRM practices outcomes (Paauwe, 2009). More specifically (Boxall *et al.,* 2016) suggested that there was a need to keep developing "the theory on the mediating variables linking HRM to performance and that linking HRM to employee well-being" (p. 109), a suggestion that was echoed by Peccei and Van De Voorde (2019). The present study shows that work gratitude is a mediating variable which connects HRM perceptions to various performance and well-being outcomes. This adds to the literature by supporting the view that positively impacting the emotional psyche of workers can invoke a desire in them to reciprocate and expend higher levels of effort and improved performance (Edgar *et al.,* 2018) and increase their well-being (Fehr *et al.,* 2017).

Research on how gratitude arises and impacts people's psychological, social and emotional well-being has been an important pillar of positive psychology movement for two decades (Skrzelinska and Ferreira, 2020). Despite is work gratitude's potential and promise to improve employee productivity as well as well-being, studies on how such gratitude may arise and impact the employee outcomes are practically non-existent (Di Fabio *et al.,* 2017; Youssef-Morgan *et al.,* 2022). This study has shown how perceptions of a caring and supportive organization can give rise to work gratitude, which in turn can act as an important emotional resource and produce mutually beneficial outcomes for the employer and employee. HRM research is in a nascent stage in Pakistan and requires good theoretical development (Ali and Brandl, 2017). HRM perspectives from South Asian countries can add rigor in HRM literature (Budhwar and Debrah, 2013). This study has made a contextual contribution and by developing and examining a mutual gains framework in Pakistan.

~~5.2. Practical Implications~~

The present study has various implications for managers and industry practitioners. First, it provides a viable solution through which practitioners can achieve both employee performance and well-being outcomes. Although occupational stress requires urgent attention and investment,

few organizations would do so because of required effort and financial commitments. Organizations are unlikely to invest in employee well-being unless there is a good business case which shows that such an investment will also result in improved performance (Guest, 2017).

Findings of this study provide a solution that HRM practitioners can use to make a case for putting an effort and investment in employee well-being. Researchers have argued that employee performance is a more robust and proximal predictor of overall organizational performance as compared to employee attitudes (Alfes *et al.,* 2012; Wright and Haggerty, 2005). This study makes a compelling argument as it shows how benevolent HRM attributions and gratitude impact employee stress as well as their task and contextual performance. Seeing how employee performance can be directly influenced can make a better business case for HRM practitioners to invest effort, energy and resources into improving employee well-being.

How can HRM practitioners invest resources and energy into ensuring that HRM practices are perceived by employees are caring and supportive, indicative of their organization's benevolent intent? There are different interventions that can be undertaken in this regard. First, an understanding is needed that there is a difference between intended and implemented HRM practices (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink, 2018). *Intended Vs Implemented* HRM is based on the idea that there may be a gap between management and employee perception/understanding of how effective, supportive, friendly and caring HRM practices are. What employees think, perceive and believe will generate a positive or negative response to the implemented HRM (or the way they see it, not the way it was intended).

As a first step, HRM practitioners need to design interventions with a view to create positive emotions (specifically gratitude) among employees (Fehr *et al.,* 2017). Policies need to be designed and implemented to come across as supportive, caring and friendly. Both formal and informal feedback channels need to be open to understand how HRM practices are being viewed at the employees' end. To reinforce the perception that management supports employees and cares about their well-being, a comprehensive employer branding strategy can be put into motion. Employer branding is based on a group of mutually reinforcing intra-firm communication interventions that are designed to strengthen the perception that employee efforts are appreciated, and the organization cares about their well-being (Kryger Aggerholm *et al.,* 2011). These intra-firm communication interventions can further reinforce the perception that organization supports their employees and cares about them.

Organization wide comprehensive employee wellness programs (Ongori and Agolla, 2008) and (SMT) stress management techniques (Kröll *et al.,* 2017) can directly and indirectly improve employee well-being and performance. Their direct influence comes from their intrinsic benefits while indirectly, such interventions can also reinforce employee perceptions that their organization is supportive, caring and benevolent. Literature spanning over two decades has shown that people can be taught to be grateful through gratitude journaling, letter writing, thanking a benefactor and turning one's attention to the blessings in life (Ma *et al.,* 2017; Skrzelinska and Ferreira, 2020). Gratitude interventions can also invoke "the expression, recognition, and perception of gratitude in the workplace" (Cortini *et al.,* 2019, p. 8). HRM practices, interventions, appreciation programs (where employees thank each other for support) and developmental feedback can embed gratitude within the culture and identity of the organization (Fehr *et al.,* 2017).

~~5.3. Limitations and Future Recommendations~~

This study has focused on employee perception of HRM practices and the route through which such interpretations have an impact on employee well-being and performance. However, the presence of well-designed HRM practices does not ensure good implementation (Bos-Nehles and Meijerink, 2018); especially since most HRM policies are implemented through line managers, who might be unwilling or incompetent in ensuring the spirit of HRM practices is implemented as it was intended by HRM management (Bos-Nehles *et al.*, 2013). In other words, HRM practices may be intended to convey a supportive and caring message, unwilling or incompetent line managers can stymie these efforts and these policies may come across as non-supportive or apathetic. Future research can examine how employees' benevolent HRM attributions can bolstered or hindered through different managerial/leadership styles. The present study also employed a cross-sectional research method to examine the relationship between the chosen constructs. While that shows that the constructs are related, it cannot remove doubts regarding the causal nature of independent variables. A longitudinal research and mixed mixed-method design can address these limitations. The study was conducted in Pakistan's business processing organizational sector which operates in the service sector. This strategy controls for between-industry differences but limits the generalizability of the present study across different sectors.

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