

# Towards Developing a Conceptual Framework on Employee Reaction, Employee Reaction, Hierarchical Distance and Performance of the Malaysian Construction Projects

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to conceptualize the critical role of communication management (CM) and human resource management (HRM) practices in the Malaysian construction industry's project performance (PP). CM and HRM have traditionally been viewed as the organization's primary source of sustainable competitive advantage, as they contribute to worker contribution. However, there have been few comprehensive studies that paint a very grim image of employment practices and industrial relations, particularly in Malaysia's construction sector. Following a survey of the existing literature on communication, HRM, and performance, many conceptualizations emerged. Perhaps the most distinctive and critical parts of HRM and communication techniques are employee reaction (ER) and hierarchical distance (HD), both of which have an influence on PP. The current research will greatly contribute to developing a new prospective framework for enhancing the PP.

**Keywords:** Communication management, HRM practices, Employee reaction, Hierarchical Distance, performance, Malaysian construction projects

**Paper type:** Conceptual paper

## 1. Introduction

The construction sector is increasingly complex (Hassan et al., 2018) and challenging (Priyadharshini and Kumar, 2015). The nature of this industry is uncertain and risky (Ajmal et al., 2021). It is an industry that is centered on unique projects, and each project is often tailor-made to the specifications of the client (Loosemore et al., 2003).

With the high-level complexity of the construction sector, significant concerns include project failure or delay (Oliver, 2019), inappropriate safety management, and extensive cost. In the construction industry, various parties such as clients, consultants, contractors and suppliers are involved to ensure smooth operation (Das and Mishra, 2020). However, the completion of the construction project is much more dependent on the involvement and contribution of the contractor (Hanif, 2011).

Malaysia is moving forward towards industrialization, and the construction sector is critical to producing income within the sector and in other emerging industries. Additionally, the sector contributes to the improvement of Malaysians' quality of life by converting the government's socioeconomic policies into vital facilities and infrastructure such as residential areas, roads, railroads, power, and communication services. Malaysia's government recognises the critical nature of boosting the building industry while also benefiting other sectors (Haron et al., 2017).

In construction activities, communication is seen as the point where all activities begin (Julch, 2016). Effective communication in the construction industry continues to be a challenge (Mwangi, 2019). Ineffective communication leads to unexpected results (Kazi, 2005). Ineffective communication is the root cause of at least one third of project failures (Project Management Institute, 2013). According to Priyadharshini and Kumar (2015), poor management of the communication process can lead to unmotivated people, errors in projects, delays in the progression of work, and disastrous performance in production.

Olaniran (2015) coined that CM illuminates the negative consequences such as inexperience with working drawings interpretation, misleading information, and late transmission of directions. Oliver (2019) and Drczkowska (2018) demonstrate how crucial communication is for PP. Additionally, it is demonstrated that CM is intrinsically linked to managing stakeholders, human resources, project inclusiveness, and transformation (Drczkowska, 2018).

Rapid demographic changes in the workforce (Mbatl, 2019) create challenges for HRM to retain the employees (Dey et al., 2017) which has continuously strained the construction industry especially (Safian et al., 2021; Ayodele et al., 2020). Raiden et al. (2001) discovered that organisations displayed a strong commitment to strategic HRM, which resulted in increased employee retention and organisational success. On the other hand, PP is dependent on the quality with the supreme work ethics (Clough et al., 2000). HRM is a realistic which improves the employee quality (Saravankumar & Nirmal, 2017). The dynamic and frequently shifting organizational, project, and skill requirements make the construction industry a challenging environment for effective HRM and development.

However, Bochner (1994) found mixed results and revealed that HD influences on the behaviours and attitudes. This inconsistency motivates this researcher to integrate HD as a moderator in this construction industry context and a developing country setting. According to some scholars, the design and configuration of HRM practises should incorporate with Hierarchical Distance (HD) (Kochan et al., 2003; Hofmann and Gavin, 1998), as this dimension is intimately connected to fruitful decision making and communication process (Jackson, 2003), besides HRM practises (Cai and Waldman, 2019). Triguero-Sánchez et al. (2007) confirm that an organization's degree of HD has an effect on its performance. Studies conducted by Vidhyasri & Sivagamasundari (2018), Mahmoud (2020), El- Sayegh et al. (2021) also explored the relevant factors that contribute to project performance. However, previous studies did not examine the employees' reactions due to these antecedents. Previously, Katou (2013) showed that employees' reaction consists of four sub-categories: motivation, commitment, work engagement, and organizational citizenship behaviour. This study extends this less explored view of employee reaction and introduces it as a mediator responsible for the project's performance. Thus, the study proposes a unique framework integrating HD and ER as indirect variables with CM and HRM and their impact on Malaysian project performance.

## 2. Literature Review and Conceptual Design

### *Social exchange theory (SET)*

The researchers attribute the HRP-employee reaction-project performance association to social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964). SET's fundamental premise is that "individuals get into relationships with others based on the advantages" (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). Organizations provide "material and socio-emotional advantages" to employees considering their "devotion and determination" (p. 491). SET coined, employees who receive "socio-emotional resources" may feel indebtedness, resulting in the employer's need to repay (Saks, 2019). As a result, personnel reciprocate by exhibiting positive attitudes and behaviours, such as higher work involvement and supreme citizenship behaviour (Bowler and Brass, 2006). Literature indicates that organizational support, a safe working environment, and supervisor trust are significant elements in eliciting employee reciprocation (Aselage & Eisenberger, 2003). In general, SET elucidates the motivating variables that contribute to favourable employee behaviours (Khan & Iqbal, 2020). Thus, this idea is quite relevant in the context of our investigation.

### *Goal-setting theory (GST)*

According to the goal-setting paradigm, in order for superiors to properly manage their subordinates, they need first present those subordinates with clearly articulated goals, as well as rewards connected to the successful completion of those goals (Locke & Latham, 1990). Goals are objects or aims of activity that are intended to reach a specific standard or skill, typically with a fixed date attached to them. This is the normal definition of goals. These objectives ought to be set at an appropriate level of difficulty and, more than anything else, ought to be adequately specific and concrete (Locke & Latham, 1990). When those requirements are met, subordinates are motivated by objectives because they increase the likelihood that they will be successful, and so earn the rewards that are associated with the goals (Locke & Latham, 2019). To put it another way, specific goals provide inspiration since they appear to be within reach.

Numerous researches validate the positive effects of setting goals in a variety of contexts (Locke & Latham, 2020). In addition to this, they divert the focus of their subordinates away from activities and responsibilities that could be a barrier to the achievement of the goals. In conclusion, it is beneficial to have goals that are specific since they eliminate the possibility of subordinates reinterpreting those goals, which is something that frequently occurs in the case of goals that are imprecise (Welsh et al., 2020).

### *Communication management in Malaysian construction*

The construction industry in Malaysia is vital due to the higher GDP contribution and emerged as the engine of the national economy (Yap, 2019). Conversely, the industry faces issues for project failure (Gamil, & Rahman, 2017) and delays in project completion due to communication problems. 17.3% of construction projects are delayed by more than three months, and some of these projects are eventually scrapped (Sia, 2020; Ali et al., 2008). Several researchers revealed few relevant problems such as lack of awareness among stakeholders about the CM (Gamil, & Rahman, 2017; Das & Mishra, 2020); lack of coordination among contractor, consultant, sub-contractor, and client (Kazemi et al., 2021; Assaf & Al-Hejji, 2006; Ali et al., 2008); inefficient communication (Oliver et al., 2019). According to Manap et al. (2017) and Sweis et al. (2008), most unskilled foreign labourers are used in the Malaysian construction industry due to cheap labour and other costs like lavy, medical insurance fees etc. Santoso et al. (2003) pointed out little formal education as a reason for miscommunication.

### *Communication management practices and performance of the construction projects*

According to Molwus (2014), a construction project is considered to be realistic when the question of whether or not the project's outcome fully satisfies the criteria of the client arises at the moment the project is realized. This study coincided with Prabhakar's (2008) claim that even though there is a lack of

consensus on what defines project success. Work timetable and budget are insufficient but critical for PP. Chan et al. (2017) found that efforts have shifted toward more effective modes of communication as a result of the recognition that communication directly associated with the context, timetable, budget, risk, or quality. This was due to the fact that communication has been recognized as having a direct effect on these factors. Additionally, Miller and Wang (2021) suggested that building projects fail to attain cost certainty, on-time delivery, and high-quality products and services without good civic communication and information exchange.

Aiyewalehinmi and Nkumah (2019) shown that training is indispensable for effective communication leads to favourable PP. Zulch (2016) discovered that effective communication skills are crucial for persuading stakeholders to adopt a sustainable project management strategy.

### ***H<sub>1</sub>: Communication management practices influence positively on the construction project's performance***

#### *HR practices and construction projects performance*

From the standpoint of organizational performance, the HRM and strategic management literature give various perspectives addressing the nature of the association between HRM and performance (Butterick & Charlwood, 2021).

Whereas one school of thought maintains a direct association between HR performance and organizational performance, another maintains that the relationship is indirect (Mohammed et al., 2021). Advocates supporting a direct association between HRP and PP say that consistent use of established human resource techniques defined as best practices results in increased efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and competitive edge (Darwish et al., 2013). HRM promote high-performance work features such as "careful hiring," "job security," effective training," "proper benefit packages," "entrepreneurial work practice," "removed glass ceiling," and "knowledge sharing" (Pfeffer, 1998).

Additionally, there are a variety of points of view within this research stream regarding whether or not individual HRM has an effect on organizational performance. Delery and Gupta (2016) stated different view that individual HRM has a negligible impact on PP. One other argument in favour of the indirect relationship is that HRM has a direct effect on behavioral outcomes, such as staff retention or low turnover, which can considerably boost financial performance and other favourable organizational outcome (Darwish et al., 2013).

### ***H<sub>2</sub>: HR practices influence positively on the performance of the construction projects***

#### *Employee reaction on communication management practices and performance of the construction projects*

Effective corporate communication is necessary for success. As Kotter (1995) noted, "workers will only make sacrifices while they perceive constructive transformation is feasible." Internal communication can help an organization gain employee support for its success. Barrett (2002) defined internal communication as having five objectives: "(1) safeguard clear and consistent messaging to train employees; (2) stimulate employees; (3) bring out best performance and maximize dedication; (4) lessen misconception; and (5) align workforce with firm's strategy."

Organizational communication contributes to an worker's self- and instils citizenship attitude. Thus, communication represents an organization's attempt to value its personnel. Additionally, an organization's communication assists employees in acquiring general and firm-specific information, demonstrating its readiness to invest in personnel. Thus, sharing knowledge via communication can increase employee commitment and positively improve employee relationship commitment (Park et al., 2012). As a result of

this communication process, openness and confidence develop, resulting in increased employee attachment to the firm.

Positive work results, such as employee engagement, bonding between employee-organization, and job happiness, have been linked repeatedly to the quality of communication between managers and their subordinates. We've already made the case that workers are more inclined to interpret management's care as humanitarian than task-based. Leaders that receive a positive response from this survey meet this need by exuding a positive tone in their communications, and as a result, their staffs go above and beyond in their work. One study found a significant correlation between ER and the degree to which workers felt their supervisors were listening to them (Lloyd et al., 2017). Hamsani et al. (2019) found that leaders with high levels of social skills (a trait similar to responsiveness in terms of relationship management) are more likely to inspire confidence and enthusiasm from their staff, hence boosting productivity. Thus, the following theory is advanced in this study:

### ***H<sub>3</sub>: Employee reaction mediates on communication practices and performance of the construction projects***

#### *Employee reaction to HR practices and performance of the construction projects*

Prior research has stressed the critical role of positive organizational activity, such as human resource planning, in enhancing commitment (Bal et al., 2015). Additionally, one may argue that employee views of HRM obligations in terms of procedural fairness, empowerment, communication, growth, and engagement would contribute to the regulation of employee attitudes about organizational successes. Organizational efforts to manage employees by ensuring procedural fairness, delegating authority to employees, recognizing employee value through effective communication, developing employee potential, and incorporating employee concerns into decision-making that affects them all illustrate the organization's sincere desire to shape employees.

Numerous studies have found a strong association between a manager's compensation and their willingness to take risks. Incentives can be monetary, such as bonuses, allowances, or awards, or they can be non-monetary, such as praise given to those who make an effort and rewarding themselves by putting in an extra effort and taking an extra day off (Westerman et al., 2020). An advantageous outcome may occur if the goals of the payment system are compatible with the needs of the workforce (Ogbeibu et al., 2020). As a corollary, this is expected to improve the results (Pham et al., 2020).

Employee training improves organizational effectiveness. Sundar and Prabhu (2019) find a "significant impact on the execution of an activity" or "performance improvement." (Wood & Bischoff, 2020) also contribute to performance maintenance. Employers and employees can maximize their efforts by educating and benefiting from one another. According to Anwar & Abdullah (2021), off-the-the-job training increases efficiency. However, on-the-the-job training does not affect on-the-job performance.

According to Zhou et al. (2020), selecting the appropriate employees helps firms to make the most use of their resources, increases overall efficiency, and decreases training and development costs. Dowling et al. (2020) assert that employee confidence is connected to job security; the better the job security, the greater the employee confidence, hence enhancing the employees' commitment to the organization's workforce. Munnell & Fraenkel (2013) assert that job stability requires some degree of reciprocity. The argument is that the corporation must first show to employees that their jobs are secure,' followed by people expressing their trust in job security. This ultimately improves employee commitment to higher performance, which benefits the firm.

According to Berger (2011), an effective performance assessment system examines and develops individuals to acquire the necessary skill sets for the organization. This is in line with claims made by other writers that a holistic approach to HR and performance management has a extensive influence on employee dedication and morale (Salminen et al., 2017).

Several researchers have found direct bridge between HRM practices and PP (Danvila-del-Valle et al., 2019). Integrating certain HRM variables as mediator can strength the association. According to Shih et al. (2006), HRM generates financial benefits for businesses by encouraging staff members to develop their abilities, hence increasing output and profitability. Many writers have stressed the importance of workers' competences in performing their jobs (Gubbins et al., 2021; Indradevi, 2010). Human resource practices, according to the Resource-Based View, create an enduring competitive advantage by creating in-house resources. Methods of HRM in particular can boost business output by making better use of in-house human resources.

Additionally, Jiang et al. (2012) viewed HRM as a long-term investment in personnel and those businesses with higher-quality human capital are better equipped to improve organizational performance. Thus, it is hypothesized that HRM affects project performance by boosting the psychological responses of personnel.

#### ***H4: Employee reaction mediates on human resource practices and the performance of the construction projects***

##### *Hierarchical Distance on Communication management practices and performance of the construction projects*

Culture in the workplace relies heavily on the presence of formal levels of authority (Hofstede, 1984). Rules for interactions and conflicts are established based on the organization's internal structures and connections (such as levels of supervision, pay, perks, and employees' ability to weigh in on major decisions). Workers in high-HD organizations seldom contact with their bosses or superiors; management is considered as an authoritative figure that provides instructions and replies that all workers must follow (TrigueroSánchez et al., 2021). According to the literature assessment, the cultural dimensions receiving the most excellent attention from scholars are individualism/collectivism and HD (Hofmann and Gavin, 1998). These cultural characteristics are inextricably linked to decision-making and corporate communication efficacy (Jackson et al., 2003).

Meanwhile, team members input significantly to decision-making process in companies with a low HD, promoting consensus (Knight et al., 1999). Furthermore, the low HD improves employee communication skill, improving workers' aspiration towards firm (Hartnell et al., 2011). Thus, it is not uncommon for an employee and their supervisor to collaborate on meeting their training needs in this type of business. This arises due to employees' opportunities to participate in decision-making, which has significant consequences for public organizations with a distinct bureaucratic and normative outline (Mbonu & Azuji, 2021). As a result, firms with low HD are most likely to have a horizontal hierarchical structure (Triguero-Sanchez et al., 2021; Cai & Waldman, 2019). The preceding explanation demonstrates that HD affects communication techniques, which affects project performance.

#### ***H5: Hierarchical Distance moderates on communication management practices and the performance of the construction projects***

##### *Hierarchical Distance on HR practices and performance of the construction projects*

HD can be defined as how a hierarchical structure is visualized, emphasizing the disparities in rank between employees and superiors (Þorsteinsson & Þorsteinsdóttir, 2020). HD is a combination of common values, attitudes, and unique beliefs that can produce expectations, affect behaviors, and influence how facts are interpreted.

Regarding the association between HRM performance and PP, recent research indicates that it should be viewed via the mediation processes that shape it, as is the case with organizational culture (Shore and Coyle-Shapiro, 2018).

Scholars assert that cultural factors deliver a solid foundation in organizational research (Detert et al., 2000; Cai and Waldman et al., 2019). Indeed, Huai et al. (2019) show that HD may operate as a moderator on employees' insights and influence their work outcomes.

Competition between employees based on financial condition, power, and position are work as a crucial differentiator. Involvement in decision-making process is a determinant when a company has a low HD. This is because decision-making processes in low HD companies tend to be developed with more individual freedom than control systems in high HD companies (Stein & Zechner, 2020).

In businesses with a high HD degree, performance evaluations are typically top-down and unilateral, as the work demands low HD and high involvement, and employees tend not to exchange views with superiors (Yen, 2018). Internal staff employees typically conduct training in these organizations since the trainer is viewed as an authoritative figure that will deliver instructions and answers the queries. Similarly, a manager aware well about the employee's career growth in low-HD circumstances, preventing workgroup consensus (Knight & Parker, 2021). On the other hand, low HD promotes communication between personnel and task involvement (Hartnell et al., 2011). In low-HD situations, employees and superiors commonly collaborate to determine training needs (Wilkins & Juusola, 2001), but in high-HD context, training is frequently organized (Sinha and Dhall, 2020).

Additionally, the hierarchy should negatively affect employees' attitudes toward change, characterized by emotions of obligation to support the change (Herscovitch and Meyer, 2002). As indicated previously, personnel at a lower level of the organization appear to have greater strategic responsibilities, and as a result, they will feel a more significant commitment to support a change that advances the organization's strategic goals. Additionally, employees at a higher hierarchical level are more likely to have benefited from the organization's increased resources, awards, and benefits in the past. Their receipt of these benefits is likely to escalate employee commitment for taking care about the organization and meet its objectives by providing support for the change (Eisenberger et al., 2001).

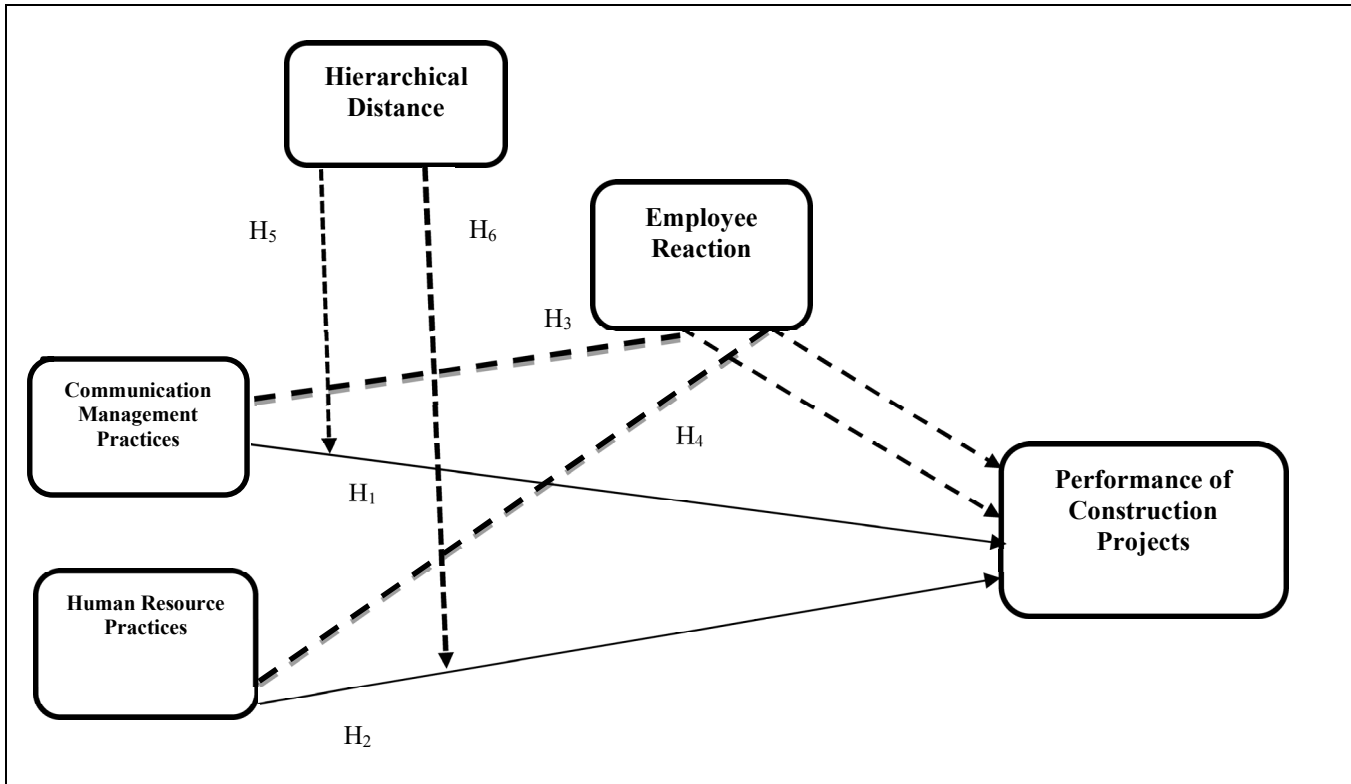
Conversely, Costigan et al. (2011) claim that HD foster link between HRM and employee workgroup engagement. In another situation, Triguero-Sanchez et al. (2013) used HD to moderate the association between HRM and PP. This study suggests the following hypothesis for examination in the context of construction projects.

***H<sub>6</sub>: There is a moderation influence of Hierarchical Distance on human resource practices and the performance of the construction projects***

#### *Conceptual framework*

The following framework has been developed based on the theoretical discussion above and the interrelationship among the variables.

Figure 1. Research Framework developed by the author



### 3. Implications and Future Research Directions

The fundamental research contribution of this study is that developing a novel framework where current researchers showed the mediated (ER)-moderated (HD) association among CM, HRM, and PP construct. Previously none of the empirical research examined employee reaction as a mediating factor in employee retention (Collins, 2014; Urbaski et al., 2021), and this study fills this gap. The uniqueness of the project is bolstered by the fact that it explores a previously uncharted field (construction) in a previously uncharted setting (i.e., Malaysia).

Another significant theoretical contribution is providing insights about the way HRM practices can surge employees' degree of congruence between their task and diverse internal and external stakeholders in light of Goal Setting Theory and Social Exchange Theory (SET). Integrating these two theories in a single model in construction context also contribute in the body of the knowledge.

The study's practical value lies in its instruction of Malaysian construction industry managers on how HRM strategies may foster employer-employee interactions leads boost construction staff retention in Malaysia. Since this industry is labor intensive industry, the retention rate is relatively low. Thus, management has to pay extra attention on employee relation through effective and empathetic HRM practices.

One of the efficient construction management's purposes is to promote, define, and create construction methods that ensure time project competition with allocated budget [Construction industry councils (CIC), 2013]. For accomplishing that goal, conducting further study on CM practices is required (Malik et al., 20019; Prabhakar, 2022) and this study contribute on this aspect.

There is a dearth of research on identifying and developing CM practices, as well as a model illustrating the link between CM practices and project outcomes. Conducting this research inside the Malaysian construction sector demonstrates a link between construction management techniques and project



outcomes. Additionally, Aulich (2013) asserts that CM may aid industry experts by providing them with a local communication document for suggestions, which might greatly empower them to be more educated. Additionally, this establishes a strategic baseline for construction stakeholders' communication efficacy and project performance.

This study is anticipated to provide light on the significance of communication and HRM in ensuring better PP, as well as on other elements that impact relationships. Additionally, this study may aid construction project stakeholders in resolving HRM issues and boosting the success rate.

This research offers several future research directions. The current conceptual study opens the pave to conduct empirical researches using the proposed framework through data collection. Apart from the construction industry, other industry such as service sector also can be further explored considering the study's model. Mixed method study can be possible to get in-depth insights on the communication, HRM, HD, ER, and project performance context. Moreover, inclusion of additional constructs such as technology adoption, organization culture, employee's skills, leadership styles with this proposed framework can provide interesting findings.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The substantial literature has established the HRM–performance and Communication–performance links; however, empirical research exploring the moderating influence of hierarchical distance and the mediation mechanism of employee reaction through which the interactions operate is sparse. The primary effect on performance is expected to come from enhanced knowledge and capabilities, not from the motivational advantages or efficiencies given by the work organization design. Additionally, it is vital to emphasize that the project performance metrics are based on a cross-sectional dataset that includes both HRM and project performance. Such approach complements with the findings of studies and internal metrics developed through experimentation for enhancing project performance.

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