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Harnessing the power of human factors

.. a path to enhancing productivity

Understanding why some firms successfully enhance productivity while others stagnate is a complex challenge. Organizations and individuals strive to optimize their efforts to meet professional demands or personal goals. However, despite these efforts, various obstacles often hinder the achievement of desired productivity levels. Research on productivity has received significant attention over the years, identifying multiple contributing factors such as materials, systems and processes, technology, and innovation.

Among these, human factors are crucial and often pivotal in advancing productivity. Human factors refer to how people behave physically and psychologically concerning their environment, products, or services. This discipline focuses on applying knowledge about human behavior, abilities, limitations, and other characteristics rather than the design of systems, tasks, environments, and technologies.

According to the International Ergonomics Association, human factors aim to optimize the interface between people and their work contexts to enhance performance and well-being. Understanding and integrating human factors into productivity strategies is vital for developing practical, sustainable improvements in organizational performance.

The Idea of Productivity

Since introducing the Ghana Single Spine Pay Policy (SSPP)

for public sector workers, an initiative to reward work of a similar nature with equal pay, stakeholders have agitated for a commensurate increase in work vis-à-vis productivity. To fulfil the requirement of productivity, there needed to be a measurement of the resources (input) given against the achievement of such targets (output) over a specific period. Consequently, productivity is an overall measure of the ability to produce a good or service. More specifically, productivity measures how specified resources, such as labour, materials, energy, etc., are managed to accomplish timely objectives as stated in quantity and quality. There are many different ways of measuring productivity. For example, productivity might be calculated in a factory based on the hours it takes to produce a good. In contrast, in the service sector, productivity might be measured based on the revenue generated by an employee divided by their salary.

Although the technical dimensions of productivity are dominant, a non-technical aspect pertains to human factors. An organization is composed of individuals (people) who are organized in some way or form to achieve specific objectives. Mullins, L. J., and Rees, G. (2023) rightly posited that effective management is the cornerstone of organizational effectiveness and that an organization's aim is achieved only through the coordinated efforts of human resources. They further gave credence to what he calls 'psychological contract'-thus a series of mutual expectations of rights and obligations, which, although not formally documented,

influence people's behavior, culminating in productivity. The individual and organizational expectations forming the psychological contract are therefore significant, as most of them affect the performance of the individual. Although it is unlikely that all the expectations of the individual and the organizations will be fully met at all times, there is a continual process of balancing, explicit and implicit bargaining, until both parties settle out at a perceived fair treatment.

The Human Relations Approach

The human relations approach to productivity should be welcomed. This approach pays greater attention to social factors at work and employees' behavior within an organization. The human relations approach considers that truly effective control comes from within the individual worker rather than from strict, authoritarian control. The human relations approach is focused on increasing production by humanizing the work organization. The human relations approach, therefore, strives for a greater understanding of people's psychological and social needs at work and for improving the management process. Since the discussion hinges on the performance of a human-driven system, it should be no surprise that the quality of our human resources is a principal driver of productivity. A more subtle influence, but equally crucial to labor performance, is the work environment. The work environment is affected by the system of management and by the social network of

employees. Optimistic people will likely have more initiative and think of imaginative solutions to various problems. A caring, considerate, and friendly person with a sense of humour can help increase productivity. Humour in the workplace puts people in good spirits, relieves stress, and develops teamwork.

Another key approach is Effective Communication. To contribute to the success of a set of activities, a worker must be told precisely what tasks are expected of him. Therefore, clear explanations of tasks and expectations are required. Employees must also know where their instructions come from, i.e., there must be a visible communication chain on the job. Instructions from an unknown source will be disregarded. Moreover, to be totally successful, communication should flow both ways. For example, Japan's 'bottom-up' management system improves productivity. The system works because it nurtures the means of communicating ideas upward and downward.

Rewards are essential, which can mean advancement in the chain of command, social recognition, or monetary compensation. Depending on the circumstances and the individual's character, they may take the form of a pat on the shoulder or the satisfaction of a well-done job. The worker should know the reason for the reward and its nature in all cases.

Moreover, the size of the reward should be commensurate with the reason for it. Unearned or unduly large rewards can have the opposite effect.

Over time, as an irking drawback

Even as these "soft" approaches may enhance productivity, caution should be thrown to the presence of Overtime - as a lurking demotivator. In Ghana, overtime generally means working over 40 hours a week. Most studies indicate that 40 hours a week is the optimum work period and that working more hours reduces the output rate. There are several reasons for this slowdown. Workers tend to pace themselves by slowing down to accommodate the longer day. According to good sources, the productivity loss may exceed the time worked beyond the typical 40-hour work week. After nine weeks of continuous overtime, the output achieved in a 50-hour week is less than that which could have been completed in a 40-hour week.

Continuous Improvement

The Productivity drive should not be a one-off event but a never-ending adventure of continuous improvement. Ensuring productivity and quality in all aspects of the organization's endeavor is a constant process. The desire to continuously improve should replicate Toyota, as summed up by Toyota: 'Even the current winner will lose the business if we work with less effort'. Beat Toyota, your enemy is yourself. Interestingly, Toyota sees itself as an enemy, something its competitors do not do. To be effective, continuous improvement should happen during all phases and activities of your endeavor. This can be done by benchmarking your processes against those of other organizations engaged in similar activities but with more success. As aptly captured by George Bernard

Shaw- 'If you have an apple and I have an apple and we exchange these apples, then both of us still have one apple each. But if you have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then we will have two ideas to benchmark the best.'

The MDPI Conversation

The going principle of productivity improvement is that the productivity of the existing process should be measured in as much detail as possible before any attempt to improve it is made. Buoyed by its new management and dynamic leadership, the revitalized government enterprise, the Management Development and Productivity Institute (MDPI), is now equipped to deliver customized and tailor-made productivity-related research, consultancy, and training to actualize the principles it espouses.

Concluding remarks

Indeed, human factors remain crucial determinants of the productivity campaign as the human resources department has changed to human resources management, which has become human resources leadership. With the emphasis on human factors as an infinite source, all people seeking productivity improvement in their businesses and lives can achieve their planned objectives and make a practical contribution to changing their societies and the global community. I support the adage, "productivity isn't everything, but in the long run it's almost everything".

Productive Day!

ASEC rejects ECG's proposed 225% tariff hike, warns of consumer burden

The Africa Sustainable Energy Centre (ASEC) is unhappy with the Electricity Company of Ghana's (ECG) proposal to raise electricity tariffs by 225 percent, describing the move as unjustified and likely to impose severe hardship on households and businesses.

While tariff reviews are permitted under Public Utilities Regulatory Commission (PURC) rules, ASEC argued that such adjustments must be transparent, fair and evidence-based—not a way for ECG to shift the cost of inefficiencies onto consumers.

The centre criticised ECG for what it described as persistent operational failures, including weak revenue mobilisation, outdated collection methods and limited innovation. It maintained that customers who pay their bills diligently should not be penalised for the utility's inefficiencies and debts.

ASEC further demanded clarity on several outstanding issues before any review is considered, including the fate of missing ECG containers, progress on debt recovery from government institutions and the utilisation of the GH¢1 levy.

"Pouring money into ECG

without reform is like pouring water into a torn sack," the statement signed by ASEC's Director of Research and Innovation, Dr. Elvis Twumasi, said, adding that any tariff adjustment must be tied to measurable performance improvements rather than arbitrary increases.

The energy think-tank also criticised PURC, which is mandated to protect public interest, for what it described as a tendency to approve tariff hikes without sufficient scrutiny. ASEC questioned whether adequate research had been undertaken on consumers'

income levels, electricity spending as a share of household budgets and usage patterns across customer groups.

ASEC warned that continuous tariff hikes, often granted despite erratic supply, have deepened economic pressure on households and undermined business competitiveness. It reiterated that addressing ECG's financial challenges requires accountability, innovation and structural reforms, not "unjustified" tariff hikes.

