

# **The Influence of Work Context and Employee Cognitions to Job Satisfaction: A Case of a Greek Public Sector**

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## **Abstract**

The present study presents the results of a descriptive analysis, completed in a public organization (ministry), showing how the work context and the employee cognitions might influence the employee job satisfaction. Using the framework provided by job characteristics and personal cognitions, this model of job satisfaction assesses whether aspects of the organizational work context, such as procedural constraints and bureaucratic structures may have an important effect on job satisfaction through the influence of employee's cognitions. The findings of the analysis indicated that the framework could identify specific leverage points that can increase job satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Work context, cognitions, job satisfaction, Greek public sector

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Within today's global and deregulated environment, major reforms are taking place in the Public, focusing on improving flexibility and competitiveness. Public administration scholars have highlighted a need for an improved understanding of job satisfaction in public organizations (Behn 1995; Perry and Porter 1982) in order to achieve efficient outcomes towards the citizens. Admittedly, job satisfaction is a difficult concept to define or study in public organizations where different issues encounter. Nevertheless, theoretical advances have been made that can assist our efforts in understanding satisfactory work context. In particular, there is a growing consensus that any model of job satisfaction should include the underlying process variables that explain how cognitions and working context affect job satisfaction (Kanfer et.al., 2001).

The observation regarding the cognitions is not new. According to the cognition perspective of McCall & Kaplan (1985), employees are assumed to be "information workers", which means that they spend most of their time absorbing, processing and disseminating information about issues, opportunities and problems (McCall & Kaplan, 1985). The experience and knowledge that employees have gained from the present or previous working context plays an important role on how they perceive job satisfaction.

More recently, it has been suggested that an integration of work context and employees cognitions may be particularly relevant to understanding job satisfaction in public organizations. If public sector organizations have greater procedural constraints may have important implications for employee work satisfaction because of their potential influence on the job characteristics and attitudes.

The present study contributes to our understanding of employee job satisfaction in the public sector by the results of a descriptive research made in one Greek Ministry, with purpose to provide insight information on how the work context and the existing employee cognitions might influence employees work satisfaction. Using a framework presented by job characteristics and personal cognitions, this model of job satisfaction assesses whether aspects of the organizational work context, such as procedural constraints and bureaucratic structures may have an important effect on job satisfaction through the influence of employee's cognitions.

The paper is organized as follows: first we present the theoretical framework and we analyze each factor. Then we continue by analyzing the methodology and the techniques we use for the analysis. Third, we provide our results and, finally, we discuss the conclusions.

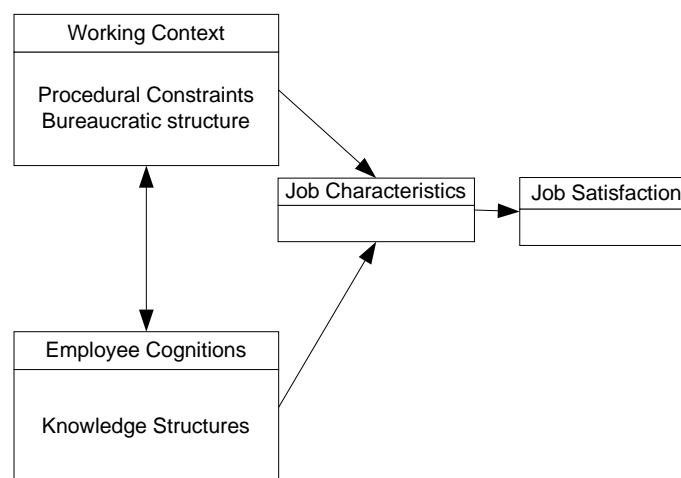
## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Locke (1976, p.1300) defines job satisfaction as “a pleasurable or positive emotional state resulting from cognition (appraisal) of one's job or job experience”. Similarly, Porter, Steers & Mowday, (1974) based on Smith, Kendall and Hulin (1969) work, consider “job satisfaction” as “feelings or affective responses to facets of the situation”. In this line of reasoning, it is true that some employees perform better than others because they have different cognitions, competencies and performance goals (Locke and Latham 1990). According to social cognitive theories, however, it is not the competencies and the goals themselves but rather the public organizational working environment that imposes the context of how employees must perform without considering employees capabilities. The result of this process is a sense of inertia or self-dissatisfaction. Also, in public sector organizations, the experience and

knowledge of an employee may not play a role as it might be placed in a job position irrelevant to its competencies.

The framework that we provide below presents the influential effect of the organizational context, job characteristics and employees cognitions to job satisfaction.

**Figure 1: Framework of Job Satisfaction**



The first category consists of the characteristics of working context that have important indirect influences on job satisfaction through their impact on these job characteristics and attitudes. The second category consists the employee cognitions that also have an indirect impact on job satisfaction through their impact on job characteristics. In particular this model focuses on the working context, the employee cognitions and the job characteristics that we assume that effect the job satisfaction.

### **Working Context**

The public administration literature has identified several aspects of the employee's work context that may influence job satisfaction. In particular, it is commonly

suggested that public organizations are characterized by multiple, conflicting and ambiguous goals, bureaucratic structures as well as the presence of several procedural constraints on employee's action (Fottler, 1981) and that these differences effect employee satisfaction and performance. Surprisingly little empirical research, however, has investigated the existence of these differences or their potential impact on the effective operation of public organizations.

Regardless of whether sector differences do exist, it would be misleading to suggest that these are characteristics only found in public sector organizations. Important variation in work context occurs within sectors, and even private sector organizations are not devoid of procedural constraints and structures (Philippidou et.al., 2007). Although, this model may be salient to public organizations if sectors differences do exist, the presence and potential impact of procedural constraints and structures is important regardless of sector. To that end, these work context factors and its potential role in employee work satisfaction is discussed below.

### ***Procedural Constrains***

The existence of procedural constraints often influences the design of job characteristic and therefore may effect employee work satisfaction. Although literature has shown that no support for a direct relationship between organizational procedural constraints and job satisfaction, the framework suggests that this relationship may be indirect, moderated by job characteristics. The level of procedural constraints employees experience in the work place may make job goals more difficult to achieve by limiting the strategies, actions or resources that may be available to the employee. Bandura and Wood (1989) found that employees who believed that have more knowledge and control over their performance environments

displayed a stronger sense of satisfaction towards the goals they achieved. They put more challenging goals and they are more satisfied with their work. On the other hand, employees who believe that their organization environments are not easily or quickly changeable will lose faith in their capabilities, making it even more difficult to be satisfied with their job and achieve any performance goals (Wood and Bandura 1989).

### ***Bureaucratic Structures***

The role of organizational structure has been widely studied in the literature and many authors have pointed to its primary importance as a determinant of job satisfaction (Damanpour, 1987). Among several structural characteristics, formalization, centralization, and vertical differentiation are those that are most widely examined. This is because they collectively define what is termed as a bureaucratic organizational structure, which is generally assumed to reduce the public organizations capacity for employee job satisfaction (Beetham, 1987).

Bureaucracy was first described by Max Weber as “a system of administration carried out on a continuous basis by trained professionals according to prescribed rules” (Beetham, 1987), with “standardized responsibilities, qualifications communication channels and work rules, as well as clearly defined hierarchy of authority” (Mintzberg, 1983). Its characteristics are highly specialized routine operating tasks, very formalized in the operating core, proliferation of rules, regulations and elaborate administrative structure with sharp distinction between line and staff (Mintzberg, 1983). The existence of bureaucratic structure put the framework of how jobs will be designed and what will be their characteristics.

Research has shown that public organizations more difficult provide their employees with job satisfaction. In large public bureaucracies, where rigid hierarchy and intrusion of different political power groups exist, it is almost impossible to for employees to be free to implement initiatives and have faith on their capabilities. These traditional bureaucratic decision and planning mechanisms are likely to be slow and inflexible, due to the formal prescriptions of roles and the centralization of power. A bureaucratic organization does not leave individuals much room for initiative and discretion (Mouzelis 1967), and is more appropriate where employees do not have high expectations of choice and autonomy and where there is a high degree of stability and certainty in the technology and environment, as in monopolies and oligopolies with long life-cycles (Dawson 1986).

### **Employee Cognitions**

According to the managerial cognition perspective of McCall & Kaplan (1985), employees are assumed to be "information workers", which means that they spend most of their time absorbing, processing and disseminating information about issues, opportunities and problems (1985). Thus, employees are facing vital challenges, as their information worlds are extremely complex, ambiguous and competitive (Mason & Mitroff, 1981; Mintzberg, Raisinghani & Theoret, 1976; Schultze & Boland, 2000; Starbuck & Milliken, 1988). In one way or another, they must employ knowledge structures that will help them, not only to represent and process information, but also to make the right decision facing difficult problems at hand (Walsh, 1995) and get satisfied. This employment of knowledge structures provides employees with knowledge representations adequate to deal with uncertainty, to experience, increase their performance and gain satisfaction of their job.

Walsh suggests that individual knowledge structures represent a mental template that individuals impose on job characteristics to give it form and meaning (Walsh, 1995). Mental templates represent a person's view of the world, including explicit and implicit understandings (Kim, 1993) and they provide the context in which individuals can view and interpret new material and determine how stored information is relevant to a given situation (Kim, 1993). However, there is a concern that some individual knowledge structures may be influenced by the bureaucratic structures of the organization and therefore be dissatisfied with their work.

### **Job Characteristics**

We define as job characteristics all those tasks that each employee has to accomplish in order to achieve a specific goal. The way that a task is designed and employees have to operate it accordingly, has an important effect on their satisfaction. When an employee is positioned in a job that has the capabilities to take initiatives and organize it, will have a positive relation to job satisfaction. On the other hand, in a working context where the job doesn't live room for initiatives and doesn't make use of the employee's knowledge and previous experience, employees will be dissatisfied.

### **3. METHOD**

The case study approach was utilized to implement the research plan. The employees of one public organization (ministry) were chosen to participate in the research. The purpose of this case study was to identify the capabilities and cognitions of the employees and specify the reasons why they were or not satisfied with their job tasks. Univariate descriptive statistics are presented to give a first insight about employees' demographics, abilities, previous working experience, description of their current



working context, working problems and motives associated with their working position and, finally, job satisfaction.

### Sampling

The population is defined as: “all the employees of the General Secretariat of Commerce, Ministry of Development who are working in Athens offices during the period 1/2/2004-1/3/2004.” The sampling method used to select the employees from the population was a combination of quota sampling and random systematic sampling. First, lists with all the employees from all the departments of the General Secretariat of Commerce were created. Then, from each department a proportionate number of employees regarding the population (e.g. if the department responsible for controlling the prices of beverages and food was the 10% of the total population of the employees of the Secretariat, then the 10% of the sample will be employees coming from this department) was selected randomly and systematically to participate in the research. The final number of the sample was 104 employees.

### **Data collection**

A well-structured questionnaire was used to collect the data through personal interviews. Before the initiation of the data collection process all the directors of all the departments were informed about the study and their support was acquired for the proper and complete data collection process (elimination of non response error). It is interesting to note that the Directors were also the subjects under examination (they participated in the survey).

### **Descriptive statistics of the sample**

### Age, Gender and Education

The sample was almost balanced in terms of gender (51,5% of the sample is women the rest 48,5% is men). The average age of the sample is 47 years, the median is 48 years, the mode is 45 years, the min age is 27 years and the max age is 59 years. The educational background of the sample is the following: 42.7% have a university (bachelor's) degree, 2.9% have a degree from a Technical Institution, 43.7% have finished high school and about the rest 10% have finished only the elementary school. No employee had a master's degree (or PhD). Finally, 42.3% had attended various professional seminars.

### **Cognitions**

#### Languages and Computer Skills

43.7% of ministry's personnel spoke the English language and only 5.8% could spoke French, while about 2% knew another language. Regarding the computer skills: 42.7% used Microsoft Word, 34.0% used Microsoft Excel and only about 3.0% used Microsoft PowerPoint and Microsoft Access. Therefore, the computer skills of the personnel are quite limited. Finally, only 16.5% knew how to use the Internet.

#### Previous Professional Experience

The majority of the sample (65.0%) used to work in the private sector before they were hired to work for the Ministry of Development. The average previous working experience counted in years is 7.3 years while the mode is 2 years. From the 65.0% of the personnel who used to work in the private sector before they were hired by the

Ministry, only 12.1% had a position of a supervisor (or above e.g. manager, director etc.). The rest 87.9% were first level employees.

### **Current Job Characteristics – Empirical Findings**

98.0% of the sample was first level employees and only 2% was directors or supervisors. 96.2% had a permanent employment contract while the rest had an indefinite employment contract. The average working experience in the Ministry counted in years is 18.6 years (the median 18.0 years) while the mode is 22 years. Only 5.8% of the sample personnel were responsible for (long term) **strategic planning**. The marginal majority (54.8%) of the personnel was responsible for implementing **administrative tasks**. 40.0% of the employee's sample had to **participate in different types of committees** and at the same time disseminate (through structured communication channels) the decisions taken to the authorized employees for the implementation of these decisions. 23.1% of the sample employees was responsible for **controlling**. Only 9.6% of the sample was dealing with **legislative** issues/tasks. About 3.0% of the sample was **technical staff** and about 48.0% stated that performed **secretary** tasks.

### **Working Context: Current Job related problems-Empirical Findings**

The question to assess job satisfaction was quite general, closed and dichotomous (e.g. "Are you satisfied from your working context & position?", Answers: yes, no). 60 out of 104 employees (total number of sample) stated that they were satisfied from their working position. 17 stated that they were dissatisfied and 27 refused/avoid to answer the respective question. The questionnaire, regardless the answer to the previous general question about job satisfaction, posed a series of specific working problems

that an employee can face in its daily working life and asked the employees to answer if they were facing such problems or not. The first question had to do with the potential lack of education or briefing or advising regarding the description of the job (e.g. specific job tasks, specific obligations, specific objectives, specific working procedures etc.). 17 employees stated that there was a significant lack of education/briefing/advising regarding their job description. It is interesting to note that similar number of employees (17) had a general perception of dissatisfaction about their working context. The marginal majority (52.4%) of the sample stated that the problem of low wages was a disincentive for higher performance and better job satisfaction, while about 17.0% stated that the lack of other motives and the bureaucratic procedures of the ministry, were influencing their performance and satisfaction in a negative way. The second most crucial working problem (in terms of being stated by a substantial percentage of the employees – 47.6%) was the lack of the necessary and appropriate resources (e.g. equipment, office consumables etc.) for completing the working tasks. Furthermore, about 30.0% stated that the inappropriate atmospherics (aesthetics, temperature, ventilation, illumination, furniture etc.) represent a disincentive for higher performance and job satisfaction. About 10.0% of the sample personnel stated that is having a serious health problem, which is likely influencing their working performance and job satisfaction in a negative way. Although, only 17 employees stated that they were generally dissatisfied about their job, only 3 stated that they did not find interesting their job and only 1 stated that he/she had a problem to cooperate with his/her supervisor. Finally, 10.2% stated that because of various working problems, low job satisfaction and lack of working incentives, they were willing to change their working position with another working position within the General Secretariat of Commerce.

Rotated Component Matrix

	Component										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
SEX				,356			,603				
AGE			,846								
PRE.YEAR			,805								
AEI					,821						
ONE_LANG					,710						
WORD	,769										
EXCEL	,814										
SEMINARS	,737										
IDIWTIKO				,790							
ALLYEARS				,877							
CHANGE								,757			
B1											,798
B2											
B3											
B4											
B5											
B6											
B7											
B8											
SATISFY											
POROI											
EDUCATIO											
WAGE											
MOTIVAT											
CLIMATE											
ANOTHER											
HEALTH											

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.

a. Rotation converged in 20 iterations.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Numerous external changes push public organizations to adopt new managerial practices and modify their bureaucratic structures. The notion of constant transformation is, in our days, so frequently invoked, that organizational change in the Greek public sector has gained increased attention. Responding to regulatory,

economic, competitive and technological shifts, the challenge of reorganization is universal for all public organizations.

The increased interference of the state in the economy, the society and the technological progress in alignment with the closer cooperation of the economies of different countries, have contributed to the improvement and modernization of the State. Therefore, the attempts of this research were to identify which factors such as working context and cognitions influence job satisfaction.

Our findings were based on a descriptive analysis made in the Ministry of Commerce and our purpose was to identify the major problems that employees were facing in their daily working context and how these problems were affecting their job satisfaction. We came up with the interesting result that a high percentage of public servants in this ministry were dissatisfied with the working context, as it doesn't leave space for taking initiatives and action. Most of the employees fill like being unable to provide the maximum of their abilities to their working context. It is not the competencies and the goals themselves but rather the public organizational working environment that imposes the context of how employees must perform without considering employees capabilities. The result of this process is a sense of inertia or self-dissatisfaction. Therefore, the characteristics of the working context have important indirect influences on job satisfaction through their impact on these job characteristics and attitudes.

Furthermore, we identified a high percentage of employee's that were dissatisfied with their job position. This percentage of employee's prefer to be placed on another position that will be relevant to their interests and experience and therefore gain a job satisfaction. We identified that in this specific Ministry the experience and knowledge

of an employee may not play an important role, as it might be placed in a job position irrelevant to its competencies. The employee cognitions also have an indirect impact on job satisfaction through their impact on job characteristics.

Finally, we have to state that the interesting part of this study is its innovativeness as no other research like that before has been accomplished in a Greek public organization. The research based on employee's cognitions and working context that reflects on employee's job satisfaction is something really new in the Greek public sector and something that must be continued in order to improve the public services provided to the citizens. The importance of this study is that identifies the need of a public organization to realize the needs, experience, and educational background of its human power that will lead to employee's job satisfaction. Our purpose for future research is to continue a study, in more Greek Ministries that will analyze in depth the working context and the cognitions of the employees in order to identify all those factors that will lead to job satisfaction.

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