Differences between exemplary performers and average performers: Review of the literature and implications for WLP practitioners

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to review the literature on the differences between exemplary performers and average performers and discuss the issues in order to address the implications for WLP practitioners. According to the McKinsey report, there is a discrepancy of 40 to 67 percent in the productivity between average performers and high performers. However, many companies are not able to get employees to perform at their highest levels all the time. In this article a review of existing literature on exemplary performers is executed, including the definitions of exemplary performers and average performers, distinguishing exemplary performers from average performers, and the approaches for improving performance by adopting the exemplary performers. Also, the implications for WLP practitioners are discussed.

[Key word] exemplary performers, average performers, human competence, potential for performance improvement (PIP), behavior engineering model (BEM), competency identification, workplace learning and performance (WLP)

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I. Introduction

In this knowledge economy era, it is a common belief that an organization’s success depends on the quality of its employees (Drucker, 2000). Moreover, as business continues to face profound, complex, and constant change, the importance of knowledge workers who have the ability to solve new problems and adapt to change has been recognized (Clark & Estes, 2002). According to the McKinsey report, there is a discrepancy of 40 to 67 percent in the productivity between average performers and high performers, and organizations with the best talent management practices (top 20 percent) showed better performance as compared to their industries' mean return to shareholders by 22 percent (Axelrod, Handfield-Jones, & Welsh, 2001). Thus, it is imperative for organizations to focus on improving the performance of their employees so that they maintain sustainable competitive power in their market, and, in fact, many organizations devote themselves to create knowledge workers in order to produce positive and profitable performance for the organization. However, the problem is that the companies are not able to get the employees to perform at their highest levels at all times.

With regard to this, several researchers argued that there is a big difference between exemplary performers and average performers in terms of productivity (Boyatzis, 1982; Gilbert, 1978; Spencer & Spencer, 1993). Specifically, Gilbert (1978) suggested measures for human competence, which is a social concept that can be judged in terms of the worth of the performance and can be measured by the societal value of the accomplishment. The underlying assumption in these research studies is that all practitioners who are working in the fields of human resource development (HRD), workplace learning and performance (WLP), human performance improvement (HPI), and organization development (OD) can increase organizational productivity by analyzing exemplary performers in order to help average performers to be more competitive (Elliott, 2008).

In recent decades, the field of human resource development (HRD) has experienced rapid changes in order to expand its focus from training to improving performance (Clark & Estes, 2002; Fuller, & Farrington, 1999; Rothwell, Hohne, & King, 2007; Stolovitch & Keeps, 2004; Willmore, 2008). In particular, Rothwell and Sredl (2000) argued that the paradigm shifted from HRD to WLP because people acknowledged the importance of the integrated use of learning interventions, such as knowledge and skills, and organizational