

Merit-based recruitment and its impact on employees' performance: Empirical evidence from a public company of Pakistan

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This study broadly explains the importance of merit-based recruitment and its impact on employees' performances. The paper argues that right person for the right job would be the crucial and important for organizations success. Based on literature review and key informant interviews, study finds out different socio-political influences which have dominated in Pakistani organizational settings play critical role in backwardness of public sector. In particular, study finds out colonial legal framework and management practices seem to be main hurdles in the way of public sector organizations to fully develop. This study argues that most of the public companies in the country have not yet fully addressed the HRM practices in accordance with the international standards. The paper concludes that recruitment and selection of employees are believed to have paramount importance, and are used building the foundation for a successful organization. Hence, this paper suggests that a moderate approach in aligning the international HRM practices with local cultures and traditions can be effective way for the organizations to address meritocracy in their decisions.

Key words: *Meritocracy, Recruitment and Selection, Employees Performance, Public Sector Companies, Socio-Political, Pakistan*



INTRODUCTION

Meritocracy has attracted attention of academic scholarship for many decades. An increasing amount of academic literature contributed by various authors' highlighted applications and uses of merit-based recruitment. Meritocracy is much about a standardizing guideline coordinating the dissemination of openings and benefits based on capacity, ability, or exertion (Burbules, N. C., 2021). A competitive environment among organizations helps in finding better workforce to establish competitive workforce (Young, 1958). Young argues that the concept of meritocracy started from the political vision of Aristotle and Plato which reflects and emphasizes on the right person for the right job. Mulgan, (2000) asserted that Aristotle brought the discussions where in Greece women and slaves were made deprived of their basic rights. Mulgan believes that Aristotle based on his political theory presented his point of view for political and social justice aimed at addressing the distributive justice and equal opportunity for all. The most equitable method to provide everyone an equal chance to succeed is through a meritocracy (Haider, H. 2019). Thus, pro-activeness among the managers was treated as the added advantage and become helpful for the organizations as well (Brockbank, 1999).

Eventually, industrial revolution gave rise to meritocracy and hiring practices, in general, secured more importance. Industries started searching capable, competent, and talented individuals to work for their specific objective (Bell, 1972; Brown & Tannock, 2009). The advent of globalization also provided an opportunity to the talented employees and the concept of recruitment and selection emerged as we know it today (Becker & Tomes, 1994; Schultz, 1971). A large body of research asserts that globalization embedded knowledge base driven economy which has led the people to learn and earn (Schultz, 1971).

More development in meritocracy is witnessed among Western countries (Charron, Dahlström, & Lapuente, 2015). However, developing nations including Pakistan is experiencing some serious challenges. For example, the long British rule in the Indian sub-continent adversely affected the legal and administrative structures and had much influences of national, cultural, political, and religious factors (Jhatial, Cornelius, & Wallace, 2014; Tayeb, 1997). Pakistan got her independence from the British rule on 14th August 1947. Immediately after attaining independence Pakistan faced number of administrative and other social problems (Jaffrelot, 2004). The quota system and ethnic tension which started from the colonial period continued after the independence and left negative consequences (Jhatial, 2009). The growing ethnic tension brought the internal conflicts among the people of Pakistan and resulted in creation of four major provinces. These provinces were made on the basis of ethnic, language difference, and population (Jaffrelot, 2004, Kennedy, 1987 Alavi, 1986; Haleem, 2003). Thus, the inherited problems from the British rule became part of administrative policies and negatively affected the management practices in Pakistan (Jhatial, Cornelius et al. 2014).

Literature Review

The field of HRM has become important discourse in the field of management sciences today. However, there are many instances of firms that do not implement human resources (HR) practices to the best of their ability (Rehman, T. U., & Khatoun, R., 2021). An organization's performance will directly be impacted by the quality of decisions made, risk-taking, innovations, and initiatives made by the employees (Sulaimon, A. A., Hassan, B. A., & Ebhohon, E. M., 2021). It is clear that a combination of hard skills and soft skills brought by employees will make a significant contribution to organizational development, underscoring the importance of human resources in leveraging these employees (Ye, G., 2022, March). Beer, (1984) suggests that in HRM the importance of recruitment and selection decisions are of greater importance. Likewise, Armstrong & Taylor, (2014) explained that HRM is a strategic, integrated and coherent approach where employees recruitment related decisions are important. The good relationship of employees with their employers brings several benefits including 'developing loyalty among employees and increase organizational as well as employees performance' (Robbins, DeCenzo, & Gao, 2007). It is actually the process of selecting the best applicant among the pool of candidates (Bhoganadam, S. D., & Rao, D. S., 2014). Eventually, the emergence of talent hunt became the top priority among the developed nations. For example, Ulrich, Brockbank, Yeung, & Lake, (1995) have identified that competency of employees is believed to be central in achieving organizational goals. Subsequently, the merit based recruitment and selection in the field of HRM developed and got much momentum as the means of hiring in a standard way (Cornell & Lapuente, 2014).

The merit based recruitment and selection is the effective tool for the organizations to discover the potential employees for various positions (Breaugh, 2008; Chaneta, 2014). It can be seen from the above literature that meritocracy, recruitment, and selection as the central components in HRM.

More recently, organizations have witnessed the visible effects of merit based recruitment and selection. For example, Swailes, (2013) & Garrow & Hirsh, (2008) explain that organizational and employees performance heavily relies upon the talent and ability of the employees and managers put their talent and skills to benefit both organizations and workers. The leadership of managers along with their innate abilities provides organizations immense opportunities to improve and prosper (Rothwell, 2010).

The concept of meritocracy has emerged as growing concern among the Western societies. The way meritocracy is conceptualized and operationalized in experimental research has evolved significantly (Madeira, A. F., Costa-Lopes, R., Dovidio, J. F., Freitas, G., & Mascarenhas, M. F., 2019). However, the nation's particularly those which remained under British colonial rule inherited many socio-economic and political problems (Jhatial, Cornelius & Wallace 2014). Jhatial, (2009) and Jhatial, Cornelius & Wallace (2014) have identified that most of the developing nations have mixture of modern and traditional

practices. Multinational companies and their subsidiaries align their administrative strategies with local cultural context (Schneider, 1988). National culture has also greater influences on employees' morals, values, attitudes, and behaviors (Sparrow & Wu, 1998). Some studies have also shown that management practices are heavily influenced by the respective national cultures (Aycaan et al., 2000; Miah & Bird, 2007).

Literature entails that meritocracy is much embedded in mainstream HRM policy and practice in most of the Western societies. Developing nations including Pakistan are lagging in meritocracy as cultural and traditional challenges are the barriers to implement modern management practices. Further, the literature also reveals that merit based recruitment is a way forward to enhance the employees performance.

Meritocracy has a long history in academic literature. It got momentum just after the Aristotle's and Plato's political ideology in which it was asserted that merit based appointments should have more weightage in organizational decisions (Young, 1958). It was Young, (1958) who in the light of Aristotle's and Plato's philosophy endorsed the rise of meritocracy and its importance for the firms.

Due to the industrial revolution and neoliberalism many firms started searching skilled, qualified, and talented employees to work for them (Bell, 1972; Brown & Tannock, 2009). Slowly and gradually with the advent of globalization the industries started searching the global talent pools (Becker & Tomes, 1994; Schultz, 1971). Ulrich et al. (1995) explained that competency is believed as the most important factor amongst the managers. Because, according to these authors managers were of the view that firms expect excellence from them. Based on their empirical data these authors identified that HR professional's role in dynamic environment was believed as the central in achieving organizational objectives. Organizations performance and competitive advantage is more or less associated with potential and skilled employees (Swales, 2013).

Hence, talent hunt became very important for the organizations around the world and the survival of organizations was mainly associated with the quality of workforce (Garrow& Hirsh, 2008). Right person for the right job helps organizations to become successful and competitive (Jackson & Schuler, 1990). Hence, HR professionals and organizational leadership together can devise effective strategies for the organizations to succeed (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2005). Consequently, the organizations started searching the proactive candidates, because they realized that proactive managers might be handy in bringing innovative cultures (Brockbank, 1999).

It is obvious from the above literature that meritocracy has a key role for organizational performance and their success directly and indirectly depends upon the quality of workforce. For example, Dahlström, Lapuente, &Teorell, (2011) on the basis of original data from 52 countries have identified that institutions that had meritorious recruitment were able to address the organizational problems more effectively. Authors further inculcated the culture of appreciation, recognition, rewards, and motivation by the HR managers helped



organizations to overcome their administrative problems. Some believe meritocracy can help in controlling the corruptions, bribery, and other unethical practices (Castilla&Benard, 2010; Dahlström et al.,

2011). Some others believe that in merit there should not be discrimination on the bases of gender and race; however the deserving candidates should be encouraged and promoted. For instances, Castilla(2005) argues that with effective and transparent performance management system can be helpful in inducing the merit culture and can have positive results for both the organizations and employees. Likewise, Heneman & Werner, 2005; Miller, (2006) argues that the organizations must make sure that in meritocracy strategies the gender and racial inequality be addressed in a proper way. The culture of meritocracy in organizations can help in stimulating equal employment opportunities and organizations can have long term benefits (Arrow, Bowles, &Durlauf, 2000).

Recruitment is the process of discovering and creating a pool of the potential employees for the various jobs in organizations (Chaneta, 2014). Organizations are continuously in search of organizational fit basically the right person for the right job because they believe that they are their assets and will eventually work directly in the changing environment (Newell, 2005). Thus, recruitment and selection is fundamental to HRM practices and helps organizations to select the most capable and skilled workforce (French & Rumbles, 2010). Skilled people can help organizations to overcome the possible constraints and can provide a great help to organizations in the ever dynamic environment (McGraw, 2013). To find out the right person and the best organizational fit policy has been the priorities of organizations (Chaneta, 2014). Because, organizations believe that their success and failure depends on the workforce they have with them. The recruitment and selection has been debated and its importance has central role in achieving organizational objectives (Chaneta 2014, Breaugh 2008, Armstrong, Taylor 2014, Robbins, DeCenzo & Gao 2007, Guest 1997). The process of recruitment plays an important role within the overall human resource management Baroun, A. E. (2021). The strategic recruitment helps organizations to find out the most deserving among the potential candidates in terms of skills and potential employees (Costen, 2012). Likewise, Taylor (2014) has asserted that recruitment and selection procedures help in identifying the skilled workforce and organizations can achieve their objectives with the help of potential employees. McGraw, (2013) takes steps forward and identifies that a careful recruitment and selection of employees brings the excellence of employees, which in long run will provide benefits for the organization.

Research questions

Hence, this study designed research questions to address the merit based recruitment among public companies of Pakistan and the questions were;



- I. What is overall procedure of merit based recruitment and selection of employees among public companies of Pakistan?
- II. How merit based recruitment in the appointments decisions is made in the public sector organizations?
- III. Does discriminatory practices exist at the workplace among public companies of Pakistan

Research methods

This study used two methods literature review method and key informant interviews (KIIs). KIIs were conducted from one of the leading oil marketing company of Pakistan. The interviews were taken in native language e.g. Urdu and were translated into English. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed in thematic analysis. KIIs help researchers to investigate the required area of research and also help reaching the respondents close (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002; Bryman, 2006).

The literature review method helps in identifying the key concepts and provides researchers with a good understanding about the areas under investigation (Barker, 2014; Hart, 1998). Hence, authors of this paper used Google Scholar as a search engine. The key words including “Meritocracy, Talent, Merit based recruitment, and Recruitment and Selection” were searched and top fifty concerned articles were downloaded and read. A brief summary of each article was made to get reflections and impressions related to the content of this paper.

Results and discussion

While asking from HR managers of company we were told that the firm has a HR policy based on which the recruitment and selection of employees is made. One of the senior managers said that; “we make open advertisement for various positions and after short-listing the candidates are invited for the interviews”.

Another manager said that; “We have Entry level and experienced level positions. In Entry level, the company invites fresh graduates from various fields (HRM, Finance, Marketing, Engineers, and Chemists). For the experience level positions the company invites people having experience within different fields and such people may be internal organizational candidates or external candidates”.

In response to merit based appointments the following managers were interviewed:

One of the senior managers told us that; “in past the company believed in experience and seniority. He further added that the company has started intensive tests and rigorous interviews”.

The middle manager said in his words; “Political and external influences exist in the key appointments decisions. Merit is not given full weight in the interviews. Sifarsih (connection) is the barrier towards meritocracy”

Another middle manager said that; “Cultural factor is also a problem in discovering the potential employees. Because, females despite their merit and skills are deprived from key positions of the company, as major positions are being occupied by males”.

The above empirical evidence shows that senior level managers and middle level managers differ in their answers. For example, the senior level of manager of HR department told us that on certain level there are political and external pressures, but the company tries to minimize them. The middle managers were of the opinion that company has political influences and some time the direct appointments are made without considering merit. Jhatial, (2009); Jhatial et al., 2014; & Khilji & Wang, (2006) have identified that Pakistani public companies do not adhere to their set policy guidelines. These authors assert that external influences including political and cultural have put hurdles in meritocratic environment among Pakistani companies.

In response to a question related to discriminatory practices during recruitment and selection of employees we took interviews from senior and middle level managers. The senior managers were trying to defend the company and seemed hesitant in addressing this question. But, middle managers were of the opinion that company has discriminatory practices based on ethnicity. For example, we were told that since Pakistan represents four provinces and the company is responsible to give equal opportunity to all.

One of the senior managers said that; “The company represents all the provinces and provides equal opportunity to all”

The middle level managers asserted that; “Ethnic tension exists throughout Pakistan. Punjab has a lion share in the jobs. Urdu speaking community mostly from Karachi are more as compared to other ethnic groups such as Sindhi, Baluch, and Pashtoon speaking”.

Other middle managers said in his words; “This company represents the whole Pakistan but does not properly address the equal employment opportunity. It is only written on the company’s website that we are equal employment opportunity provider”.

Overall, above empirical evidence shows that company under research does not fully address meritocracy in its mainstream HRM policy and practice. Equal employment opportunity is seen and witnessed in its scope particularly in the developed societies. However, less developed nations including Pakistan have been facing some serious challenges with discriminatory practices in the recruitment decisions (Harcourt, Lam, & Harcourt, 2005).



The empirical evidence employs that the case company does not fully adhere meritocracy in its decisions. Khilji (2003) finds that employment practices in Pakistan remain under the high political influence. She has asserted that major decisions related to appointments, promotions, hiring and firing are not based on merit.

Khilji (2004) has argued that merit, equal employment opportunity, career development, and employees' rights are not fully addressed among Pakistani public sector companies. Jhatial et al. 2014 and Khilji (1999) asserted that most of the recruitment decisions particularly for higher positions are based on political influence.

Islam, (2004) has similar findings and has explained that Pakistani organizations and their HRM policies have not fully nurtured and also lack in addressing meritocracy in their decisions. The consistent findings have been highlighted by Jhatial et al. (2014) where they have identified that Pakistani public sector organizations have serious issues and challenges in addressing meritocracy. In particular, the public organizations of Pakistan remain under political, cultural, and social influences which do not help in embedding meritocracy (Shahzad, Bashir et al. 2008).

Conclusion and Recommendations

In our earlier discussion we have presented that recruitment and selection of employees are believed as one of the most important ingredients in the field of HRM. Merit based appointments are essential for the organizations. From the secondary data it was also identified that the selected companies have designed certain HR policies which give impression that the organizations do follow what they say on their website. On their websites it is clearly narrated that the organization believes in merit, equal employment opportunity, and do not believe in discrimination.

The literature published in Pakistani context give impression that set policy guidelines among public companies are not fully addressed. Pakistani companies are no exceptions and have remained under the influence of cultural and traditional barriers. Mangi, Jhatial, Shah, & Ghumro, (2012) while studying the HRM practices in private companies of Pakistan have identified that, "national cultural factors such as collectivism and high power distance" are found to be the major dominating factors in Organizations. Similarly, Khilji (2003) has the similar findings and has identified that culture has significant influence on organizational performance. According to her, such influence did not help HRM practices to fully flourish in accordance with international practices. Jhatial, Cornelius & Wallace 2014 have identified that Pakistani companies are not fully developed and their management practices have many issues to deal with. These authors add that discriminatory practices including no-merit recruitments continue to exist. Islam (2004) has similar findings where he has identified the management structure among Pakistani where power distance, masculinity, and individualism are the barriers towards the development. Eventually, with the passage of time organizations



in Pakistan did not fully develop due to mess in administrative structures. Non-merit based appointments, political influences, and discriminatory practices have negatively affected the very fabric of the public sector of Pakistan. The organization must measure and exist at a strategic level to articulate the impact on organizational performance so that the company knows what has been achieved as a result of HR operations (Hamza, P. A., Othman, B. J., Gardi, B., Sorguli, S., Aziz, H. M., Ahmed, S. A., ... & Anwar, G., 2021). The authors of this paper have concluded that meritocracy plays a central role in recruitment and selection decisions. The authors have identified that meritocracy has got momentum in the developed nations but the developing nation including Pakistan lags behind meritocracy practices.

This paper uses literature review method and in-depth interviews. In the context of Pakistan, the paper has found that most of the public companies have not yet fully addressed the HRM practices in accordance with the international standard.

The paper concludes that recruitment and selection of employees is believed of paramount importance, and is used building the foundation for a successful organization. Hence, this paper suggests that a moderate approach in aligning the international HRM practices with local cultures and traditions can be effective way for the organizations. Hence, the authors of this paper have the following suggestions:

- o Recruitment and selection decisions among public companies of Pakistan need to be revised in accordance with international standards.
- o Merit based appointments among public companies in general and case company in particular can be effective practice to revive the traditional ways of recruitment decisions.
- o Equal employment opportunity to all among public companies in general and case company in particular can be vital to strengthen meritocracy.

The authors believe that more empirical based research on HRM practices can reveal more information and can also be learnt more about public companies of Pakistan.



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