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Performance or Politics: Promotions in the Israeli Public Sector

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Abstract

The paper presents findings of a research examining the perceptions regarding promotions of employees in the public sector. A questionnaire containing a series of factors related to promotion was conducted on 166 employees from the public sector in Israel. The findings reveal that the public sector employees ranked organizational politics as the most important factor, followed by tenure, pressure on the supervisor, success in projects/ missions, experience and education. Comparison between workers' and managers' perceptions exposes substantial differences in most of the factors influencing promotion. The meaning of the findings and their implications are discussed in the paper.

Keywords: human resources management, promotions, public sector, Israel.

1. Introduction

Many employees, especially in the public sector, claim that promotion is based on who you know and not what you know; that the impression one makes and playing the promotion “game” can lead you to the top management (Singh, Kumra & Vinnicombe, 2002). Thus, they feel that anyone wishing to advance in the employment world is required to invest great efforts into establishing interpersonal relationships with the right people rather than investing their efforts in improving their work performance for the benefit of the organization (Conner, 2006).

One assumption is that organizations operating in a competitive environment will strive to maximize human potential to survive the business competition; therefore, promotion according to whom you know is more prominent in public organizations where there is little or no competition. Another assumption is that public organizations are related to national politics and therefore the organizational politics will have a major impact on their activities (Vigoda & Drory, 2006; Vigoda & Kapoon, 2005), including the promotion process.

Findings indicate that the high-tech employees rank organizational politics after success in projects/ missions, education and multi-disciplinary knowledge, as the most important factors influencing promotion (Sharabi, 2008). This article investigates public employee's (manager and workers) perception of factors influencing promotion and suggests practical implications to deal with the destructive perceptions.

2. The Effect of Promotions on Employee and Organizations

Many scholars perceive promotion as one of the most important components of employer-employee relations (e.g. Fenwick & Bierema, 2008; James, 2000; Saporta & Farjoun, 2003). As far as a worker is concerned, a promotion is not only an expression of gratitude and a reward for effort, but also a chance for self-fulfillment and career advancement, satisfying an individual's need for achievement and success. However, for an organization, a promotion is both an expression of gratitude and a motivational tool. There is no doubt that promotions bring the additional benefit of "binding" the employee to the organization and preventing "brain drain". Promotion (or Organizational Career Management) is a positive necessity for an organization and is one of the most important tools in HRM (Human Resource Management) (Sharabi, 2008).

It was found that a lack of promotion opportunities, flawed promotion processes or a perception of unfairness in the promotion decisions, are related to a low level of performance, a low level of loyalty and commitment (Yu & Egri, 2005; McKay, 2004; Williams & O'Reilly, 1998) and high turnover and absenteeism (Lee, Hsu & Lien, 2006; Eby, Allen & Brinley, 2005; Saporta & Farjoun, 2003). Furthermore, it negatively affects employees' wellbeing and performance (Baptiste, 2008). Actually, individuals who are more involved and socially integrated, those who

perform better at work, and who are more committed to the organization, will have greater chances of being offered promotions, and vice versa (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998).

The replacement costs of talented employees are high not only due to the HR functional aspects (e.g. recruiting, selecting, interviewing, staffing, training and development) but mainly due to the intellectual capital aspect; i.e.: departure of employees who are familiar with processes, work methods, knowledge, operating systems, classified information, etc. According to this, maintaining and promoting good employees is the main mission of public and private sectors (Sharabi, 2008). In addition to the above, promotions according to "who you know" are likely to be a means for discrimination against women and minorities and may result in lawsuits against organizations.

The Effect of Demographic Variables on Employees Promotion:

Many studies have focused on the effect of demographic variables, such as ethnicity, gender and seniority on promotion opportunities (James, 2000; Taniguchi, 2006). One aspect reported in various studies is that educational similarities (i.e. level of education, educational institution attended, and type of certification) are also factors considered by supervisors when making a decision regarding the promotion of employees (Yu & Egri, 2005). This notion is not unfamiliar to the Israeli organizational culture, for instance, where upper level managers who were formerly senior military commanders, ensure the addition of newly retired high-ranking military commanders to their organizations (Tzafrir, Baruch & Meshoulam, 2007). Although this is not a case of educational similarities, the similar background creates empathy and may be a factor which should be taken into consideration when making promotion related decisions (Yu & Egri, 2005; Tzafrir et al., 2007).

Another interesting finding reported in the literature is the correlation between personal similarities between employers and employees and promotion opportunities. The way, in which these similarities may be expressed between workers at the same level, or between a worker and a supervisor, is through sharing the same perspective, responding in similar ways, interpersonal trust, and personal commitment. The greater the number or degree of similarities, the more "bonus points" (social capital) are credited to the worker. Thus, a particular worker becomes a natural candidate for promotion (James, 2000). This is typical of organizational politics and emphasizes the importance of personal connections in achieving promotions. Organizational political games are one of the tactics employees use to pursue personal interests, including pay and promotions (Vigoda & Drory, 2006; Conner, 2006). Similarly, Singh, et al. (2002) and Conner (2006) assume that employees, by not using political tactics or "impression games" are limiting themselves from achieving personal goals such as promotion. In order to survive and advance in an organization, employees must use political tools such as being familiar with the organizational culture, identifying the sources of power, nurturing relations with superiors, cooperating with colleagues and other figures of power, building a positive, well-liked image, etc. (Vigoda & Drory, 2006; Vigoda & Kapoon, 2005)

When examining promotion by gender in Israel, it is evident that although women were 48.4 percent of the workforce in 2002, most of them were employed in traditional feminine occupations characterized by low wages, such as teaching, secretarial work, sales, etc. (Tzafrir et al., 2007). Data from the Statistical Abstracts of Israel - 2002 (2002) shows that although the percentage of women managers has doubled over the past 20 years, the percentage of male CEOs is almost 4 times higher than female CEOs.

As for managers in the high-tech industry, there has been some progress. While in 1978, only 9 percent of managerial positions were filled by women, by 2000, 22 percent of all managers were women, even though women comprise only 34 percent of the high-tech workforce. However, when taking a closer look at these female managers, it becomes apparent that they are concentrated mainly in the field of Human Resources, which is considered more feminine, and thus they are discriminated with regards to working conditions – basic wages, benefits and stock options (Wertzberger, 2001).

3. The Public Sector Characteristics

In his classical study, Murray's (1975) compared between the private and the public organizations characteristics. The differences focus on five main points:

a. *Criteria for the goal realization:* In a private organization there are purely economic considerations, while in a public organization there are blurred considerations meant to ultimately achieve consensus among the various population components.

b. *The degree of activity and values level:* In a private organization there are simple activities and a limited emphasis on values, while in a public organization there are complex and value-based activities that serve the interests of different and sometimes opposing groups. Frequently, such activities result in extensive extra-organizational and intra-organizational politics.

c. *Law:* Private organizations may act within any framework that is not against the law, while public organizations have to obey the law exclusively.

d. *Exposure and auditing:* A private organization is less exposed to auditing because of alternatives available to the client, while a public organization can be subjected to a long list of auditors and supervising bodies.

e. *Dependence upon the system:* A private organization is free from politicization, while a public organization is often impacted by, and must always be cognizant of politics.

The inherent politics in the public sector and the inherent profit rational goals in the private sector can explain the main differences between the two sectors' function and performance. We cannot deny that the main factor for the differences is the level of external pressure. According to Pfeffer, (1992) the higher the external pressure (competition) on the organization, the lesser the internal organizational politics and the higher the inter-organizational politics will be. When examining at a continuum based on environment stability degree and an organization's chances of survival, the private organizations (especially the high-tech companies) are at one end of the spectrum and the public monopolies, operating in a secure stable environment, are at the other end (based on the continuum of organic-mechanistic organizations by Barnes and Stalker) (Jackson & Schuler, 2000). Clearly, the latter types of organizations, are more internally focused, less exposed to a turbulent environment, and usually do not face a high level of uncertainty (Harpaz & Meshoulam, 2004); therefore they are more prone to considerations based on personal relations, organizational politics, tenure and gender when granting promotion, and less prone to rational business considerations (Jackson & Schuler, 2000).

Although recently many of the world's nations have introduced a significant level of competition into the public sector as well (many public bodies and mechanisms have to justify their mere existence by the comparison between their performances and those of their competitors in the private sector in the fields of employment, health, education, and even security), this competition is still not similar to what is happening in the private sector (Vigoda & Kapun, 2005).

Politics Perception in the Public Sector vs. the Private Sector:

Vigoda & Kapun (2005) have found significant differences between the private and the public sector employees in all 9 items reflecting politics perception. The public sectors employees show lower agreement with the statements "promotions in this department generally go to top performers", "since I have worked in this department, I have never seen the pay and promotion policies applied politically" and "rewards come only to those who work hard in this organization" than the private sector employees. They also show higher agreement with the statement "favoritism rather than merit determines who gets ahead around here" than the private sector employees. Therefore, this explanation strengthens the expectation that we will find more internal politics at play in the public sector than in the private one.

4. The Public Sector in Israel

Israel was established in 1948 as a welfare state with economy and society managed by a high degree of centralistic system that favors the public sector at the expense of the private sector (Vigoda, 2007). Since the 1970's, the Israeli economy has shifted from a centralized socialistic economy, with employment virtually guaranteed for almost all, to a capitalist market economy characterized by an uncertainty of employment (Sharabi, 2008). The 1980's privatization of state-controlled organizations, led to the decrease of the sacred institution of 'work tenure'. It also led to an increase in the unemployment rate and employment uncertainty in the labor force (Sharabi & Harpaz, 2010).

The public sector (especially the governmental units) reacted slowly to the change and became more efficient. The employees still have tenure status and their unions are very militant in preserving the employee's historical condition. In addition to that, the public sector still suffers from high political involvement that limits the rational, effective and efficient decisions and policy (Vigoda & Kapoon, 2005).

5. Method

5.1 The Sample

Our public sector sample was based on 166 employees who returned the questionnaires that were distributed via mail (42 percent of the questionnaires were returned). They were from public governmental agencies in several geographical locations (the center and the north of Israel). From the 166 employees 141 were workers and 25 managers. 55.4 percent men and 44.6 percent women, 16.9 percent had secondary school education; 46.4 percent had some college or vocational-technical education; and 36.7 percent had first or higher academic degree. The mean age was 44.3 years.

5.2 The Questionnaire

A questionnaire containing several demographical questions (age, sex, educational level, status: worker/ manager etc.) and a series of factors related to promotion. The employees were asked to rate the degree to which they agree to the next statement, ranging from 1 "very little" to 7 "very much".

Statement: Promotions in your organization are based on:

1. Education
2. Tenure in the organization
3. Professional experience
4. Success in projects/ missions
5. Politics - social relations with the “right” people
6. Multi-disciplinary professional knowledge
7. Constant pressure by worker on the supervisor (including presenting letters of recognition, certificates of excellence, etc).
8. Age
9. Gender
10. Luck (or "being the right person at the right time")

6. Findings

The means in table 1 indicates that the public sector employees believe that organizational politics is the most important factor influencing promotion (5.42), followed by tenure (5.01) and pressure on the supervisor (4.84). Success in projects/ missions, experience and education (ranked 4-6 respectively) are all considered to have similar medium influence on promotions.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and correlations[a] of the factors influencing promotions in the public sector

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Education	4.13	2.15	-											
2. Tenure in the organization	5.01	2.34	.07	-										
3. Professional experience	4.40	2.72	.17	.23	-									
4. Success in projects/ missions	4.64	2.16	.25	.00	.25	-								
5. Politics	5.42	2.24	-.21	.39	-.23	-.56	-							
6. Multi-disciplinary knowledge	3.69	2.17	.13	-.14	.15	.21	-.29	-						
7. Pressure on the supervisor	4.84	2.63	-.33	.42	.11	-.60	.71	-.12	-					
8. Age	3.88	2.37	.19	.76	.52	-.18	.34	-.06	.22	-				
9. Gender	3.52	2.43	-.12	-.01	.13	-.05	.36	-.06	.47	.16	-			
10. Luck	3.24	2.42	-.35	.23	-.31	-.24	.31	-.20	.44	-.12	.19	-		
11. Employees education	2.33	.93	.15	.23	-.12	-.21	.02	.19	-.07	.12	-.02	-.24	-	
12. Employees age	44.3	10.17	-.22	.18	.31	.12	.38	.25	.41	-.15	.23	.19	.30	-
13. Employees gender[b]	1.45	.50	-.03	-.02	-.10	-.23	.41	.12	.44	-.23	.46	-.02	-.18	-.04

a. Correlations higher than 0.17 are significant at $P<0.05$.

b. 1-Male, 2-Female

The variables of multi-disciplinary knowledge, age, gender and luck received the lowest scores. From the correlation coefficients we can see that education, success in projects/ missions, experience and multi-disciplinary knowledge are negatively correlated to politics and pressure on the supervisor.

In table 2 we can see a comparison between workers' and managers' perceptions of the factors relating to promotion. The findings reveal significant differences in seven from the ten factors. A multivariate significant difference was found for the factors perceptions between workers and managers ($F_{(9,165)} = 18.26$, $p < .001$).

While managers rank success in projects/ missions at work as the most important factor influencing promotion, followed by education, experience, tenure and multi-disciplinary knowledge, the workers rank politics as the most important factor influencing promotion, followed by pressure on the supervisor, tenure, success in projects/ missions experience and experience. The largest significant gaps between managers and workers perceptions were related to pressure on the supervisor and politics. Also education, success in projects/ missions multi-disciplinary knowledge gender and luck as factors influencing promotion, perceived different importance by managers and workers. There were no differences between managers and workers related to the importance of tenure, professional experience, and age on promotions.

Table 2. Promotion factors as perceived by managers and workers in the public sector

Promotion factors	Managers			Workers			*t value*
		Mean	S.D.		Mean	S.D.	
Education	(2)	5.21	2.32	(7)	3.90	2.12	2.81**
Tenure in the organization	(4)	4.63	2.24	(3)	5.13	2.36	-.98
Professional experience	(3)	4.70	2.88	(5)	4.36	2.69	.58
Success in projects/ missions	(1)	5.77	2.11	(4)	4.42	2.17	2.88**
Politics	(6)	4.14	2.21	(1)	5.71	2.25	-3.22***
Multi-disciplinary knowledge	(5)	4.48	2.10	(9)	3.54	2.18	2.00*
Pressure on the supervisor	(9)	2.64	2.52	(2)	5.28	2.65	-4.62***
Age	(8)	3.58	2.26	(6)	3.94	2.39	-.70
Gender	(10)	2.42	2.33	(8)	3.67	2.45	2.37*
Luck	(7)	4.10	2.66	(10)	3.03	2.38	2.03*

a. Rankings are in parenthesis *P<.05; **P<.01; ***P<.001

Regression analysis was conducted to investigate the affect of the participant's status (worker- manager) and demographic variables (age, gender and education) on the factors of promotion. Overall, employees status (worker- manager) and age have the highest prediction regarding the promotional factors, especially regarding pressure on the supervisor (β= -.33, p<.001and β= .26, p<.001 respectively) and politics (β= -42, p<.001 and β= .24, p<.001 respectively) factors. Regarding gender, women in the public sector bestow higher impotence to the influence of gender on promotions then men (β= .29, P<.001). Employees education have low affect on the promotion factors and can hardly explain the perception differences.

7. Discussion

Some of our findings were to be expected in the public sector, but others were surprising. The most important factor influencing promotion is organizational politics and it is much higher than success in projects/missions. The belief that politics is more important than performance exemplifies the major difference between the public and private sectors as a whole (Vigoda, 2002; Vigoda & Kapun, 2005).

The greatest and most significant gaps between managers and workers were in the scores given to politics and mostly to pressure on the supervisor. Managers gave low scores to these factors, possibly because they did not want to reveal their weakness and lack of objectivity in promotion decisions or because they were actually unaware

of how much they were affected by these pressures or perhaps this is indeed what they believe in. These gaps raise the question of whether workers' perceptions are unsubstantiated, or whether workers in a political environment try to maximize their chances of promotion.

The public sector workers, from their experience in sector milieu, feel that promotion can be achieved mainly via politics (having the right "connections", lobbying, "advertising/promoting" themselves in one way or another) and by applying pressure, directly or indirectly, on their managers to promote them (Conner, 2006; Singh et al., 2002; Vigoda & Drory, 2006). Public sector workers, who do not apply these tactics, jeopardize their chances of promotion. These findings also indicate that there is a lack of transparency in the processes of evaluating and promoting workers, since using clear criterions for promotion and applying them, should have prevented this discrepancy between managers and workers. A situation in which only partial information is available, together with many rumors about what influences promotions, would cause differences between the perceptions of workers and managers especially concerning politics and pressure on the supervisor, as promotional factors.

It is interesting to see that managers ranked luck – "being the right person at the right time" higher than workers. Among managers, luck was ranked similar to politics and higher than pressure on the supervisor. It is not certain whether this is coincidental or not. As noted previously, the low ranking of politics and pressure on the supervisor are understandable (even if they are indeed part of the considerations). Managers are expected to base promotion decisions on extensive objective considerations. Perhaps the notion that a promotion is based on "luck" is a way of avoiding criticism that these decisions are affected by subjective considerations. It might be better perceived if a manager claims that a worker was promoted because of luck rather than politics or personal relations. The high ranking of luck among managers warrants further investigation. I have not come upon any researches dealing with the affect of luck in the promotions process.

There is a troublesome gap between workers and managers regarding the influence of gender in the promotion process. The manager gives much lower importance to this factor in contrast to the workers and it can be assumed that the workers believe that there is sex discrimination.

The Implications of the Research:

It is likely that workers act according to how they are measured, appreciated and rewarded. Therefore, the public sector workers will prefer to devote their time and energy to organizational politics, as well as putting pressure on superiors, rather than succeeding in projects/ missions (as the main organizational activity) and acquiring more knowledge, education, and experience. Hence, workers focus on activities that they perceive are crucial to their personal success, but which do not necessarily contribute to the organization's success, thus reducing organizational effectiveness. Furthermore, the success of the public sector is dependent on the successful HRM in terms of enhancing motivation, loyalty, and commitment and workers wellbeing. Promoting the most suitable candidates, regardless of subjective variables, is one of the main bases for reaching the above advantages.

Organizational politics based on personal relations, cooperation, interests, etc. create a preference for promoting workers similar to managers in their personal traits, gender, ethnicity, academic institution, place of residence, membership in various organizations and so forth. Using these characteristics in the promotion process, does not support diversity management and legal norms, or the corporate social responsibility. HRD professionals have to assimilate equal opportunity policy on the promotion decisions, and support the advancement of discriminated groups (See suggestions by Woodhams & Lupton, 2006).

The perception of the workers in our research that seniority is the second important factor (after politics) was found to be a major factor in promotion in public organizations (Vigoda, 2002; Vigoda & Kapoon, 2005). According to this, young talented workers will find it harder to progress in the public sector than in the private sector since the seniority is one of the most important factors in promotions. Seniority in the organization does not guarantee successful performance in an organization and the HRM have to balance between the promotion of young talented workers and senior experienced workers.

Promotions are a sensitive, emotionally loaded subject. Extensive use of non-rational considerations and a lack of transparency regarding promotions create anger, frustration and low performance (Baptiste, 2008) as well as a decrease in work performance, involvement and commitment and higher rates of absenteeism (Yu & Egri, 2005; McKay, 2004). Such a promotion process leads to turnover not only among the low level workers, (Lee et al., 2006) but also among the middle and top managers (Eby, Allen & Brinley, 2005; Saporta & Farjoun, 2003).

The mission of HR managers in the public sector is to insure that the career path planning will comply with the organization strategy and needs and to set objective requirements for each promotion. Hence, to assure that the workers, who contribute the most to the organization’s success, will be promoted, by developing and using

relevant criterions for promotions. Transparency of the promotion criterions and implementing performance appraisals based on achieving the main organizational goals, are necessary to maximize the organization's HR potential and minimize the nonobjective factors influencing the promotion decisions (especially organizational politics and pressure on the supervisor). In addition, it would be useful to use internal or external assessment centers to evaluate the potential and the abilities of workers, who are candidates for meaningful positions (managerial and technical) in the organization.

Global competition, together with the privatization process of the public sector in western countries, requires increasing efficiency of organizations, and obligates management to focus on improving the way in which promotions are determined. In addition to that, the increased sensitiveness to employees discrimination and moral issues in promotion decisions, cause more and more HR managers today, to consider the promotion processes as the main issue in corporate social responsibility (Fenwick & Bierema, 2008).

A survey such as this one, performed periodically in organizations, may help HRM professionals to identify patterns or changes in employees' (workers and managers) perceptions regarding the factors influencing promotions. Learning and development intervention can generate awareness among managers about non- relevant factors affecting their promotion decisions. With such intervention, managers will, hopefully, be able to focus on objective criteria regarding promotions to the mutual benefit of the company and the employees.

The aims of the final research (after expanding the survey) are: a) Discovering how demographic variables (age, gender, education, etc.) influence promotion factors perceptions. b) Discovering how different the perceptions are of private and public sectors employees, while referring to the different cultures and values of the organizations, and c) Examining the different perceptions of managers and workers about the factors influencing promotions in the public vs. the privet sector and their impact on employee's emotions and behavior. Promotion considerations in different types of organizations should provide more insight on the subject.

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