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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Initiatives for Training and Developing Soft Skills in the on the Job Training Programs of Public Organizations

Seyed Mojtaba Hashemian*



Assistant Professor,
Department of Management,
VaP.C., Islamic Azad
University, Varamin, Iran.

*Correspondence

Seyed Mojtaba Hashemian
E-mail: m.hashemian@iau.ac.ir

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T

Introduction

Human Resource Management (HRM) has become increasingly vital in today's corporate landscape. Broadly speaking, if we break down HR's core functions into recruitment, training & development, motivation, and retention, the area of training and development stands out. Its importance lies in its ability to build essential competencies and prepare employees to perform at their best amidst the growing complexity and fast-paced changes of the modern business environment.

Training and developing employees and managers has always been a cornerstone of effective HR. This is even more critical today, in a business landscape defined by constant change, the need for talent and knowledge management, and the understanding that people are the organization's most valuable asset. Because of this, there's a much stronger focus on the human element and on building a knowledge-driven culture.

It's now undeniable that an organization must not only attract and retain talent but also actively invest in developing it. This is why companies are pursuing more robust systems and frameworks dedicated to employee and manager training.

In this effort, developing the organization's leaders and managers is particularly crucial. Their growth is directly tied to the improvement of the entire company. By preparing leaders with the right knowledge, skills, and mindset, we empower them to steer the organization effectively. This leadership development ultimately creates a ripple effect, making a significant and measurable impact on both organizational results and the performance of their teams.

This is why developing employees' soft skills is so critical; it directly boosts both individual and organizational performance and is a key indicator of overall success. Given this, the central aim of this study is to pinpoint and outline a practical framework for training and developing managers and staff within Iran's public sector organizations.

Methodology

To describe its methodology, this study follows the "research onion" framework. It is an interpretive study with an applied-developmental orientation, using an inductive approach. Its primary objective is descriptive, and it adopts a qualitative methodology, specifically using a cross-sectional thematic analysis.

In simpler terms, this is a qualitative study that uses thematic analysis to identify and articulate key themes from the in-depth discussions with the participants.

The research involved experts with direct knowledge and experience in management and training, all

of whom had worked in the training departments of Iranian public sector organizations. A key participation criterion was a minimum of five years of experience in organizational training. This requirement was essential to ensure that the contributors had significant, firsthand experience with the specific issues being studied. Participants were selected through a purposive sampling method, designed to identify individuals who could provide the most insightful and information-rich perspectives.

This sampling process continued until data saturation was achieved, which resulted in a total of 20 participants being interviewed.

Given that this research aimed to gain a deep understanding of the participants' personal experiences and perspectives, interviews were chosen as the primary data collection method, as they were deemed most suitable for this purpose. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, guided by a pre-established set of key themes while allowing for flexibility in the conversation. All interviews were conducted in person, on an individual basis, and were scheduled in advance with the participants' full consent. The data was captured through meticulous note-taking by the interviewer during the sessions.

At the beginning of each interview session, the purpose and importance of the study were explained to the participant. We also guaranteed strict adherence to ethical guidelines, specifically assuring the complete confidentiality of all information shared. Once all interviews were finished, the collected data was carefully reviewed. The analysis was an ongoing process, running parallel to the data collection itself. We continued to select and interview new participants until we reached the 20th individual, at which point the data showed clear patterns of repetition and was deemed fully saturated.

Findings

We analyzed the data from the semi-structured interviews using thematic analysis. After each interview, we carefully read through the notes taken during the conversations. This helped the researcher build a thorough understanding of what the participants had shared. The first step was to perform an initial coding of all the interview notes.

Once the initial codes were established, we reviewed and refined them. We removed duplicate codes and merged those that were similar in meaning. This process resulted in 28 distinct sub-themes, which we refer to as basic themes.

The initial coding was done with a focus on theoretical sensitivity. This meant the researcher read the entire text word-for-word, line-by-line, and identified any segment that provided a meaningful answer to the research question. These key segments were highlighted and assigned a code.

Next, we looked for connections between the basic themes. We grouped those that were conceptually and semantically related, which allowed us to form broader categories, known as main or organizing themes.

The final step was to build a cohesive thematic map. We organized these main themes and their underlying basic themes into even broader, overarching categories called global themes. The resulting framework is presented in Table 2, which outlines the structure of 4 inclusive themes, 10 organizing themes, and 28 basic themes.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study was conducted to identify and formulate a framework of training and development measures for soft skills in the in-service training programs of public sector employees. Following the research procedure, the findings were consolidated. The results indicated that the aforementioned framework comprises 4 inclusive themes and 10 organizing themes.

The inclusive themes include:

1. Developmental Environment
2. Experience-Based Development
3. Job-Centric Development
4. Classic Training & Development Programs.

The organizing themes consist of: Development-Oriented Social Context, Developmental Technological Platforms, Developmental Relationships, Self-Development Initiatives, Assigned Missions and Projects, Developmental Restructuring, Control and Feedback Mechanisms, Formal Academic Training Programs, Classic In-Service Training, and Experience-Based In-Service Training.

Each inclusive theme, based on its nature and type, encompassed one or more subordinate themes, categorized as organizing themes. For instance, the inclusive theme "Developmental Environment" included more foundational themes such as: an organizational culture promoting learning, growth, and development; organizational memory and knowledge management systems; online and offline instructional media; and inter-university/inter-institutional educational and research networks.

As noted in the literature review, limited research has specifically focused on identifying and formulating training and development measures for managers and employees. The few existing domestic studies that have partially addressed this topic treated the identification of such measures as only a minor component of a broader research objective. Consequently, their findings regarding these measures have been limited, case-specific, overly general, and have failed to provide a relatively comprehensive and integrated framework.

The most significant value-added of this research lies in creating a relatively comprehensive and integrated framework encompassing a diverse spectrum of training and development measures applicable to managers and employees in both public and private sector organizations. This diverse and multifaceted spectrum includes self-development initiatives, environmental measures, organizational actions, and a variety of both traditional and modern methods, all formulated and presented within a single coherent framework.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that those involved in planning and implementing organizational training programs recognize and consider the distinct range of different training programs and the unique function of each. It is suggested that through short-term training sessions, program planners familiarize themselves with the outputs of this study to gain a more complete perspective on the diverse array of available training measures.

The reliance on traditional, conventional training methods—which are less active and participatory and more suited for knowledge transfer—should give way to a broader utilization of a diverse, modern, active, and more participatory range of methods. These methods should not only aim to enhance knowledge but also to upgrade skills and improve competencies related to attitudes and insights.

Furthermore, a key finding of this study emphasizes training and development measures and mechanisms defined beyond the classroom. Examples include "Developmental Restructuring," "Developmental Environment," and "Self-Development Initiatives." In essence, exclusive attention to classroom-based methods should be replaced by a wider spectrum of intra- and extra-curricular methods. Senior organizational managers should also pay attention to other contexts and grounds for enhancing employees' knowledge and insight, such as a developmental culture. Conversely, extra-curricular training methods should not be perceived merely as job-related instruction; more complex learning mechanisms facilitated by the environmental context should also be considered.

Another segment of the findings was categorized under experience-based educational solutions, including: experience-based storytelling, managerial experience transfer panels, thematic experience transfer panels, learning expeditions, collective discussion circles, critical reviews of films, books, articles, documentaries, organizational case studies, and purposeful organizational and management games. Given that a portion of organizational knowledge is not explicit but is, by definition, tacit knowledge, it is essential to utilize mechanisms and platforms like the aforementioned measures to create opportunities for discussion, dialogue, experience transfer, and the conversion of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge.

Specifically, it is recommended that the output of this research—the comprehensive framework of training and development measures—be utilized as a key input for designing the model of training and development programs for managers and employees.

KEY WORDS

Management, Development, Training, on the Job Training, Soft Skills.

