Employees' Satisfaction with Online Learning and Transfer of Training during Covid-19 in Saudi Universities

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Abstract

The present paper examines the current level of employees' satisfaction with the online learning and transfer of training during the COVID-19 pandemic. The available data confirms that the majority of Saudi universities' employees are satisfied with the transition to mixed methods and actively utilize them. At the same time, they recognize that they cannot fully substitute for traditional learning. The major challenges experienced by them and potential solutions are properly examined. As further digitalization and integration of online and traditional teaching methods is inevitable, additional training courses should be introduced for employees. The main priority should also be assigned to optimizing communication and interactions between employees and instructors, thus harmonizing the interests of all parties. Further reforms can effectively maximize employees' satisfaction, while ensuring the most effective organization of the training process under new conditions.

Keywords: transfer of training, employees' satisfaction, online learning, Saudi universities

Introduction

Transfer of training is one of the most significant aspects of human resource management (HRM) in the context of enhancing employees' performance and productivity (Olenick *et al.*, 2019). Training transfer allows achieving the better comprehension of the key knowledge and skills to be demonstrated by employees with the proportional positive impact on HRM professionals' decisions (Shen & Tang 2018). The current approaches to knowledge and skills' transfer appear to be highly non-uniform, implying the need to develop models that may enable the smooth transition to new employment practices (Iqbal & Dastgeer 2017).

The educational sector has proved to be one of socioeconomic spheres that were seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to health-related concerns, both employees and instructors had to transit to new modes of learning with the major focus on digitalization and distance activities. The present paper elaborates on the changed levels of employees' satisfaction with the transition to online courses during the pandemic among employees of Saudi universities. The integration of objective challenges and subjective perceptions of the universities may be highly important for better comprehending the scope of the problem and designing more effective solutions for increasing the sustainability of Saudi institutions of higher learning in the context of new pandemic-related threats (Chen &

Liu 2018). The most important aspect is finding sustainable approaches to adopting mixed learning methods that will successfully integrate the major advantages of both traditional and online learning. Most employees of Saudi universities are satisfied with the general organization of distance learning during the pandemic, although they admit that online learning cannot be viewed as a perfect substitute for traditional educational programs.

Previous Studies on Transfer of Training

The aspects of transfer of training constitute the major interest for experts and researchers in the sphere of HRM innovations. Na-Nan and Sanamthong (2020) demonstrate the close relationship between self-efficacy and employee job performance. On this basis, the higher motivation for the transfer of training can be promoted. The system of workplace support should be organized in a manner that will allow effectively transforming such relationships into more effective workplace management decisions. Shen and Tang (2018) demonstrate that transfer of training may be effective for improving the quality of services delivered. Moreover, job satisfaction can also be increased proportionally. Therefore, such practices can be especially applicable to the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic that has disrupted the traditional educational process in all institutions of higher learning.

Iqbal and Dastgeer (2017) stress the significance of motivation for transfer of learning that may largely affect the devotion demonstrated by members in this field. The properly organized process allows integrating the following major aspects: self-efficacy, training retention, and transfer of training. Such an approach can be successfully integrated with various organizational theories. Vignoli and Depolo (2019) claim that proactive personality can significantly facilitate the transfer of training. Therefore, personality characteristics should necessarily be evaluated when planning such interventions. In any case, the rational organization of the process can allow employees and HRM managers to reach some mutual agreement on the main issues.

Digitalisation of Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic created a situation when the traditional organization of the learning process had become impossible. While seeking to find the sustainable balance between health concerns and the delivery of quality educational services, Saudi universities initiated the large-scale campaign for transitioning toward more flexible and online courses (Abdulrahim & Mabrouk 2020). Instructors were required to optimise the entire process and organise educational programs in a manner that could allow attaining the set training objectives in the online and digital format. Despite the initial challenges, the large-scale reliance on the Internet and online technologies confirmed their high effectiveness in sharing the relevant information with employees and offering new training opportunities to them (George 2020). Virtual classrooms were also actively used for substituting traditional classrooms and enabling the productive interactions among employees (Chen & Liu 2018). They were effective to some degree, although some aspects of direct and offline communication between employees and instructors were not fully recreated in the online environment (Yang et al. 2019).

Study materials used by institute of public administration (IPA) and Saudi universities were also revised in a manner that could be better comprehended in the context of distance learning. As a result, employees were able to grasp the key ideas and properly integrate all learning activities in a way that would result in the steady progress in their academic knowledge and skills (Maheshwari 2021). All assignments were also adjusted in order to minimize the risks of any misunderstandings and problems for online trainee. The overall effectiveness of Saudi universities' transition to the new system was confirmed by the

positive perceptions expressed by most employees. According to Alsmadi et al. (2021), 63 per cent expressed their satisfaction with Internet and digital learning technologies available for them. They confirmed such tools as being more effective and convenient for them in terms of acquiring new knowledge and skills. In contrast, only 18 per cent of the employee's population expressed their dissatisfaction with such innovations, while 19 per cent remained neutral. Moreover, the vast majority of employee (75%) confirmed that it was easy for them to understand course materials in the digital format. Finally, 67% of all employee indicated their ability to properly understand all assignments and deal with them effectively (Alsmadi et al. 2021). Such results proved to be consistent among both male and female employee as well as both Saudi and non-Saudi students.

Employees' Satisfaction with Online Learning Practices

Employees' and instructor's satisfaction with the transition to online learning is crucial for objectively comprehending the major achievements and issues that still exist in this sphere (Tanis 2020). In particular, the questions of employees' mental readiness for such large-scale reforms as well as the availability of relevant skills for performing such functions properly constitute the main aspects of interest (Dutta 2020). The evaluation of their perceptions and the key problems experienced will indicate the major directions of future reforms and policy adjustments to be made. Regular training sessions were organized across Saudi Arabia to train the instructor's in terms of effectively organizing online learning practices and utilizing the available technologies to the maximum degree. In particular, the study by Paolo et al. (2017) indicates the high effectiveness of video learning materials for maximizing employees involvement and motivation for learning under such conditions. At the same time, Foster et al. (2018) stress the role of supportive language for creating the optimal micro-climate and environment for all learners.

The recent study by Chatta et al. (2022) offers the solid empirical foundation for examining the dominant perception of transition toward online education during the pandemic among employees of Saudi universities. The sample of 103 respondents is representative of the entire Saudi faculty due to the proportional involvement of both male and female professors as well as Saudi and non-Saudi residents. The questionnaire was used to collect the latest data on faculty members' perceptions of such transition Cronbach's Alpha equals 0.767, indicating the high degree of internal consistency of respondents' perceptions, thus contributing to the reliability of findings and implications made (Chatta et al. 2022).

The major empirical findings are as follows. First, the majority of instructor's (63%) are satisfied with taking online courses. Employees recognize the benefits of this method of learning under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic (Chatta et al. 2022). Moreover, they stress that the major benefits of online learning significantly outweigh any potential challenges or limitations that exist in this field. Second, 55% of employees from Saudi universities still prefer the regular organization of the teaching process, while 45% of employees agree that the mixed approach is optimal in the vast majority of cases. Third, the majority of employees and faculty members (83%) are convinced that online classes cannot replace regular classes in any meaningful manner. Therefore, they suggest that some elements of traditional education should necessarily be reintroduced once the situation is normalized in the country. Fourth, most employees (70%) admit that they did not have any prior experience of teaching online classes before the pandemic (Chatta et al. 2022). Despite the lack of experience, many of them proved to be effective in successfully applying digital technologies when delivering the quality educational services to their students (Radha et al. 2020).

The differences in employees' satisfaction have appeared to be insignificant in the context of a platform used during classes. In particular, Blackboard, Zoom, and other platforms demonstrated similar reactions and perceptions among Saudi faculty members. The empirical findings have proved to be statistically significant, indicating that they realistically describe the dominant perceptions among employees (Chatta et al. 2022). The professional organization of the transition to online learning accompanied with the help of professional digital instructors allowed professors and faculty members to demonstrate a sustainable progress and achieve the harmonization of all stakeholders' interests and needs (Xie et al. 2020).

Major Problems Faced by Employees and Ways to Address Them

Although the general tendency toward transitioning to online education and the utilization of digital technologies is highly positive, there are still considerable obstacles that negatively affect some employees' satisfaction (Al-Nuaimi et al. 2021). The first one is difficulties with successfully utilizing the latest technologies as well as successfully transitioning from earlier to current communication systems and online tools. Some faculty members face issues with delegating a considerable portion of their traditional work to technological operations. They may still prefer using traditional tools for delivering their messages and evaluating students' work. Such difficulties are especially widespread among those instructors and employees who had no prior experience of participating in online teaching activities. The optimal strategy for addressing such challenges refers to modifying the existing training courses and orienting them specifically to the needs and concerns expressed by every employee (Chen & Liu 2018). The most typical situations that regularly occur during online classes can be modelled, thus confirming the possibility of applying such technologies to solving current challenges of different types. Similar trainings and tutorials can also be introduced when universities initiate the transition to new technologies. Moreover, the results of the study by Chatta et al. (2022) regarding the absence of any significant impact of a specific technology used on employees' satisfaction implies that the most important aspect is rationally organizing the overall process of trainings and online education. As a result, regardless of technologies used, professors and employees will be satisfied, thus contributing to the maximization of educational standards in Saudi Arabia (Khalil et al. 2020).

The second one is the practical difficulties of effectively integrating traditional and online tools in a manner that will allow achieving the maximum synergic effects. Some employees may tend to face the dichotomy of choice between traditional and online tools without the proper consideration of potential opportunities for combining them in the most coherent manner (Dutton et al. 2019). Thus, most opportunities associated with the innovative integration of different channels of information delivery and students' involvement may not be used properly. In order to address such a problem, the major emphasis should be placed on actively utilizing the latest empirical findings that indicate the optimal approaches to integrating different communication methods. The evaluation of students' involvement and academic progress may also be helpful for making better-supported choices (George 2020). Moreover, there is no universal approach to integrate different sources in the most coherent manner as the structure of students' preferences and specifics of the course should necessarily be considered (Teräs et al. 2020). Thus, employees should develop a broader perspective on the problem and rely on a scientific method to arrive at ultimate practical implications.

The third one is the high degree of inequality observed in terms of obtaining and utilizing students' feedback. Some professors and employees are successful in generating the

maximum feedback that may be used for evaluating potential future reforms to be initiated in this sphere, while others cannot obtain even the minimum amount of feedback from students (Czerniewicz et al. 2019). As a result, it becomes more problematic to determine the existing weaknesses and identify the key directions of further improvements. In order to address such challenges in the most effective manner, employees should try to establish continuous contacts and interactions with students (Kibaru 2018). Technologies should serve as the major tools for improving communication between university employees and students (Alsmadi et al. 2021). Moreover, students should be able to provide their feedback on their learning experience in any convenient manner. Universities may also develop additional incentives to encourage all students to share their perceptions (including both positive and negative ones) (Dutton et al. 2019). In addition, practical recommendations of the most experienced and productive professors may also be helpful for outlining the general direction of future adjustments to be made at the university level to maximize students' involvement.

Methodology

The current scope of studies devoted to the transfer of training in Saudi Arabia and their application to the educational sector is highly insufficient. Accordingly, the methodological approach taken in this study is a review of the literature (Dubé and Paré, 2003). The qualitative methodology with the major emphasis placed on the literature review appears to be optimal in this regard because it allows integrating the available research on the topic and determining the major directions for addressing the question of employees' satisfaction during the transfer of training under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic (Shen & Tang, 2018). Moreover, such insights can also be relevant for the post-COVID-19 world, thus indicating the main directions for future policy improvements.

Recommendations

As the majority of employees of Saudi universities are highly satisfied with their online teaching experience, the general direction of such reforms' implementation should persist in the following months. The most important aspect is comprehending additional opportunities created by such technologies and applying them in a manner that can benefit both students and faculty members (Davis et al. 2019). At the same time, some general recommendations can be made to improve the perception of online teaching practices by employees and other stakeholders (Mishra et al. 2020). In particular, digital and online technologies should be viewed as complementary to traditional teaching approaches rather than their substitutes (Kebritchi et al. 2017). Mixed methods constitute the major industry trend that may become even more significant in the near future. While the actual balance between online and offline methods may be subject to change among universities and courses, all of them should be consistently used to deliver the quality educational services under the current conditions (Czerniewicz et al. 2019). The current globalization tendencies and the growing number of non-Saudi students and faculty members also indicate the need for using mixed methods to the maximum degree (Stone & Springer 2019).

Another recommendation refers to consistently integrating both objective indicators of academic and subjective perceptions of students and employees. On the one hand, the objective evaluation of the level of knowledge and skills demonstrated by students as well as their correspondence to the set learning goals is necessary (Hoq 2020). On the other hand, any significant and long-term improvements in this field should also be accompanied by positive perceptions shared by students and faculty members (Alsmadi et al. 2021). The

identification of any negative reactions or conflicts of interests should be examined at the university level with the evaluation of available opportunities for adjusting the teaching strategies used by target members. The quality of communication and interactions between students and instructors should be maintained at the highest possible level (Cox & Prestridge 2020). Different methods and tools should be combined with one another in order to maximize employees' and students' satisfaction with the application of relevant innovations.

Real-time databases and interactive indicators may be used to perform the continuous monitoring over all activities taken by participants with the possibility to identify any deviations from the expected patterns of performance and target academic outcomes. Moreover, supervisors can evaluate several potential scenarios of organizing the teaching process with the specification of the major benefits and potential risks (Hartley & McGaughey 2018). In this manner, better-supported decisions can be made (Adedoyin & Soykan 2020). The most important aspect is that such a system can also be successfully applied to the post-COVID-19 academic activities because it realistically reflects the dominant structure of all stakeholders' preferences and needs (Rapanta et al. 2020). Overall, employees' satisfaction should be viewed as one of the key determinants of academic development and sustainability for any Saudi university.

Conclusion

The provided analysis indicates that the COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated the transition to online learning in Saudi universities. Training courses for professors and employees proved to be helpful for increasing their awareness of the latest technologies and skills to apply them in the most coherent and student-oriented manner. The majority of faculty members confirm their successful transition to the new conditions. At the same time, they admit some problems associated with the comprehension of new digital methods, their successful integration with traditional teaching approaches, and the lack of feedback obtained from students in some cases. However, systematic reforms and adjustments can be implemented in order to address all of the above issues properly. The existing training available to employees should be adjusted to demonstrate the key benefits of new technologies as well as the major approaches to integrating them with traditional teaching methods. Universities may also encourage all employees to provide their feedback on their learning experience that may be used for establishing the key priorities for identifying and addressing any sources of potential misunderstandings. The most important aspect is that the maximum flexibility should be demonstrated in order to properly address all major concerns of concrete employees. In any case, the dominance of the mixed teaching methods may continue to increase in the following years, and the major efforts should be directed toward integrating the interests of all major stakeholder groups.

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