

Work Engagement of the Royal Thai Volunteer Rangers in the Fourth Army Area for the Security Mission in the Southern Border Provinces

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Abstract

Work engagement of performers lead to achievement of organization. This present work aims to 1) study the work engagement of volunteer rangers for the security mission in the southern border provinces 2) compare their work engagement based on demographic factors 3) investigate the influence of career commitment and work motivation on work engagement. The tools used to gather data were a questionnaire for 577 volunteer rangers in the fourth royal Thai army and 9 focus groups with a total of 58 volunteer rangers. The results revealed that the rangers' work engagement was at a high level. Differences based on demographic factors showed no differences in the level of work engagement. The findings also showed that career commitment and work motivation had a statistically significant positive correlation with work engagement ($p < .01$). However, only two out of three facets of career commitment (affective and normative) and both factors of work motivation (i.e., motivator and hygiene) explained 47.40 % of the rangers' work engagement. Additionally, the focus groups showed that to enhance work engagement, the commanders should emphasize the above mentioned factors as well as organizational commitment and military ideology for their work.

Keywords: Work engagement, volunteer ranger, the fourth royal Thai army area, security mission, southern border provinces

Background

South Thailand has been facing the insurgency situation for over 11 years since 2004. Therefore, in the period of 2005-2011, the Royal Thai Army approved the establishment of additional ranger regiments for the southern army area or the fourth royal Thai army area (The Royal Thai Army, 2007; 2011). Presently, there is a total of 9 ranger regiments from number 41 to 49. Consequently, the southern army area has more ranger forces than all the other army areas in Thailand combined. This increase is for the purpose of controlling and stopping the unrest situation in the southernmost provinces. Moreover, this reinforces the capacity of the army for intelligence and proactive public relation operations, which are the key success factors to win hearts and minds of people in this area. This also contributes to the community's cooperation and trust toward the Thai army. The increase in the ranger forces are mostly volunteer rangers. Both male and female Thai citizens from all over Thailand qualified and volunteered to work for the southern army. That is why the ranger forces are designated as the people's military (The Royal Thai Army, 2007).

However, some volunteer rangers do not really intend to work, have poor job performance and in less than one year they resign. Within 6 months, an average of 210-280 volunteer rangers from 9 ranger regiments quit their job. This leads to discontinuous operation and loss of budget of the Thai army in the case of admission, selection, training and other expenditures for new volunteer rangers (Plemjit, 2012). Moreover, the study about turnover cost revealed that if the employee resigns, the organization will lose around 50-150 percent of the employee's annual salary (Klaff, 2001). On the other hand, the employees who remain engaged in their work mean that they have a positive attitude, are fulfilled, have work-related state of mind towards the work and its value (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). They are also the energetic and dedicated employees who tend to have better performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Yalabik et al., 2013). A previous study revealed that the higher the level of work engagement of employees, the better is their in-and extra-role performance (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Heuven, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2008). Additionally, the employees who engage their work tend to have a lower rate of absenteeism (Thepwan, 2011). Furthermore, work engagement is negatively related to burnout (Lynch, 2007; Demerouti & Mostert, 2010) and also has an effect on intention to leave (Morrison & Lynch, 2007; Bakker &

Demerouti, 2008). These reduce human resource management cost of organization but increase efficient and effective performance of the employees (Cohen, 1998; Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). Therefore, work engagement is an important factor towards personal, work and organizational success.

For these reasons, the study of work engagement of the employees is very necessary in every organization. Especially, work engagement for the security mission in the southern border provinces of the royal Thai volunteer rangers in the fourth army area. Because this mission is urgent and of national importance, every Thai government in this decade have emphasized on it. In addition, the southernmost provinces ranger forces plan to enhance potential of ranger force by developing their organization and human resources (The Southernmost Provinces Ranger Force, 2011). However, current academic literature in the field of work engagement falls short in its application to ranger organizations. With the on-going insurgency in the three southernmost provinces in Thailand, it is crucial that the ranger regiment leadership ensure that their subordinates are engaged to their work under the security mission. This present study focuses on work engagement and the expected factors related to work engagement, i.e. demographic factors, career commitment and work motivation. It also aims to obtain empirical data, which can be used as guidelines for the human resources management policy in order to increase work engagement of the volunteer rangers. This would affect the ranger forces' mission and achievement in bringing back sustainable peace to the three southernmost provinces of Thailand.

Objectives

This study will specifically discuss three research objectives which are:

1. To study the work engagement of volunteer rangers for the security mission in the southern border provinces.
2. To compare the work engagement for the security mission in the southern border provinces based on demographic factors of volunteer rangers.
3. To predict work engagement of volunteer rangers for the security mission in the southern border provinces with career commitment and work motivation.

Research Methodology

This present study was a mixed methods design which combined quantitative and qualitative analysis. Collected data by using the convergent parallel design after receiving the consent from the fourth army area commander.

Quantitative design

Participants and procedures

The population of this study was 10,568 volunteer rangers and the sample was selected randomly by using a stratified random sampling in proportional sizes from 9 ranger regiments. Paper-based survey was used to collect data. The volunteer rangers completed the questionnaires at the location of their task forces of ranger regiment numbers 41-49 in the three southernmost provinces. A total of 630 questionnaires were given out and 577 valid questionnaires were returned with a 91.59 % response rate.

Measures

Each respondent was required to complete the questionnaire that is composed of three measures which are work engagement, career commitment and work motivation.

The work engagement scale adapted from Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) which developed by Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006), consist of 17 items on the three underlying dimensions of vigor (6 items), dedication (5 items), and absorption (6 items). Items are rated on a 5-point rating scale (1-5) ranging from very low, low, average, high and very high.

The career commitment measured three-component scale of affective, normative and continuance developed by Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993). It included 18 items, divided into 6 items for each component. Responses were made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree and strongly agree.

The work motivation scale followed the Herzberg's Two-Factor Theory (Ivabceovich, Konopaske & Matteson, 2011). This measure consisted of 26 items, while 12 items were used to measure motivators and 14 items were used to measure hygiene factors. A 5-point rating scale (1-5) ranging from very low, low, average, high and very high was used.

All the statements for every measurement were modified to fit the royal Thai volunteer rangers. In addition, the survey instrument also captured several demographic variables which are gender, age, educational level, hometown, work duty, tenure, and experience in fighting

Validity and reliability analysis

Content validity of the measurement items of all variables, was assessed by the expert opinions of one higher level officer of the southernmost provinces ranger forces and two professors from universities who are research specialists in mixed method research and organizational behavior disciplines. The scale was then pretested with 40 volunteer rangers. These participants were not included in the final study. The reliability or Cronbach's alpha ranged between 0.926 and 0.932 for work engagement measures, between 0.751 and 0.812 for career commitment measures, between 0.895 and 0.935 for work motivation measures. These values provided a form of confidence of the data gathered and its results because of their proven track record and the valid reliability was greater than 0.7. The alpha value of 0.7 is often considered the criterion for internally consistent established scale (Nunnally, 1976).

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics, t test, One-way ANOVA, correlation coefficient, and stepwise multiple regression analysis were used. Data processing was done using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer program.

Qualitative design

Participants and procedures

The tools used to gather the information were focus groups' discussions with volunteer rangers from 3 regiments, the 41, 43 and 45 ranger regiments. These regiments were chosen because they have been established for a long time and have been operating continuously in the southernmost provinces. They also have volunteer rangers who retired at the age of 45 and 60 years.

The 3 focus groups' discussions in each regiment composed of male volunteer rangers who retired at the age of 60 years, and those who retired at the age of 45 years, and female volunteer rangers who retired at the age of 45 years. The participants are volunteer rangers who have been working more than one year and

have fighting experience, totaling 9 focus groups discussion, and 58 volunteer rangers.

Measures

The scope of the questions in the focus groups' discussions composed of career commitment, work motivation, work engagement and the relationship between these factors.

Data analysis

The contents of the discussion groups were analyzed and compared with the findings from the quantitative survey.

Findings

The 577 volunteer rangers who completed the questionnaires consisted of 439 men and 138 women, mostly younger than 30 years. The majority of the respondents have a high school degree or equivalent, their hometowns are in southern Thailand but not in the 3 southernmost provinces (Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat). 299 volunteer rangers are responsible for operation, 121 for civil affairs, 106 for general service and logistics, 51 for intelligence. Years of service of the majority are less than 5 years. Most of them had no experience in fighting the unrest in the three southernmost provinces. The results from the study revealed that the mean value for overall work engagement of the volunteer rangers is at the high level ($\bar{X} = 3.99$, S.D.= 0.58). Total dedication facet showed the highest mean value ($\bar{X} = 4.05$, S.D.= 0.77), then vigor facet ($\bar{X} = 3.99$, S.D.= 0.58) and absorption facet ($\bar{X} = 3.97$, S.D. = 0.62). All participants from the focus group discussions confidentially stated that they have work engagement for security mission, are dedicated to do this work and most of them referred to the sense of vigor and absorption.

Demographic factors of the volunteer rangers, i.e. gender, age, educational level, hometown, work duty, tenure, and experience in fighting showed no significant differences in work engagement for the security mission. The finding from the focus group discussions also found the same results.

The findings showed that career commitment and work motivation had a statistically significant positive correlation with work engagement ($p < .01$). After examining the relationship among all the independent variables, the results showed that multicollinearity was not a problem. Stepwise multiple regression was used to investigate the factors that influence work engagement. The finding indicated that 4 out of 5 factors involved in the work engagement’s prediction equation are motivator factor of work motivation ($B = .346$, $p < .001$), affective career commitment ($B = .206$, $p < .001$), hygiene factor of work motivation ($B = .169$, $p < .001$), and normative career commitment ($B = .084$, $p < .001$). These four factors significantly predicted work engagement ($R^2 = 0.474$, $F = 5.440$, $p < 0.001$) and together accounted for 47.40 percent of variance.

Table 1: Stepwise multiple regression analysis predicting work engagement of the volunteer rangers for the security mission in the southern border provinces.

Predictor variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	p
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.988	.146		6.760	.000***
motivator factor of work motivation	.346	.041	.358	8.335	.000***
affective career commitment	.206	.027	.204	6.261	.000***
hygiene factor of work motivation	.169	.037	.249	5.560	.000***
normative career commitment	.084	.036	.087	2.332	.000***

$R = .688$ $R^2 = .474$ $R^2_{adj} = .470$ $SE_{est} = .41966$ $F \text{ Change} = 5.440$
 *** $p < 0.001$

Additionally, the focus group discussions found that aside from the 4 above mentioned factors, organizational commitment and military ideology for their work also influenced work engagement. Most of the volunteer rangers in every focus group discussion stated that they feel committed to their ranger regiments and they work with the sense of following their military ideology. They look at being a volunteer ranger not only as a job to do but as a profession which they can be proud of and find dignity in. These motivate them to fully engage in their work.

Discussions

Work engagement of the volunteer rangers is at a high level. This result is consistent with the result from qualitative analysis. All rangers who participated in the focus group discussions emphasized the facet of dedication because they wanted to be volunteer rangers with no compulsion from anybody. So, they have willingness to invest their effort to work and are happy to work in order to achieve the security's mission. Differences based on demographic factors showed no differences in the level of work engagement. These results are consistent with the results from the focus group discussions. It is also consistent with published work which reported that none of the demographic characteristics were significant predictors of work engagement (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2009). It can be explained that although the volunteer rangers have differences in demographics, but they are resolved to do the same mission, they have the same goal, help solve the problems and keep security for the southernmost provinces of Thailand, so their work engagement is alike.

Furthermore, career commitment and work motivation had a statistically significant positive correlation with work engagement ($p < .01$). Two out of three facets of career commitment, affective and normative, and both facets of work motivation which are motivator and hygiene explained 47.40 % of the rangers' work engagement. Other factors might influence work engagement of volunteer rangers as the focus groups' discussions found more factors, i.e. organizational commitment and military ideology for work. These results are also consistent with previous findings that reported the relationship and influence of career commitment on work engagement (Crutchfield, 2010), including the studies that indicated the relationship and influence of work motivation on work engagement (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008; Vandenberg, Bakker, & Cate, 2013). Career commitment shows the bonds which tie individuals to their career and this attachment may lead them to engage to do their work. In addition, work motivation is a set of energetic forces to initiate work-related behavior and to determine its form, direction, intensity and duration (Pinder, 2008). So, if the volunteer rangers have work motivation, this strong effort may lead them to engage to do their work until the goal is achieved.

Recommendations

Understanding the context of work engagement for the security mission of the volunteer rangers as well as the factors that influence it are imperative to support the management of senior commanders. From this current study the recommendations to the senior commanders in the Fourth Royal Thai Army Area for enhancing volunteer rangers' work engagement are as follow:

1. Make every effort to reinforce affective career commitment in order to make volunteer rangers commit and value a deep sense of involvement with their work and desire to remain in their career. By instilling the value and positive attitude as well as the sense of maintaining and protecting the dignity of the volunteer rangers profession.

2. Reinforce normative career commitment to make volunteer rangers have a sense of obligation to their security duties in the southernmost provinces. By giving knowledge and signifying that their career is valued and important toward the country. In addition they can instill positive attitude for developing themselves to be professional volunteer rangers.

3. Emphasize and focus on both factors, motivator and hygiene, of work motivation which can lead to the rangers' deeper engagement and satisfaction in their work. The hygiene factor can be enhanced by making the volunteer rangers' employment permanent instead of temporary and extending the retirement age; and giving the rangers room for advancement strengthens the motivator

4. Improve organizational commitment of their volunteer rangers. In the selection process ranger regiments need to scan applicants with organizational commitment in view and gauge the potential volunteer rangers' attitude toward the ranger organization. In addition constantly communicate about the mission and goals of ranger regiment to the volunteer ranger, simultaneously promoting unity and loyalty to the organization.

5. Strengthen the ranger' military ideology for their work as part of their core competence and for the rangers to realize the sacrificial nature of their works and its utmost importance for the country's security and sovereignty.

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