A Leadership Intervention Targeting Job Satisfaction Among ABA Practitioners

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Abstract

Organizational culture shapes workplace dynamics and employee relations. Leaders contribute to this by setting the parameters for behavioral expectations and modeling them. In this pilot study, it was hypothesized that a motivational email would increase job satisfaction and increase completion rates of clinical notes. Pretest posttest T-tests were performed to determine significant differences between scores in the experimental and control group. The results indicated a significant difference in job satisfaction when receiving a positive motivational email. The completion of clinical notes increased and there was a significant difference in completing clinical notes when receiving a positive motivational email. The findings of this study aligned with the current literature available on the topic of employee job satisfaction. Using these findings to make shifts in the way an organization operates and provides a positive work environment for their employees will yield happier employees who have a higher level of performance.

Keywords: applied behavioral analysis, leadership in psychology, job satisfaction, organizational culture

Organizational culture shapes and molds workplace dynamics. Individuals in leadership set parameters for the type of behavior that is expected within the office setting and how it should be carried out. Organizational culture can impact job satisfaction, performance and company outcomes, staff morale, retention, and progress toward target goals (Longman, et al. 2018; Warrick, 2017). Warrick (2017) suggested that many corporations do not realize the implications of these actions and their ramifications until it is too late and valuable workers have been lost to rival companies. They stressed the need for leaders to build and maintain a stable and flexible organizational culture. Doing so can lead to positive responses from and between workers and an overall welcoming atmosphere (Warrick, 2017).

Individuals' feelings about their performance can also impact their perception of satisfaction. Providing a means to share knowledge and to feel like a part of a larger unit and team can increase workplace satisfaction (Froman 2010; Papachristopoulos & Xanthopoulou, 2019). Venkataramani et al. (2013) defined workplace satisfaction through favorable ties with colleagues and with upper management and whether team members feel they are supported and can approach others for advice. If the culture encourages aspirations to expand and build on professional development, then many employees can and will. However, in the absence of such support, staff personnel feel a lack of incentive to continue their pursuits and focus instead on moving their careers to different venues which do support such goals. Therefore, the need for management to create a career path for those seeking such movement is key in developing productive workplace culture and career success across the board (Alas & Mousa, 2016; Wang, et al. 2019; Yalabik, et al. 2017). While research on workplace satisfaction is expansive (Dhamija, et al. 2019; Epton, et al. 2017), little is known about the underpinnings of occupational behavior and satisfaction in the field of applied behavior analysis (ABA), and organizations are not applying behavioral analysis interventions to motivate their staff (Ludwig, 2015, p. 606).

This pilot study measured job satisfaction among thirty-one individuals working in an Applied Behavior Analysis program. The aim of this study was to analyze the impact of a tool intending to increase job satisfaction and the completion of job duties. This was a motivational email containing both positive reinforcement statements and information from Scientific Journals. The following research questions were answered:

1. Does a positive motivational email sent to practitioners working in an Applied Behavior Analysis program (Board Certified Behavior Analysts, Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts, Registered Behavior Technicians, Behavior Interventionists) increase job satisfaction?
2. Does a positive motivational email sent to practitioners working in an Applied Behavior Analysis program (Board Certified Behavior Analysts, Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts, Registered Behavior Technicians, Behavior Interventionists) increase their completion of clinical notes?
3. Do practitioners working in an Applied Behavior Analysis program (Board Certified Behavior Analysts, Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts, Registered Behavior Technicians, Behavior Interventionists) who receive positive motivation emails have a higher rate of completed clinical notes than those who do not receive positive motivational emails?

Literature Review

An effective company can build on its employees' capabilities and promote accordingly, allow team members to interact and share knowledge, and serve as a repository and overseer for these personnel members (Caruso, 2017, Hoever, et al., 2018; Lacerenza, et al., 2018). Employees often do not volunteer knowledge or experience unless directly asked; without managerial encouragement, they may not perform at their highest possible potential, which can create a losing situation for companies (who do not benefit from this knowledge) and employees, who could feel more secure in their positions by way of demonstrating their skillsets (Caruso, 2017). In Caruso's view, then, organizational culture must foster an environment which is largely built upon the acquisition and sharing of knowledge at all levels, including those gained through training seminars, life experiences, and interchanges with others (Caruso 2017).

Likewise, having a relationship with teammates at all levels, including supervisors, is integral for company success. Webb Day et al. (2014) note the need for effective communication between supervisors and subordinates in this context including the recognition of high performing individuals and accompanying compensation. While discussions concerning salary and compensation are certainly essential, it is equally important (if not more so) for supervisors to acknowledge and draw attention to exemplary productivity; positive feedback can enhance employee self-esteem, lead to rewards (both tangible and intangible) and even lead to merit increases. Hence, placing an emphasis on common ground is helpful to open-up such dialogs. Tools such as motivational emails with positive reinforcement statements and information from scientific journals that will help staff in their job, in which all parties are permitted to give voice to questions, comments, and concerns, can also be of merit in this undertaking and can create an atmosphere of trust in corporate leadership too, which adds a further layer of loyalty and satisfaction since they would feel more secure in their positions and less likely to be blindsided by unexpected layoffs or company closures (Webb Day et al, 2014).

Some attention has been placed upon the relevance and correlation of workplace interactivity, productivity, culture, tangible reward systems, and how these elements conjoin to form the basis for employee happiness overall (Froman, 2010; Salah, 2016). These constructs are critical to business success as they aid in retention, thereby reducing business costs in recruiting and training new hires; moreover, it also underscores the notion that the company is a desirable setting based upon the experiences of those involved (Froman, 2010). Feedback to and from upper management combined with the judicious usage of positive psychology can support how a business formulates its unique branding. Organizational culture can also encourage unity among teammates and can glean a greater sense of accomplishment within their tasks (Froman, 2010; Salah, 2016). By providing a motivational email to ABA program practitioners, it is hypothesized that they could feel a greater sense job satisfaction.

Materials and Methods

This pilot study is a quantitative experimental research design. Experimental research is a scientific approach to research, where one or more independent variables are manipulated and applied to one or more dependent variables to measure their effect on the latter (Bryman, 2012). Scientific studies also allow for either a controlled experiment and or the use of surveys that are customary and isolate the cause-and-effect relationships, while at the same time, scheming unrelated variables (Tsang, 2014). Administering an experimental research

design helps to implement a scientific approach to answering the research questions and testing the hypothesis while providing insight into the phenomenon in a cost-effective and time-efficient manner (Bryman, 2012). Due to the dearth of research in this area, a pilot study was conducted to determine if this is a viable line of inquiry, warranting a full-scale experiment.

Participants

The participants for this study (N=31) were comprised of a convenience sample of adults who self-reported as male, female, or non-binary, who provide Applied Behavior Analysis services to children with Autism, Intellectual Disability, ADHD, and other behavioral health needs. For this study, the participants must be in the United States and be social media users. No other restrictions apply.

The participants for this study were invited to participate in the survey via an advertising post on www.LinkedIn.com, a professional networking platform and sent to individuals who post on social media that they are employed in the field of Applied Behavior Analysis. The general population throughout this study was sampled, with no restrictions, based on sex, race, ethnicity, or other factors. The location of the participants was online and voluntary. To secure confidentiality, the online survey did not ask for any identifying information such as their name. The data was entered and secured in a google sheet that is password protected with a Business Associate Agreement to prevent anyone other than the researcher accessing the information. Data will be kept for a minimum of 5 years, at which time it will be destroyed based on the National Institute of Standards and Technology Guidance on best practices for clearing, purging, and destroying research data.

Once a participant granted consent, they were sent the direct survey link to take a pre-test that scored overall job satisfaction and any areas where they felt that they may be challenged or struggling. Participants were then contacted via an email including a review of the details of the study. Once those items had been verified and confirmed, the organized participants' contact information was organized into an excel spreadsheet. Since participants did not share their personal information and only responded with an email address, identifying information was not used on the confidential research material. Candidates subsequently were referenced using their email addresses rather than names or other details to prevent any accidental disclosures of their identities. That added step allowed participants to feel secure that their replies were truly confidential and would be held as such.

Participants' responses to the background and demographic questions were collected. Most participants (68%) were male, with 26% of participants female, 3% (N=1) reported as non-binary. The respondents identified as white or Caucasian (84%), 3 % (N=1) identified as Native American, and 10 % (N=3) of participants were of the Black/African American ethnicity.

Participants were also asked for highest level of education completed. Forty nine percent reported they had a bachelor's degree, while 16.1% had some college credit with no degree, and 16.1% reported they have an Associate degree as their highest education. A small number of participants (N=1) reported they have some high school with no diploma or a high school diploma (N=1). Finally, 12.8% (N=4) reported to have completed a graduate program and have a master's degree.

Instruments

After providing demographic information, the participants completed a pretest and survey. The pretest utilized was the Abridged Job Descriptive Index, which is a valid and reliable measure (Guidroz, et al. 2010; Inoyatova, 2021) published by Bowling Green State University (2009). Additionally, a survey questionnaire was administered containing several measurement scales. The selected scales are attached as Appendix A (A bridged Job Descriptive Index), and Appendix B (Research Interview Questions). The Abridged Job Descriptive Index may be downloaded and used without special permissions and is frequently used by academic and organizational researchers to measure employee attitudes such as job satisfaction. The first six questions relate to demographics including the participants identified gender, current age, occupation, job title, highest degree obtained, subject area of highest degree. The seventh question asks the participant to rank their preference of content in a motivational email. The eighth question asks if the practitioner would like to have weekly emails as part of their workplace culture. Each motivational email sent during the study had two parts. The first part included positive reinforcement statements (i.e., You're doing a great job providing ABA services to your client!) The second part of the email included information from a scientific journal on ABA best practices.

Procedure

Participants were split in half and randomly assigned to two groups (N1=15, N2=16), the experimental (trial) group and the control group did not receive an intervention. The experimental group was sent a weekly motivational email for 6 weeks. Data was collected using pretest and posttests. Responses from the Abridged Job Descriptive Inventory and Research Interview Questions were collected from all participants and scored.

Analysis

Statistical tests were performed to determine if there were significant differences between pretest and posttest scores in the experimental and control group. Descriptive analysis was performed, and data was then coded and entered on a spreadsheet. Once data was organized into a spreadsheet, it was then entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The independent observations were collected from two random samples, each sample was checked for normality and equal variance. With these conditions met, despite a small sample size in each group and overall, a t-test was performed to determine any pre-posttest differences in the groups as there is not a defined lower limit to sample sizes in t-tests (De Winter, 2013). Pretest posttest T-test was run using SPSS version 26. These statistical tests will be performed to determine significant differences between pretest and post test scores in the experimental and control group.

Results

RQ1. Does a positive motivational email sent to practitioners working in an Applied Behavior Analysis program (Board Certified Behavior Analysts, Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts, Registered Behavior Technicians, Behavior Interventionists) increase job satisfaction?

The Null Hypothesis (H1o) was rejected, as the findings supported the significance in difference in job satisfaction when receiving a positive motivational email. Job Satisfaction

was the tested variable among the experimental group for pre-test, post-test, paired t-test. Overall, the model explained a significance (2-tails) at .002 (Table 1).

RQ2. Does a positive motivational email sent to practitioners working in an Applied Behavior Analysis program (Board Certified Behavior Analysts, Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts, Registered Behavior Technicians, Behavior Interventionists) increase their completion of clinical notes?

The Null Hypothesis (H2o) was rejected, as the findings supported the significance in difference in the completion of clinical notes when receiving a positive motivational email. The completion of clinical notes was the tested variable among the experimental group for pre-test, post-test, paired t-test. Overall, the model explained a significance (2-tails) at .009 (Table 2).

RQ3. Do practitioners working in an Applied Behavior Analysis program (Board Certified Behavior Analysts, Board Certified Assistant Behavior Analysts, Registered Behavior Technicians, Behavior Interventionists) who receive positive motivation emails have a higher rate of completed clinical notes than those who do not receive positive motivational emails?

The Null Hypothesis (H3o) was rejected, as the findings supported the significance in difference in the completion of clinical notes when receiving a positive motivational email. The completion of clinical notes was the tested variable among the experimental group versus the control group for post-test, paired t-test. Overall, the model explained a significance (2-tails) at .005 (Table 3).

Table 1
Job Satisfaction Experimental Pre-Test Versus Job Satisfaction Experimental Post-Test

		Paired Samples Test					
		Paired Differences **95% Confidence Interval of the Difference**	T	df	Significance		
		Upper			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
Pair 1	Job Satisfaction Experimental Pre – Job Satisfaction Experimental Post	-8.84158	-3.649	18	<.001	.002

Table 2

Notes Completion Experimental Pre-Test Versus Notes Completion Experimental Post-Test

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	T	Significance
		Upper		Two-Sided p
Pair 1	Notes Control Post – Notes Experimental Post	-6.77680	-3.447	.005

Table 3

Notes Completion Control Group Post-test versus Notes Completion Experimental Post-test

Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	t	df	Significance	
		Upper			One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
Pair 1	Notes Experimental Pre – Notes Experimental Post	-6.35521	-2.935	18	.004	.009

Discussion

The findings were such that when a positive motivation email was sent to practitioners in an ABA program, their job satisfaction increased from pretest to posttest with a significance of

.002. Additionally, these same practitioners that received a positive motivational email increased their completion of clinical notes from pretest to posttest with a significance of .009. When comparing the completion of clinical notes as the tested variable among the experimental group who received a positive motivational email versus the control group who did not receive a positive motivational email, the results explained a significance at .005.

When participants were asked if they would like to have weekly emails as part of their workplace culture, the results varied between the control and experimental groups. The control group responded with 50% of them desiring to have a weekly email, whereas the experimental group responded with 84% of them desiring to have a weekly email. Overall, 71% of participants reported a desire to have weekly emails as part of their workplace culture. Participants were asked if they prefer to receive a motivational email with a positive reinforcement statement (i.e., You're doing a great job with your client!) or a motivational email with information from a scientific journal. A total of 44% of participants stated they would prefer an email with a positive reinforcement statement, whereas 55% of participants stated they would prefer a scientific journal in their motivational email.

Research has touched upon the positive and negative aspects of occupational functioning and the overreaching impact on employees' lives, including favorable results from managerial praise and peer recognition, the drop in morale when supervisors do not acknowledge contributions, and the need for incorporating tools into the business which expand upon talents, abilities, and morale (Froman, 2010; Hoever, et al. 2018; Mashhadi, et al. 2016; Papachristopoulos & Xanthopoulou, 2019; Salah, 2016). This study aimed to build upon the literature available and found that indeed incorporating tools as simple as a positive motivational email can increase job satisfaction as well as the completion of job duties. Capitalizing on these areas can serve the corporation's best interests in conjunction with lifting team spirit; these perks can serve as their rewards. Different forms that feedback delivery can take and how each of those forms can alter an employee's performance adversely or favorably, as well as changing or influencing how the employees view the company, their peers, and their supervisor. A virtuous organization is one that considers and cultivates individual experience, knowledge base, emotional adaptability, and unique capabilities and differences. This approach demands powerful company leadership which models the behavior that they desire, but which also adheres to a strict moral code in tandem with a clear ethical background (Froman 2010). Upper-level leadership can spearhead the type of performances and behaviors which they would like to see from their personnel and can be instrumental in creating the kind of workspace that they would like to see enacted.

This study can be used to generate meaningful change in organizational and workplace culture, especially in Applied Behavior Analysis organizations. Higher levels of job satisfaction, can translate to higher levels of productivity. This is also of utmost importance with the increasing need for Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) services and the availability, or lack thereof to assist all those in need of services.

Considering the intensive and one-to-one nature of ABA-based services, (Behavior Analyst Certification Board, 2014) as well as the latest reported prevalence rates of ASD, which estimate 1 in 59 children in the USA received the diagnosis (Baio, et al. 2018), there is an increasing need for ABA providers. Turnover rates for community-based direct-care staff working with individuals with developmental disabilities have long been problematic and reported as high as 70.7% to 77% per year (Kazemi, et al. 2015; Wine, et al. 2020). In line with the health care industry, there is a loss of productivity and costs of hiring and training

new staff which places a financial burden on providers (Novak & Dixon, 2019). High turnover also negatively impacts the current employees' morale and workload as experienced staff are replaced by untrained staff (Sulek et al. 2017). Finally, frequent turnover may disrupt the continuity of services, which may potentially hurt patients' progress in treatment and the organization's reputation in the community. This study should provide a basis for further research on how to cultivate job satisfaction among ABA practitioners to lower turnover and understaffing rates in the field. Stakeholders can benefit from the results of this study by way of companies saving money (therefore increasing payouts for shareholders), more productive workers, and a community that favorably views the company.

A major limitation of this pilot study is the small sample size and potential for confounding variables such as inner motivation or personal stressors which can also impact motivation. Additionally, many of the participants identified as white and male. In so much, the findings from this study are not generalizable to broader populations. Future research efforts should focus on recruiting a more diverse and representative sample. As this quantitative study focused on the measurement of job satisfaction, a more robust description of the participants' experiences and evaluative processes was not captured, and future studies could utilize a tool less dichotomous in nature. Future research could isolate and standardize a motivational email as a tool. Finally, a qualitative design could offer insight to better conceptualize variables that impact job satisfaction.

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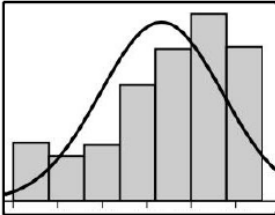ownership of one's job explains positive and negative workplace outcomes of job engagement. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 104*(2), 229–246. https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000337

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Appendix A

Abridged Job Descriptive Index

People on Your Present Job

Think of the majority of people with whom you work or meet in connection with your work. How well does each of the following words or phrases describe these people? In the blank beside each word or phrase below, write

Y   for "Yes" if it describes the people with whom you work
N   for "No" if it does not describe them
?   for "?" if you cannot decide

....

___ Boring
___ Slow
___ Responsible
___ Smart
___ Lazy
___ Frustrating

Job in General

Think of your job in general. All in all, what is it like most of the time? In the blank beside each word or phrase below, write

Y   for "Yes" if it describes your job
N   for "No" if it does not describe it
?   for "?" if you cannot decide

....

___ Good
___ Undesirable
___ Better than most
___ Disagreeable
___ Makes me content
___ Excellent
___ Enjoyable
___ Poor

ABRIDGED JOB DESCRIPTIVE INDEX

2009 Revision

including

Abridged Job in General Scale

BGSU®

Bowling Green State University

The Job Descriptive Index
© Bowling Green State University
1975-2009

The Job In General Scale
© Bowling Green State University
1982-2009

Work on Present Job

Think of the work you do at present. How well does each of the following words or phrases describe your work? In the blank beside each word or phrase below, write

Y   for "Yes" if it describes your work
N   for "No" if it does not describe it
?   for "?" if you cannot decide

....

___ Fascinating
___ Satisfying
___ Good
___ Exciting
___ Rewarding
___ Uninteresting

Pay

Think of the pay you get now. How well does each of the following words or phrases describe your present pay? In the blank beside each word or phrase below, write

Y   for "Yes" if it describes your pay
N   for "No" if it does not describe it
?   for "?" if you cannot decide

....

___ Barely live on income
___ Bad
___ Well paid
___ Underpaid
___ Comfortable
___ Enough to live on

Opportunities for Promotion

Think of the opportunities for promotion that you have now. How well does each of the following words or phrases describe these? In the blank beside each word or phrase below, write

Y   for "Yes" if it describes your opportunities for promotion
N   for "No" if it does not describe them
?   for "?" if you cannot decide

....

___ Good opportunities for promotion
___ Opportunities somewhat limited
___ Dead-end job
___ Good chance for promotion
___ Fairly good chance for promotion
___ Regular promotions

Supervision

Think of the kind of supervision that you get on your job. How well does each of the following words or phrases describe this? In the blank beside each word or phrase below, write

Y   for "Yes" if it describes the supervision you get on the job
N   for "No" if it does not describe it
?   for "?" if you cannot decide

....

___ Praises good work
___ Tactful
___ Influential
___ Up to date
___ Annoying
___ Knows job well

(Go on to next page)   (Go on to back page)

Research Interview Questions

Demographics:
1) What is your identified gender?
2) What is your current age?
3) What is your occupation
4) What is your job title?
5) What is the highest degree that you have obtained (High school diploma, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, or Doctorate)
6) What is the subject of your highest degree (eg Psychology, Applied Behavior Analysis)

Motivational Email Preference:

7) Rank the following items in the order that you would prefer to receive in a

motivational email (1=preferred the most; 2=preferred the least)

___Positive reinforcement statement (i.e. You're doing a great job with your

client!)

___Information from a scientific journal

8) Would you like to have weekly emails as part of your workplace culture?