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Quantitative Research Methods

Project Report on the
research topic: Impact of
character to corporate
efficiency and performance
in Asian context

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Title: Project Report on the research topic: Impact of character to corporate efficiency and performance in Asian context

This project report illustrates the development of a survey instrument and research strategy (including sampling and analysis) to test hypotheses related to character strength and corporate efficiency. The instrument was pretested and checked for robustness with academic expert. The instrument, the outcomes of the pretest and research strategy are presented in the content below. The issues regarding the academic context, literature review, methodology, and findings are addressed one by one.

1. Academic context

The academic knowledge base of this research is management. The discipline is business and the subdiscipline is organisational behavior. The concept this paper discuss is “Character in Leadership”, according to the literature reviews, the term this paper use is “Character Strength”. The corporate context of this paper research is both in commercial and non-profit organizations setting in Asia. Data collection is through on-line questionnaire. The theoretical framework of this paper starts with hypotheses, definitions of concept, then it discusses about the research design, follow by interpretation and analysis, and finally it concludes with generalization according to the findings.

The business background of this study is our world has lost trust on corporate leaders because of various business scandals happened since 2008 e.g. Lehman Brothers. Head of McKinsey & Co.’s Global Consulting relates this result to the decision made by leaders which was influenced by the their characters: “When we think about leadership, we focus too much on what leaders do . . . and we don’t spend enough time on who leaders are — the character of leaders” (Sosik, Gentry, Chun, 2012). According to Sosik, Gentry, Chun, “Character” is being undervalued although corporate leaders acknowledge it is an important element in leadership. There is concerns that contemporary corporate environment rewards managers only according to their business results. However, there are strong voices that staff well-being is being neglected, business plans and result are short-term focused. Unfavorable consequences only come into light sometime later. It is also a common phenomenon that leaders who deliver business results with low staff engagement scores. With this business backdrop, the objective of this study is to examine the importance of “Character” by studying the relationship between “Character Strength” with corporate efficiency, which includes performance, staff engagement and well-being, etc.

Several scholars also pointed out this research topic has academic importance and there is very limited empirical research in this area. For example, Wright and Goodstein introduced that strength of character is an important organizational research topic and this topic is largely untapped in applied research (Wright and Goodstein, 2007). Besides,

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualisation

What is Character, the concept definition

According to Wright and Huang, character (ethos) refers to habitual qualities within individuals, and applicable to organizations that both bind and lead them to prefer and pursue personal and societal good (Wright and Huang, 2008).

According to Kish-Gephart et al, employees with low moral character committes harmful work behaviors more frequently and demonstrates helpful work behaviors less frequently. They are also more easy to engage in delinquent behavior and tends to be more lenient towards unethical negotiation tactics (Kish-Gephart et al., 2010). Harzer and Ruch also highlighted that Character Strengths are trainable. Therefore, this topic is worth studying for individual and corporate benefits (Harzer and Ruch, 2015).

Character and performance

Kiel has used seven years to study about 9,000 employees and 84 executives at Fortune 500 corporates from 100 organizations. He concluded that character-driven leaders and their teams deliver five more times of returns than "self-focused" leaders. This finding can help corporates to refocus their strategy, improve employee morale, and even earning customer loyalty (Kiel, 2015).

Harzer and Ruch's study indicates that possession of certain Character Strengths contribute to more productive or profitable behaviors (e.g, job performance) at work (Harzer and Ruch, 2014). According to their research, the application of Character Strengths at work can increase the productivity up to 12.5%, and decrease turnover rates up to 50% (Hodges and Asplund, 2010).

Moradi et al, also done a research in 2014 among call center staff and they found that there is positive relationship between performance and Character Strength like Wisdom and Knowledge (e.g., curiosity for learning, perspective) and Temperance (e.g., having self-control, being prudent, humble, and modest). Their research result suggested that allowing individuals to put their strengths at work will benefit individual and in turn the organization itself. The result can be used by organization in future staff selection (Moradi et al., 2014). The limitation of this research is it only studies a small segment (i.e. call centre), in corporate context .

Some other scholar like Hadassah, Littman-Ovadia and Shiri Lavy they find that Character Strength has positive relationship with work performance and negative relationship with counterproductive work behaviors (Hadassah, Littman-Ovadia and Shiri Lavy, 2015).

Character and staff engagement

Harzer and Ruch have done a research with 1,111 adults and suggested that the degree of positive experiences at work (e.g. job satisfaction, pleasure, engagement, meaning) is a function of the application of an individual's distinctive Character Strengths (Harzer and Ruch, 2013). Organisations need to sure that their corporate environment setting can allow staff to apply their character strengths in order to achieve exceptional business results and high staff engagement.

Character and well-being

Littman-Ovadia and Davidovitch have done a quantitative study on the positive association of Character Strength and personal well-being, but the sample size was very small (N = 85). And the research targets were college graduates instead of business context (Littman-Ovadia and Davidovitch, 2010).

Fortunately, Hadassah, Littman-Ovadia and Shiri Lavy's have done an international research with bigger sample size of 686. Their research result shows that character strengths contribute to well-being at work, and to the growth of individuals and organizations.

In this pretest, we adopt Peterson & Seligman's definition of Character Strength in 24 Values in Action (VIA) classification. The 24 Character Strengths were derived from an extensive review of literatures on good characters from psychiatry, psychology and philosophy, and brainstorming with selected groups of scholars (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, Harzer and Ruch, 2014). To make this pretest simple, only six classifications (i.e. Fairness, Honesty, Judgment, Humility, Bravery, Spirituality) were selected to study. The short definition and core meanings of the six selected Character Strengths are below:

Fairness - Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance.

Honesty - Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions.

Judgment.

Thinking - things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly.

Humility - Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is.

Bravery - Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what's right even if there's opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it.

Spirituality - Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort.

2.2 Hypotheses development

Supported by the above literature findings, character strength has positive relationship with performance, engagement and well-being. However, the number of research available is still limited and there is no particular research focus on Asian context. For hypothesis development, this study sub-divided the construct "Performance" into staff (i.e. direct report or respondent's self-performance) and team performance. The research question is: to explore the covariance relationships between the six selected Character Strengths and corporate efficiency including leadership, staff job performance, team performance, staff engagement and well-being in Asian context. In the hypothesis framework, corporate efficiency is the main construct, the six selected character strengths dimensions are subconstructs. Character strengths are the independent variables and corporate efficiencies are the independent variables. Below are the hypotheses being put forward:

Null hypothesis

H₀: Character Strengths (Fairness, Honesty, Judgment, Humility, Bravery, Spirituality) have NO impact on Leadership quality, Job performance of direct report, team performance, Staff engagement, Well-being, and no difference in Asian Context.

Alternative hypothesis

- H₁: Character Strengths (Fairness, Honesty, Judgment, Humility, Bravery, Spirituality) have impact on Leadership quality
- H₂: Character Strengths (Fairness, Honesty, Judgment, Humility, Bravery, Spirituality) have impact on Job performance of direct report
- H₃: Character Strengths (Fairness, Honesty, Judgment, Humility, Bravery, Spirituality) have impact on Team performance
- H₄: Character Strengths (Fairness, Honesty, Judgment, Humility, Bravery, Spirituality) have impact on Staff engagement
- H₅: Character Strengths (Fairness, Honesty, Judgment, Humility, Bravery, Spirituality) have impact on Well-being
- H₆: Character Strengths (Fairness, Honesty, Judgment, Humility, Bravery, Spirituality) have difference in Asian Context

3. Methodology

This study examines the impact of Character Strength to corporate efficiency and employee performance. This is a primary, and empirical study because this research collects original data for this particular research project through questionnaires. This is also an explanatory research because it tries to explain the relationship between Character Strength and Corporate efficiency and employee performance. Applied research method is adopted as the researcher hopes the findings can contribute to the application in business practice e.g. improving corporate efficiency, employee and team performance, productivity, employee engagement; reducing turnover; increasing employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

In this research, deductive approach is used because hypothesizes statements are developed at the start exploring the relationship between character strength and corporate efficiency. After this, conclusion is found based on the empirical evidence and analysis. Positivist tradition is followed in this research because it seeks facts of causes of a social phenomenon (i.e. corporate efficiency) apart from the subjective states of the researcher. The basic belief of this research is the world is external and objective, and the observer is independent.

3.1 Item Development

3.1.1 Design

This study adopted the VIA Inventory of Strengths assessment developed by Peterson and Seligman as the items (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). The applicability of Character Strengths Rating Scales (ACS-RS) was tested reliable and valid by Harzer and Ruch (Harzer and Ruch, 2013). The item pool was reviewed by academic expert regarding the concept, criterion and construct validity. The valuable feedback given by the academic expert was used to revise the items. 28 items were finalized.

3.1.2 Sample

The samples come from 25 Business Administration Doctoral (DBA) degree candidates in Hong Kong. They represent employees from various size of companies (Below 50 people, 51-200 people, 200-500 people, Over 500 people, Over 1000 people, Over 2000 people), and from different types of enterprises (Hong Kong Enterprise, Multi-national, National (China) Enterprise, Non-profit making organization, Government). Their level of responsibilities varies from Individual contributor, junior people manager, middle-level people manager, to senior people manager.

3.1.3 Procedures.

The survey was done in on-line format and was sent 3 batches of DBA candidates sample frame. A brief note or statement regarding the purpose of the research was sent to the targeted sample before sending the survey.

3.1.4 Item Revision

At first, 14 items were sent to the academic expert for comment before sending out to collect samples. The expert supports that the dimensions (fairness, honesty, judgment, humility and bravery) identified are important. He comments that to test a hypothesis, quantitative researcher usually has two sets of questions. Therefore, second set of items were developed to measure the correlation mentioned in the hypothesis. Another dimension (i.e. Spirituality), was added by the researcher, making the total items to 28.

3.2 Measurement/scale development

3.2.1 Measures

The survey questionnaire included three content areas: respondent characteristics, character items, and corporate efficiency items. Respondent characteristics, includes gender, company size in number of employees, company nature e.g. for-profit or not-for-profit, education level, level of responsibilities. Character items includes 17 items in 6 dimensions. Each dimension has 2 to 3 items. The average score of those 2 or 3 items was used for calculation, and presented per dimension. Corporate items includes Leadership Quality, Job Performance, Staff Engagement, Well-being, Difference in Asian Context. The complete questionnaire is available on request.

3.2.2 Analysis

Scale scores of the 24 Character Strengths developed by Peterson and Seligman correlate substantially. Corrected item-total correlations (CITC) standard of $< .40$ was applied, The applicability of Character Strengths Rating Scales (ACS-RS) was tested reliable and valid by Harzer and Ruch (Harzer and Ruch, 2013, Peterson and Seligman, 2004).

3.2.3 Sampling

The target sampling population is the accessible population of researcher's Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) programme classmates. Sampling frame is the 2019 and 2020 batch of the DBA programs with a sample size of 25. The sampling unit is individual. The sub-group, extent,

timing are individuals with corporate experience. The sampling method is purposive sampling as the sample is confined to educated corporate professionals who is able to comprehend the concept of Character Strength and has immediate supervisor. This sample method ensures the sample can provide the desired information. The survey was distributed and collected online. The data collected are stored in password protected files. Ethical issues e.g. confidentiality, of the research was addressed.

4. Findings

A total of 25 respondent completed the pilot survey with 80% Male, 20 Female. 96% has master or higher education, 4 % has bachelor education. 24% of the sample works in company size over 2000 people and 20% works in company with size below 50 people. Most of the respondents worked in Multi-nationals (44%) and 60% of them are senior people managers.

This research aims to study the construct in Asian context but majority of the data collected are from Hong Kong. There is 28% of the sample that comes from the employees of Hong Kong Enterprise, 4% is from China National Enterprise. We can argue that 44% of the data comes from multi-national which to some extent represents Asia. Detail breakdown is listed in table 1.

Table 1
Pilot Survey Respondent Characteristics (n = 25)

	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Male	20	80
Female	5	20
What is the highest level of Education		
Master or above	24	96
Bachelor	1	4
Secondary or below	0	0
Please indicate your company size		
Below 50 people	5	20
51-200 people	4	16
200-500 people	4	16
Over 500 people	4	16
Over 1000 people	2	8
Over 2000 people	6	24
Which category best describes your company type		
National (China) Enterprise	1	4
Hong Kong Enterprise	7	28
Multi-national	11	44
Government	2	8
Non-profit making organization	4	16
Which category best describes your job role?		
Individual contributor	5	20
People manager_junior	3	12
People manager_middle	2	8
People manager_senior	15	60

4.1 Scale Characteristics

The items were divided among the scales representing six constructs. The arrangement of the scales for the six constructs are (Fairness, 3 items; Honesty, 3 items; Judgment, 3 items; Humility, 2 items; Bravery, 3 items; Spirituality, 3 items). They were scored using 5-point Likert type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The mean scale scores for each construct ranged from 3.45 (Spirituality) to 3.73 (Judgement). The Cronbach alpha ranged from 0.7185 (Humility) to 0.9592 (Spirituality). The individual mean scores, standard deviation and Cronbach alpha are listed in Table 2.

The 16 impact-related (i.e. Corporate Efficiency) items were also scored using 5-point Likert type scales but the attitudinal wordings are different. For example, Leadership quality, Staff engagement Job performance of direct report, Job performance of team, Asian Context are using wordings (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). For Job performance of direct report, Job performance of team, Well-being are using wordings (1 = Very bad, 5 = Very good).

Table 2
Character Strength Questionnaire Items

Construct and item	Mean	SD	Cronbach α
Character Strength			
1. Fairness	0.47	1.05	0.9347
2. Honesty	0.61	0.88	0.8568
3. Judgment	0.48	1.01	0.8956
4. Humility	0.58	0.86	0.7185
5. Bravery	0.65	0.94	0.9057
6. Spirituality	0.57	1.18	0.9592

4.2 Correlation

Pairwise associations among scales, between scales and their impact (i.e. Leadership quality, Job performance of direct report, Job performance of team, Staff engagement, Well-being) and the difference in Asian context are presented in Table 3. Majority of the associations were statistically significant ($p < .05$), except Honesty (0.38), Humility (0.17), Bravery (0.34) with Job performance of direct report; and Spirituality (0.22) with Asian Context. The strongest associations ($r \geq .50$) were between Honesty, (0.61) Humility (0.58) , Bravery (0.65), Spirituality (0.57) and Leadership quality; Judgment (0.52) and performance of direct report; Fairness (0.51), Honesty (0.53) and Job performance of team; Fairness (0.72), Honesty (0.64), Judgment (0.69), Bravery (0.58), Spirituality (0.65) and Staff engagement; Fairness (0.57), Honesty (0.53), Judgment (0.59),

Humility (0.57), Bravery (0.57), Spirituality (0.57) and Well-being. For the differences in Asian context, it has comparatively strong association with Fairness (0.52) and Honesty (0.57).

Table 3

Correlations between character strengths and corporate efficiency (Leadership quality, Job performance of direct report, Job performance of team, Staff engagement, Well-being) and the difference in Asian context scales

Character Strength	Pearson Correlation Coefficient					
	Leadership quality	Job performance of direct report	Job performance of team	Staff engagement	Well-being	Asian Context
Fairness	0.47 P-Value is .017753	0.50 P-Value is 0.010922	0.51 P-Value is 0.009201	0.72 P-Value is 0.00005	0.57 P-Value is 0.002933	0.52 P-Value is 0.007712
Honesty	0.61 P-Value is 0.001205	0.38 P-Value is 0.06097	0.53 P-Value is 0.006429	0.64 P-Value is 0.00057	0.53 P-Value is 0.006429	0.57 P-Value is 0.002933
Judgment	0.48 P-Value is 0.015169	0.52 P-Value is 0.007712	0.47 P-Value is 0.017753	0.69 P-Value is 0.000135	0.59 P-Value is 0.001907	0.46 P-Value is 0.020686
Humility	0.58 P-Value is 0.002373	0.17 P-Value is 0.416549	0.42 P-Value is 0.036594	0.48 P-Value is 0.015169	0.57 P-Value is 0.002933	0.42 P-Value is 0.036594
Bravery	0.65 P-Value is 0.000436	0.34 P-Value is 0.096326	0.40 P-Value is 0.047568	0.58 P-Value is 0.002373	0.58 P-Value is 0.002373	0.46 P-Value is 0.020686
Spirituality	0.57 P-Value is 0.002933	0.48 P-Value is 0.015169	0.46 P-Value is 0.020686	0.65 P-Value is 0.000436	0.58 P-Value is 0.002373	0.22 P-Value is 0.290649

5. Conclusions

Based on the above findings, this pretest achieves its objective and the instrument is valid for the survey. Following are the conclusions being derived.

5.1 Major and interesting findings

Majority of the alternate hypotheses and constructs are statistically significant ($P < 0.05$) according to the 95% confidence interval, except the correlation between Honesty, Humility, Bravery, and the Job performance of direct report (i.e. self-performance). What interest us is the correlation between Honesty (0.53), Humility (0.42), Bravery (0.40), and the Job performance of team are statistically significant. While self-performance is part of the team performance, respondent tends to indicate that their own performance will not be affected by the character strength of their direct supervisors. This result may due to respondent's self-ego, emotional maturity or competency.

According to the findings in table 3, fairness, judgement and spirituality has influence on all of the constructs. High correlations (e.g. r equal and over 0.5) across the constructs can be found in fairness and honesty. This result is very useful for leadership development because character strength can be trained as stated by some scholars including Spears (Spears, 2010).

	Pearson Correlation Coefficient					
Character Strength	Leadership quality	Job performance of direct report	Job performance of team	Staff engagement	Well-being	Asian Context
Fairness	0.47 P-Value is .017753	0.50 P-Value is .010922	0.51 P-Value is .009201	0.72 P-Value is .00005	0.57 P-Value is .002933	0.52 P-Value is .007712
Honesty	0.61 P-Value is .001205	0.38 P-Value is 0.06097	0.53 P-Value is .006429	0.64 P-Value is .00057	0.53 P-Value is .006429	0.57 P-Value is .002933

According to the correlation, majority of the character strengths have difference in Asian context except spirituality ($p > 0.05$). This finding indicates that future study with focus on Asian context is meaningful.

This highest correlation score (0.72) falls in the relationship between Fairness and Staff Engagements, which is an important indicator for leaders and corporate who want to increase staff engagement.

5.2 Scale general reliability

The Cronbach alpha (i.e. α) among the items are very high, from 0.72 to 0.93, with 83% over 0.86. This may due to the possible presence of a positive manifold underlying virtue of character, but it is unsure to what extent such covariation could be minimized (McGrath, 2019).

5.3 Limitation

Due to the lack of SPSS support, the analysis of the pre-test only uses excel to calculate the correlations between character strengths and corporate efficiency (Leadership quality, Job performance of direct report, Job performance of team, Staff engagement, Well-being) and the difference in Asian context. If the tool SPSS is available, analysis about the influence of gender, level of education, company size, company type, job role to the constructs can also be done in a more efficient way. The findings will be very valuable for corporate strategy including staff selection, leader's development, driving profitability and corporate sustainability.

5.4 Areas for further adjustment

In this pretest, the item regarding the category includes both country orientation (e.g. National (China) Enterprise, Hong Kong Enterprise, Multi-national) and company type (e.g. Government, non-profit making organization). In order to collect and analysis data in Asian context, it is better to separate the country orientation and company type in different items. For country orientation, the scale in the item can include Hong Kong Enterprise, National (China) Enterprise, Taiwan companies, Singapore companies, Others (multinationals), etc. For company type, the scale in the item can include profit making firms, non-profit making organization, Government, semi-Government, etc.

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