Red tape kills innovation at the modern workplace

Employers need to retain some form of monitoring while providing great independence to staff. PHOTO | FOTOSEARCH

By SCOTT BELLOWS

Posted Thursday, March 3 2016 at 09:42

In Summary

- When employees feel not trusted by their employers, then they perform worse on tasks and accomplish fewer goals.

Workers love to make decisions for themselves. We dislike when others tell us what to do when we already understand what must get accomplished.

A boss who frequently checks in on his or her employees represents one of the heights of irritation in today's workplace.

In the same vein, an organisation that retains standard operating procedures that require frequent signature approvals for too many actions discourages staff and kills creativity and innovation.

On the flip side, employees who frequently ask for guidance and direction from a supervisor even when given autonomy suffer from what many researchers call low self-esteem. So workers crave autonomy and managers desire autonomous workers.

The above observations come off as plainly obvious to every professional Kenyan. Of course people surely desire autonomy. Unfortunately, most workplaces fail to give the autonomy besought by so many.

Starting off, executives must understand that low autonomy causes low felt trust by employees. When employees feel not trusted by their employers, then they perform worse on tasks and accomplish fewer goals.

Further, Sadaf Ambreen and colleagues' research in Pakistan and Malaysia found that greater levels of autonomy granted to workers resulted in higher levels of staff commitment to an organisation. Higher commitment leads to harder working employees that generate better performance and profits.

Sadly, firms spend increasingly large sums of money on employee motivation programmes, bonus rewards, job description clarification, and training. All such activities represent good steps towards greater workplace performance and, ultimately, higher profits.

However, study after study shows that levels of autonomy given to employees moderates their responsiveness to motivation programmes and other employer efforts.

What is a moderating effect? In research, we look at the causes, or independent variables, that managers can utilise to generate desired effects, or dependent variables.

But some results cannot be totally explained by the independent variables alone.

As an example, if Kenya continues to invest billions of shillings in the tourism sector, that investment as an independent variable (cause) does not necessarily result in the dependent variable (effect) of higher sector earnings. A normal cause does not always lead to the desired effect.

A moderating variable represents something that can enhance or sideline the normal causes and effects.

In Kenya, our biggest moderating variable the impacts tourism revenue stands as global perceptions of terrorism in our country. If perceptions of terrorism threats reduce, then international tourism revenue goes up and vice-versa.

Inasmuch, researchers look at multitudes of ways that autonomy moderates impacts on performance. Jarrod Haara and Chester Spellb in New Zealand investigated that when companies became more fair and balanced towards employees, often known as organisational justice, employees quit less often, remain engaged, and report higher job satisfaction.

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However, if firms simultaneously do not grant more high levels of autonomy, then even though the firms put so much work into organisational justice enhancements (independent variable), the results (dependent variables) fall flat. In short, firms waste time and money.

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But if organisations increase job autonomy (moderating variable) along with organisational justice, then large positive effects will be felt.

Also, when Judith Volmer and her fellow researchers at the University of Erlangen in Germany delved into autonomy investigations, they uncovered that even when positive worker-leader social exchanges occurred, low levels of job autonomy granted to staff killed off the good workplace results that would have come about.

Autonomy, though, does carry a bad side. However, the downsides of autonomy do not incorporate what managers usually fear.

Executives often worry that if they grant too much autonomy then employees will not work amply. But the reality is much more complicated. High levels of autonomy only hinder worker performance in specific settings.

First, Sakthi Mahenthiran, Ben Liu, and Zalina Hashim conducted a study across Asia. They found that when many distractions existed for employees, then high autonomy jobs resulted in lower performance.

When fewer distractions were available, high autonomy caused massive performance improvements.

In their model, rural firms experienced large sales growth from autonomy given to employees whereby urban companies, with all the commensurate distractions, actually saw sales growth slide when more autonomy was introduced. Employers must still monitor even while giving autonomy.

Second, research by Claus Langred at Washington University found that if work teams enjoy high individual levels of autonomy and also highly trust each other, then the combination led to lower performance. Why? High coworker trust means that work members become reluctant to monitor each other.

If monitoring nearly disappears so that deliverables become nebulous and autonomy of tasks remains high, then accomplishments dwindle.

While high trust and high autonomy both exhibit strongly positive performance results alone, when put together, employers need to retain some form of monitoring while providing great autonomy to staff.

Autonomous organisations still need clear targets, but employees decide how to accomplish the deliverables. So monitoring becomes the moderating variable between trust, autonomy, and performance.

Executives should follow the strong conclusive research results and grant staff more say over how and when they accomplish their job descriptions.

Put sensible monitoring into the mix and watch how expanded autonomy can improve your bottom line.

Share your stories of bosses who granted you great autonomy or managers who walked all over you and your ideas with other Business Daily readers through #KenyaBosses on Twitter.

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