# Human Resource Accountability and Employee Work Behavior: Significance of Employee Psychological Contract

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## Abstract

*Employees in many enterprises are often found to show various levels of commitment to their job duties. Numerous research works have been published which have identified employee psychological contract as a determinant of such commitment and various kinds of work behavior. But the issue of human resource accountability has been neglected as a predictor of employee psychological contract and desired work behavior. This study has argued that human resource accountability might play a role in influencing employee psychological contract which in turn produce various positive and negative work behavior. The study applied exploratory research design based on key informant interview and available literature have also been analyzed to examine the association between the accountability of HR and employee psychological contract. The findings of the study are intended to help researchers, practitioners and policy makers to implement appropriate human resource accountability framework to produce desirable employee job behavior.*

**Keywords:** Human Resource Accountability, Employee psychological contract, Employee commitment, Work behavior

## 1. Introduction

Globalization, use of artificial intelligence, and digitalization in workplaces not only change employees' job duties, but also change managerial responsibilities. Workplaces are now having dynamic workforces with diverse background, skills, competencies, and work behaviors. Moreover, intense use of internet technology and access to information not only change managerial job responsibilities but also demonstrate a shift in employment relationship. Employee engagement, commitment, and loyalty have become more complex issues due to the increased use of temporary or contractual employees and virtual management by the companies. In addition to that, work-life balance is also facing dilemma in clearly defining working hours and family hours, as employees can deliver many of their work duties even from their home due to the access to internet. This kind of change in workplace has stimulated enterprises to get proper feedback from the human resource managers regarding people issues, which is not possible without enhancing Human Resource (HR) accountability through proper policies and performance based human resource management practices. On the contrary, questions arise about how the employees would respond if they are being asked frequently about their contributions. Employees might perceive managerial role or accountability practice as a source of mistrust on them or might accept positively as a sign of good governance which, in turn, helps them to be a good citizen of the

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organization. This kind of perceived relationship between employee and employer is often termed as employee psychological contract. Many of the work behaviors are often derived from the employees' changing nature of psychological contract. Therefore, it is often argued that managing human resources with desired work behavior in talent management era is becoming a challenge for human resource (HR) professionals due to the shift in employee psychological contract (Maguire, 2003; Roger, 1995). Shift in psychological contract is expediting due to globalization, intense competition and use of artificial intelligence. Human resource managers are expected to form a human resource accountability framework wherein they will not only keep accounts of HR related activities but also use it to achieve organization's long-term strategic goals. Without accountability, HR managers might be accused of not being transparent in staffing, managing performance and payroll. Additionally, HR managers might be accused of breaching contract which might result in undesirable work behavior by the employee. Thus, the need for HR accountability practices have been increasing along with employee psychological contract.

Focusing on the importance of psychological contract, Maguire (2003) opined that the breach of a legal contract allows the aggrieved party to seek enforcement in court, but breach of a psychological contract results in withholding the contributions or withdrawing from the relationship by the aggrieved party without going to the court. Meyer & Allen (1991) argued that committed employees are better performers and are more likely to stay in the organization. Focusing on employees' psychological wellbeing, Revesencio, (2015) stated that employees work more effectively, creatively, and collaboratively when they are happy at work and vice versa. Thus, employees in many enterprises are often found to show various levels of commitment to their job duties. Numerous research works have been published which have identified employee psychological contract as a determinant of such commitment and various kinds of work behavior (Revesencio, 2015). But the issue of human resource accountability has yet to be addressed as a predictor of employee psychological contract and desired work behavior. This study is an attempt to investigate the link between human resource accountability and employee psychological contract to produce desired work behavior.

## 2. Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

- To investigate the interrelationship between HR accountability and employee psychological contract;
- To provide a conceptual framework reflecting HR accountability and psychological contract.

## 3. Methodology

This study has been conducted based on exploratory research design which has used interviews of a few key consultants for having input to define problems and objectives; and has used secondary data to identify the relationship between employee psychological contract and HR accountability. Articles, books, official documents and reports of various organizations along with dissertation and information from websites

have been used extensively to identify the nature of psychological contract and its relation with HR accountability and to provide a conceptual framework. Six key informant interviews with HR consultants and heads of various organizations have been conducted to conceptualize the problem of the study and to generate a conceptual framework for future empirical studies. The interviews have been recorded and transcribed. Data derived from the sources have been coded and categorized based on the objectives. Thus, the findings of the study have emerged during reading and re-reading of the transcribed data. Some secondary literature has also been used to validate the interview results. Finally, the findings have been put under the theme of the research objectives and framed into a conceptual framework.

## 4. Literature Review

### 4.1. Human Resource Accountability

Many job circulars use the term 'accountability' to refer to taking ownership of all responsibilities and honoring commitments. For example, delivering outputs within prescribed time, operating in compliance with organizational rules and regulations; and maintaining cost and quality standards etc. Accountability can also be demonstrated through supporting subordinates, providing oversight and taking responsibility for personal shortcomings and in some cases, those of the work unit. It also represents having obligation for activities, accepting responsibility to report, explaining and disclosing results in a transparent manner or providing justification for assigned duties and responsibilities. The responsibility for money and other entrusted property also fall into the domain of accountability.

In Wikipedia the term 'accountability' has been defined from different perspectives. For instance, in ethics and governance, accountability is answerability, blameworthiness, liability, and the expectation of account-giving (Dykstra, 1939). From leadership perspectives, Reyes (2006) defines 'accountability' as the acknowledgment and assumption of responsibility for actions, products, decisions, and policies including the administration, governance, and implementation within the scope of the role or employment position and encompassing the obligation to report, explain and be answerable for resulting consequences. From the perspective of beliefs and perceptions, the term 'accountability' has been claimed as reciprocal obligations between the employee and the organization (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994). However, in governance, accountability has been expanded beyond the basic definition of "being called to account for one's actions"(Richard, 2000; Sinclair, 1995). It is frequently being considered as an account-giving relationship between individuals, e.g. "A is accountable to B when A is obliged to inform B about A's (past or future) actions and decisions, to justify them, and to suffer punishment in the case of eventual misconduct" (Schedler et.al.,1999).

In an example cited by Bishay (2017), a founding member of Dev Bootcamp mentioned

*"One leadership meeting, I came in with a problem. I was having a hard time understanding why (in an incoming cohort of 30) only two of the students were women,*

*when our main purpose as an organization was diversity.*
*When we started talking about the issue everyone had ideas. We talked for two hours but finished with no clear plan of where to go… just a lot of good ideas. I came back the following month with the same problem, but nobody wanted to keep talking about it."*

The person draws conclusion in the following manner:

*"This problem could have been solved through having clear accountabilities. Either someone should have been accountable for making the decision on how we were to deal with the issue and initiated action, or we should have realized that nobody is accountable for it and move to clarify someone who can then have that accountability."*

Thus, lack of accountability might create confusion between employees and employers, by creating implicit expectations from each of the individual related with the context. Clear HR accountability might eliminate any implicit expectations, reduce tension regarding the work and help to build more adult relationship in the workplace which is sometimes termed as psychological contract.

Wakeman, and Lauritsen, (2012) have demonstrated accountability as a combination of four factors; i.e., commitment, resilience, ownership and continuous learning (fig1).
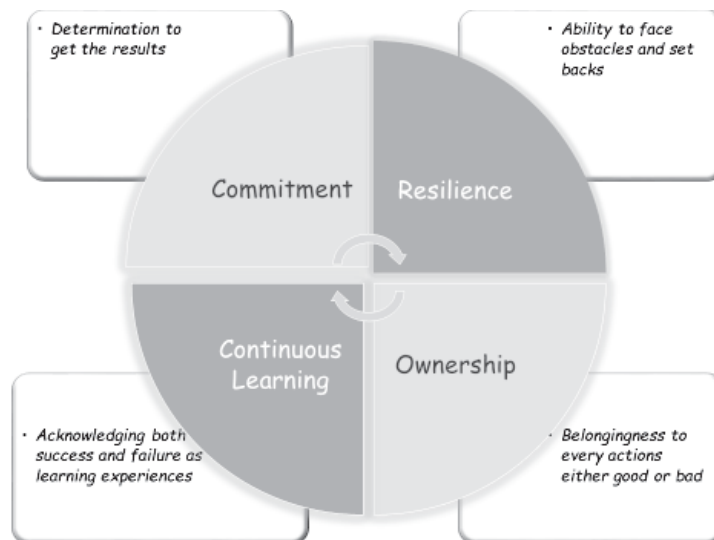


Figure-1: Components of Accountability {Author's compilation based on Wakeman, and Lauritsen's description (2012)}

The South African Board for People Practice (SABPP, 2017) has argued that HR accountability is considered as one of the instruments of HR governance and corporate governance. HR governance confirms the people are in line with the key principles of

governance. The report has also mentioned that an improvement in the employee performance could translate into an improvement in organizational performance, as the terms corporate governance and HR governance were strategically related.

The report has also mentioned that HR accountability sometimes focuses more on HR legislation rather than HR function. Thus, the Labour Relations Act, Basic Conditions of Employment Act, Skills Development Act, Employment Equity Act and the Occupational Health and Safety Act etc. are often getting much more considerations than many other HR functions in organizations (SABPP, 2017).

Wakeman, and Lauritsen, (2012) stated that the failure of the HR functions is usually considered as the total absence of accountability for the employee, manager or even HR in the process. Bargerstock, (2000) focused on HRM effectiveness audit as a tool to ensure HR accountability. HR accountability might ensure transparency in human resource management function. Transparency might improve confidence and mutual trust between employee and employer that might shape employees' psychological contract. Based on the above discussion of accountability, this study proposes the following framework of human resource management accountability (fig-2):
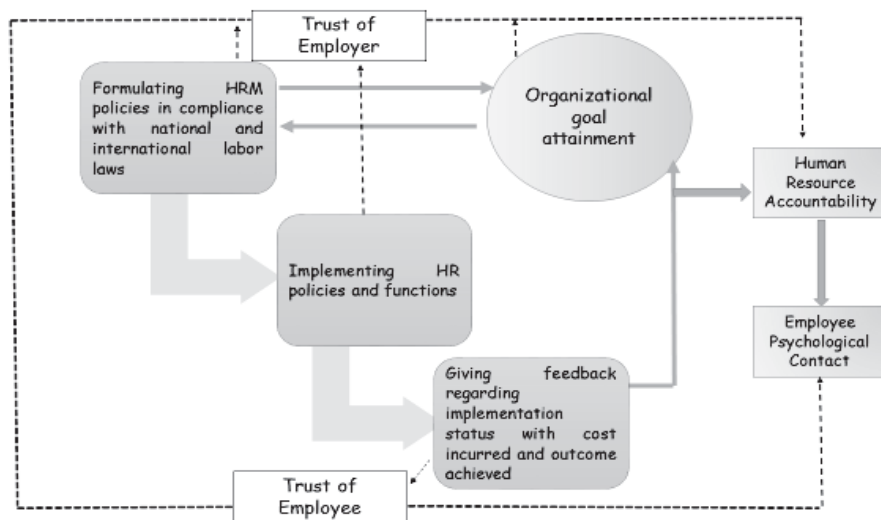


Figure-2: Human Resource Management Accountability (Authors' Contribution based on literature)

Figure-2, as shown above, has demonstrated that human resource management accountability could be achieved through adequate formulation of HRM policies reflecting national and international laws, proper implementation of policies and appropriate feedback for the implementation. Employers' trust in human resource management will be gained through proper human resource management functions in terms of policy formulation and implementation. Adequate feedback mechanism could ensure employee trust. Thus, effective human resource management practice will determine both HR accountability and positive psychological contract.

## 4.2 Employee Psychological Contract

The term 'psychological contract' has originated from the work of Argyris (1960) and later has been found in the work of Schein (1965). Now increased attention toward the term has been observed among HR practitioners, researchers and academicians. Schein (1965) focusing on the obligations and expectations of the employer and the employee, has defined psychological contract as a non-written 'trading agreement'.

Rousseau (2000) has focused on typology of psychological contract where he showed two types of psychological contract, i.e., relational and transactional contract in an environment characterized by high competition and economic instability.

Table-1: Typology of Employee Psychological Contract

| Transactional Contract | Relational Contract |
| --- | --- |
| Transactional contract denotes traditional employee-employer relationship which is termed as 'working partnership'. | Relational contract goes beyond the traditional relationship which encompasses feelings or affective involvement or attachment in the employee. |
| The transactional contract denotes an attitude of 'money comes first': employees are more concerned with remuneration and personal benefits than with being good 'organizational citizens, or 'going the extra mile'. | Relational contract influences employees to be good organizational citizens and persuades them to go the extra mile in their assigned job duties. |

Source: Extracted from the work of Rousseau (2000)

Focusing on the result of both transactional and relational contracts, researchers have argued that job satisfaction declines due to the violation of the transactional obligations of the psychological contract (e.g., pay, benefits and promotion) (Robinson et al. 1994; Rousseau, 1990). However, lower organizational commitment becomes inevitable due to the violation of relational obligations, e.g. loyalty and support (Anderson and Schalk, 1998; Guzzo and Noonan, 1994; Robinson et al. 1994; Rousseau, 1990). Individual's attitudes and behaviors, such as trust, loyalty, commitment and intention to leave sometimes also play important role in violating the psychological contract (e.g. Schmedemann, and Parks, (1994); Robinson and Rousseau, 1994; Robinson and Morrison, 1995). It is often observed that good psychological contract may not always result in superior performance, or satisfied employees but poor psychological contracts might result in lower levels of employee commitment, higher levels of absenteeism, turnover and reduced performance etc (Beardwell, 2007; Belcourt and Mcbey 2016). Influence of psychological contract has also been emphasized in the work of many

researchers on various work behavior; i.e., changed employee's behavior, commitment, and obligation toward the organization; job dissatisfaction and intention to leave; and organizational citizenship (Kabar and Barrett, 2010; Euwema, et.al. 2007).

Human resource managers through adequate human resource management practices might help organizations to keep psychological contract intact, which will be possible if the HR manager remains accountable to both employer (fair recruitment, payroll, managing employee absenteeism) and employee (clarifying provision of recruitment, realistic job previews, and adequate training and promotion opportunities, fair performance management) for proper execution of HR policies and functions. Any incongruence will result in psychological contract violation (Makin et al., 1996; Rousseau, 1995). Meglino, et. al. (2000) have also put emphasis on realistic job previews which will contribute to the formation of pragmatic psychological contracts and reduce turnover.

Knights and Kennedy (2005) referring to the work of other researchers have stated that the provision of training and development sends a message to employees that the organization cares about them and supports them (Eisenberger, et.al.1986); any unmet promises in this area will result in reduced management credibility (King, 2000) and lower the trust (Robinson, 1996). Psychological contract violation is more often experienced during the organizational change such as restructuring or strategic shifts (Rousseau, 1995), and revisions to employee benefits (Lucero and Allen, 1994). Adequate explanation and justification for unmet promises help improves employees' trust and credibility in the face of actual violations (Robinson, 1996). Thus, the HR managers are responsible for maintaining psychological contract intact which can be ensured through proper HR accountability framework.

## 5. Findings

Based on the literature mentioned above, this study has argued that the impact of HR accountability practice might be mixed. People usually fear accountability and like to say that 'it is not me', when anything goes wrong. One of the respondents, a leading HR consultant and trainer, was saying that *most of the HR problems stem from the unclear job duties and lack of clear chain of command*. It is a very common phenomenon in the majority of Bangladeshi companies. Lack of proper HR governance framework often lead to inadequate accountability practice.

*"During taking many HR decisions, like firing or laying off employees, in most of the cases there will be no clear explanation as to what exactly was the reason, who was responsible to deal with the layoff decision"* said one of the respondent HR heads. Thus, the laid off employee does not find adequate reason to satisfy himself to be considered as the low performing employee. His/her colleagues also go through fear and mistrust as if he/she is going to be the next person to be laid off. Thus, confusions and mistrust are created in the workplace which are responsible for low productivity, minimum effort from the employees, and turnover. This was also confirmed by a respondent from a leading multinational company.

On the contrary, if proper accountability framework can be built through formulating clear HR policies; distributing responsibilities for implementing those policies; using peer review committee for monitoring progress and providing suggestions for improvement, perhaps trust could be regained among employees which has been shown here as employees' psychological contract.

*"Employee's psychological contract would remain intact when they believe that any of their positive contributions for the organization will be acknowledged and rewarded or would not, at least, be punished; similarly, they will remain accountable for any of their willful misconduct and violation of organizational policies"* said one of the leading consultants from a Consulting company.

This study has also argued that if HR accountability practices, in the form of HR policies and its application and monitoring through HR audit, are not communicated properly with employees through a kind of participative leadership practice, it might influence employee psychological contract negatively and may be represented as 'violation of psychological contract' which may consequently result in job stress, turnover, low productivity and morale etc. Focusing on the role of human resource accountability, one of the respondents was giving example referring to the result of a few HR initiatives in the following way:

*"The HR manager faced threat due to implementing new HR policies with clear job duties and reporting mechanism which was purchased from a leading consulting firm, because employees' input was not taken, rather it was imposed on them. Therefore, employee's psychological contract was supposed to be violated"*. Thus, she concluded that *"fair HR practices accompanied with harmonious industrial relations and proper communication or participative management practices needs to be supplemented"*.

HRM professionals are usually responsible for maintaining compliance with HRM policies and strategies; administering HRM functions, and rewarding employees through fair performance management. This sort of compliance practice might impose added responsibility on employees which may breach employees' psychological contract. According to social exchange theory, breach of a psychological contract results in negative outcome (Zhao et. al., 2007) such as low job satisfaction (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994), low levels of organizational citizenship behaviors (Restubog, et. al., 2006;), absenteeism (Deery et.al., 2006), and turnover intentions (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994).

Fair HR practice again will enhance employees' trust on the organization which might result in increased productivity, job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, organizational learning and growth and better industrial relations (Fig-3). *Another consultant from Bangladesh Society for Human Resources Management (BSHRM)* also emphasizes on the similar kinds of outcome of employee psychological contract. Earlier studies have also supported the views that good HR practices will lead to increased job satisfaction, commitment, and positive role performance (Chen et al 2016; Smith et al., 1983 and Schuler, 1991).

Therefore, this study has introduced the following model (fig-3) demonstrating that fair HRM practice will lead to HRM accountability.

Therefore, the model (fig-3) introduced in the current study shows that the organization first needs to establish fair HRM practice which will lead to the development of adequate HRM accountability. HRM accountability then influences employee psychological contract which has the potential to demonstrate job satisfaction, organizational citizenship behavior, productivity improvement, learning & growth, good industrial relations, lower turnover and increased employee engagement and vice versa.



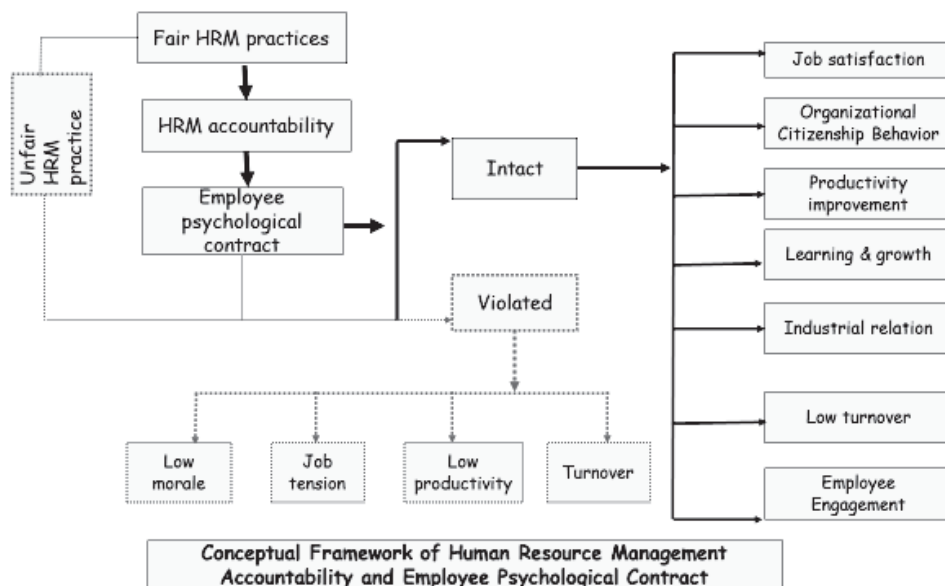Conceptual Framework of Human Resource Management Accountability and Employee Psychological Contract

Figure-3: Conceptual Framework of Human Resource Accountability and Employee Psychological Contract (Authors' Findings based on literature)

## 6. Conclusion

Human resource accountability and employee psychological contract both are burning issues in contemporary HRM practices. The objective of this study is to explore the relationship between HRM accountability and employee psychological contract. Exploratory research design approach was applied to draw upon the framework for understanding the relationship between HR accountability practice and employee psychological contract. Results-based HRM practice compelled HR managers to keep account of all kinds of HRM activities. Whereas increased competition and characteristics of generation Y, with the emergence of artificial intelligence has also increased the complexity to retain talent and make them responsible, committed, engaged and loyal employees for the organization. Considering the current scenarios this study has proposed a conceptual framework which can be validated through

empirical research. This study proposes that human resource functions would be more effective with adequate accountability practice by the HRM. It has also been argued that employees' psychological contract governs employees' work behavior either positively or negatively. Therefore, HRM might play a crucial role in guiding desired work behavior through formulating appropriate HRM accountability framework.

This study is a small initiative to design a theoretical framework for guiding human resources managers based on available literature and discussion of a few HRM leaders. Thus, the limitation of this study is that since there is no study that linked HRM accountability as a predictor of employee psychological contract which is capable if determining various kinds of work behavior, therefore, future studies might be conducted based on the aforementioned theoretical framework.

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