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Orginal Article

Designing a Model for Improving the Quality of Work Life of Isfahan Mobarake Steel Company Employees: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Quality of work life (QWL), grounded in management science philosophy, prioritizes the enhancement of human dignity and well-being—both psychological and physical—by facilitating opportunities for professional growth and a fulfilling work life. Accordingly, this study investigates QWL among employees in Iran's steel industry through a qualitative, grounded theory methodology. Using purposive (snowball) sampling and theoretical saturation as the criterion for data collection termination, in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 participants—including frontline employees, specialists, and managers from Mobarakeh Steel Company—and 7 academic experts in organizational behavior and occupational health. Data analysis followed Corbin and Strauss's systematic three-phase coding process: open coding for initial concept identification; axial coding to establish connections among categories and subcategories; and selective coding to integrate core themes into a cohesive theoretical framework. The analysis yielded five primary causal dimensions influencing QWL: (1) individual-level factors (e.g., self-efficacy, health status); (2) work–life responsibility balance; (3) managerial practices (e.g., leadership style, feedback mechanisms); (4) organizational justice (distributive, procedural, and interactional); and (5) the physical and psychosocial work environment (including safety, ergonomics, and social support). For each dimension, the study proposes targeted, evidence-based strategies across five strategic domains: (i) personalized employee development programs; (ii) strengthening interpersonal and team-based relationships; (iii) streamlining workflows and reducing

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administrative burdens; (iv) institutionalizing fairness in policies, decision-making, and interpersonal treatment; and (v) redesigning physical workspaces to align with ergonomic and psychological needs. These interventions collectively aim to elevate subjective well-being and job engagement. Critically, enhancing QWL directly contributes to improved organizational performance—specifically, increased productivity, reduced turnover, attraction of skilled talent, lower healthcare and absenteeism costs, and enhanced profitability. Conversely, neglecting QWL correlates with burnout, disengagement, and operational inefficiency. Early identification of detrimental factors—such as inequitable reward systems or hazardous environments—enables proactive managerial response and systemic reform. In capital- and labor-intensive sectors like steel manufacturing, where occupational stress and physical demands are pronounced, embedding QWL into human resource strategy is not merely ethically warranted but economically imperative. This research offers a context-sensitive, theory-driven framework for QWL optimization in heavy industry—a model potentially transferable to comparable industrial ecosystems regionally and beyond.

Keywords: Quality of life, Quality of Work Life, Isfahan Mobarake Steel Company, Qualitative Study

Extended Abstract

Introduction

In recent years, quality of life has gained increasing importance as a psychological indicator in both developed and developing societies. This significance is clearly evident in the efforts of leading organizations across industrial, commercial, and educational sectors to optimize their human resource utilization (Panahi, 2012). However, employees in heavy industries such as steel manufacturing—who face continuous work pressures and chronic stress—are recognized as a high-risk group for cognitive and mental health disorders. These conditions not only threaten workers' psychological well-being but also have significant negative consequences for organizational productivity, talent acquisition, and ultimately corporate profitability. Therefore, designing and implementing targeted psychosocial interventions for this group is crucial both for preserving public health and fostering organizational development.

Despite numerous global studies on the quality of work life, few in-depth qualitative investigations have addressed this issue in Iran's steel industry. This research gap has created challenges in planning effective quality-of-life improvements for workers in this sector. Focusing on Mobarakeh Steel Company in Isfahan, the current study aims to identify factors influencing work-life quality, propose practical enhancement strategies, and elucidate

the outcomes of implementing such strategies. Addressing these fundamental questions can provide a robust scientific foundation for human resource policymaking in Iran's heavy industries.

Method

This qualitative study adopted a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) to explore quality-of-life components among Iranian steel industry workers through semi-structured interviews. Using purposive snowball sampling, theoretical saturation was achieved with 25 participants, including 18 employees from Mobarakeh Steel Company (5 female, 13 male; 6 single, 12 married) representing diverse roles, ages, and educational backgrounds, along with 7 experts (5 university faculty and 2 PhD candidates). Interviews were analyzed via three-stage coding (open, axial, selective) following Corbin and Strauss's methodology, with member checking ensuring data validity through participant verification of interview summaries.

Results

The study's primary research question asked participants: "What factors influence your quality of life?" Initial analysis of interview data using a thematic approach identified 460 concepts. Through open coding, 350 distinct concepts emerged from the data. Subsequent axial coding grouped related concepts, while selective coding organized conceptually similar components into coherent categories. The analysis revealed five core dimensions (main categories) and 13 components affecting quality of work life at Mobarakeh Steel: 1) Individual factors, 2) Work-life balance, 3) Managerial challenges, 4) Organizational justice, and 5) Physical work environment - all representing key concerns raised by employees.

The secondary question investigated effective strategies for improving QWL in steel industries. Employee-suggested strategies formed five main categories with 12 components: 1) Employee development programs, 2) Improved workplace relationships, 3) Work facilitation, 4) Justice system development, and 5) Workspace ergonomic optimization. As contextual factors enable strategy implementation, and implementation affects outcomes (which represent direct/indirect manifestations of the core phenomenon per Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In the Quality of Work Life (QWL) enhancement model for steel industry employees, both direct and indirect relationships among components are illustrated. Quality of work life improvement serves as the central phenomenon, with causal factors (requiring review and improvement) at the model's apex. Contextual factors facilitate strategy implementation, paving the way for achieving beneficial

outcomes. The model demonstrates how these elements interconnect through various pathways to ultimately enhance employees' quality of work life.

Discussion

Overall, the research findings indicate that workplace environment quality and employee satisfaction/comfort represent crucial dimensions of quality of work life. Organizations that provide favorable QWL conditions help create positive mental images among employees, significantly contributing to talent attraction and retention (Noor & Abdullah, 2012). These results align with multiple established studies (Smith & Levermore, 2008; Mirvis & Lawler, 1984; Kanten & Sadullah, 2012).

The study's outcomes fundamentally demonstrate that quality of life emerges from the interaction between personal characteristics and life events across multidimensional domains including: autonomy, knowledge, economic status, security, social interactions, environment, and recreation. This construct serves as a psychological indicator for assessing individuals' spiritual-psychological and material needs - particularly requiring greater attention for workers in demanding occupations like steel industry roles.

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