

Sense of coherence, self-efficacy and job performance in the recruitment industry

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Abstract

The aim of the research was to investigate the relationship between two positive psychology constructs (namely sense of coherence and self-efficacy) and job performance in a group of 99 recruitment consultants. The study was conducted in the context of the recruitment industry, which is characterised by high levels of competition and stress as a result of sociopolitical and economic factors. No relationships were found overall between sense of coherence, self-efficacy and job performance. However, the comprehensibility component of sense of coherence correlated statistically significantly with overall job performance and two of its dimensions, namely customer service and productivity. Stepwise regression analyses indicated that comprehensibility contributed significantly to variance in total job performance scores, and the addition of meaningfulness to the model further increased variance in total job performance.

Key words: *positive psychology; sense of coherence, self-efficacy; job performance; recruitment industry*

1 Introduction

The 21st century workplace is constantly changing. New technologies, the globalisation of markets, and the changing needs and values of current employees require that organisations adapt in order to remain competitive (Twenge & Campbell 2009). According to Cascio (2009), the nature of change itself has changed. Competition is increasing and the global economy is giving rise to new trends in international competition. In South Africa small organisations are being established as a result of the entrepreneurial explosion; large organisations are downsizing and contracting out services. Because of keener competition and a less stable business environment, organisations are increasingly under pressure to do more with less and to be more flexible (Schreuder & Coetzee 2006).

The process of measuring and subsequently actively managing organisational and employee performance in order to improve organisational effectiveness is currently seen as critical to the development and survival of organisations (Den Hartog, Boselie & Paauwe 2004). Research has shown that a multitude of situational and dispositional factors can influence employees' performance (Rothmann & Coetzer 2003). Among the most studied antecedents of job performance have been job satisfaction, job attitudes, personality, motivation, leadership, and (to a lesser extent) group processes and

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organisational design (Blumberg & Pringle 1982). Research on personality and job performance (Barrick & Mount 1991; Tett, Jackson & Rothstein 1991) indicates that personality measures (as dispositional factors) may be used as predictors of job performance. Tett and Burnett (2003) have emphasised the need for situational factors or appropriate cues for trait expression that lead to mutually valued outcomes.

Effective job performance that is aligned to corporate strategy is critical for the survival of any organisation, and therefore predictors thereof and related constructs have always been a focal point in research by industrial psychologists over the years.

Several factors contribute to the challenges recruitment consultants face in the 21st century South African recruitment industry. Economic recession, a skills shortage and the brain drain are merely some of the difficulties that make the recruitment industry a challenging sector to perform in. By October 2008, the world was witnessing the worst financial crisis since the great depression of 1929, and by July 2009 it had turned into a full-blown global economic crisis (Edigheji 2010). The economic recession resulted in fierce competition over fast-shrinking business opportunities in the South African recruitment industry as organisations imposed a moratorium on filling job vacancies. South Africa is also experiencing a general skills crisis, especially pertaining to the retention of its top talent or 'knowledge workers' (Du Preez 2002). This loss of skilled workers, which is referred to as the 'brain drain', severely affects socioeconomic growth and development in South Africa (Rasool & Botha 2011). The loss of thousands of skilled professionals every year makes sourcing candidates for placement with clients a challenge for recruitment consultants.

It was argued that the above challenges (including the stressful nature of the work) currently associated with the recruitment industry indicate that a high degree of personal resilience is required for consultants to achieve success in this industry. This study therefore set out to explore the relationship between employees' strengths, as operationalised by the positive psychology constructs of sense of coherence and general self-efficacy, and job performance.

2 Positive psychology

Positive psychology is defined as the scientific study of ordinary, positive, subjective human strengths, virtues, experiences and functioning (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) present the idea of prevention as a concept that is in the foreground of positive psychology. Prevention researchers have discovered that there are human strengths that act as buffers against mental illness: courage, future mindedness, optimism, interpersonal skill, faith, work ethic, hope, honesty, perseverance, and the capacity for flow and insight – to name several (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000).

Strümpfer (2003) anchored four concepts which appear to form the backbone of positive psychology: (1) awareness of the need for a balance between pathology and health; (2) the study of health; (3) a focus on virtues and character such as reason; (4) and the idea of prevention through building resilience. He also demonstrated that these are not new thoughts or ideas, because they can be traced back to ancient times and civilisations.

Wissing and Van Eeden (2002) listed some positive psychology constructs that have been developed over the years as sense of coherence, self-efficacy, satisfaction with life, optimism, resourcefulness, constructive thinking, emotional intelligence, coping, social support, reality orientation, self-actualisation, resilience, fortitude and hope.

These constructs, and their operationalisations, were inspired by different theoretical traditions and empirical observations (Wissing & Van Eeden 2002). The positive psychology constructs in this research included sense of coherence and self-efficacy, which are described and justified below.

2.1 Sense of coherence

The sense of coherence construct was developed by Antonovsky (1979) in response to his salutogenic question: Why do some people, despite the multiple challenges and stressors associated with living, remain in good health? Antonovsky's (1979, 1987) salutogenic paradigm focuses on the origins of health as opposed to the traditional pathogenic orientation which focuses on illness. The salutogenic approach accepts the inevitability of stressors in daily life in general and in the workplace specifically, and the fact that human beings have to cope with the ensuing stress in one way or another (Oosthuizen & Van Lill 2008).

Antonovsky (1987:19) defines sense of coherence as follows:

The sense of coherence construct is a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that (1) the stimuli deriving from one's internal and external environments in the course of living are structured, predictable, and explicable; (2) the resources are available to one to meet the demands posed by these stimuli; and (3) these demands are challenges, worthy of investment and engagement.

Antonovsky (1987) developed a scale for measuring sense of coherence that consists of three subscales which are described in the above definition in points (1) to (3). The subscales are named comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness respectively.

Strümpfer (1990:270) suggests that a person in the workplace with a strong sense of coherence would in all likelihood:

- make cognitive sense of the workplace, perceiving its stimulation as clear, ordered, structured, consistent and predictable information (comprehensibility);
- perceive his or her work as consisting of experiences that are bearable, with which (s)he can cope, and as challenges that (s)he can meet by availing herself or himself of personal resources or resources that are under the control of legitimate others (manageability); and
- be able to make emotional and motivational sense of work demands, as welcome challenges, worthy of engaging in and investing his or her energies in (meaningfulness).

An orientation towards work in an individual with a strong sense of coherence can only lead to productive performance, recognition, rewards and promotion (Strümpfer 1990). The choice of sense of coherence as a construct in this study was motivated by both Strümpfer's (1990) suggestions above and the nature of the construct as a mediator of stress (Antonovsky 1979).

2.2 Self-efficacy

Believing that one can accomplish what one wishes to accomplish is one of the most important ingredients – perhaps the most important ingredient – in the recipe for success (Maddux 2009). People's self-efficacy beliefs determine their level of motivation, as is reflected in how much effort they will exert in an endeavour and how

long they will persevere in the face of obstacles (Bandura 1989).

Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's judgements of their capabilities to organise and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance. It is concerned not with the skills one has, but with judgements of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses (Bandura 2002:94). General self-efficacy is the belief in one's competence to tackle novel tasks and to cope with adversity in a broad range of stressful or challenging encounters – as opposed to specific self-efficacy, which is constrained to a particular task at hand (Luszczynska, Gutiérrez-Doña, & Schwarzer 2005). Self-efficacy as a construct in this research was conceptualised as general self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is best understood in the context of social cognitive theory. From the perspective of social cognitive theory, people are considered to be self-organising, self-reflective, self-regulative and able to make judgements about themselves based on their own activity (Luszczynska et al 2005). Social cognitive theory explains human functioning in terms of triadic reciprocal causation. In this transactional view of the self and society, personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective and biological events, behavioural patterns and environmental events all operate as interacting determinants that influence one another bi-directionally (Bandura 2001).

The outputs of strong self-efficacy include approach versus avoidance behaviour, effective performance and persistence in working through challenges (Betz 2004). These outputs or consequences of strong self-efficacy, together with the suggestion that it is a coping construct, allowing the individual to cope with a broad range of stressful and challenging encounters (Luszczynska et al 2005), motivated the choice of self-efficacy as a construct in this study.

3 Job performance

Campbell, McCloy, Oppler and Sager (1993) viewed performance as synonymous with behaviour. They describe performance as what people do that can be observed and measured in terms of each individual's proficiency or level of contribution. Rothman and Coetzer (2003) have deepened this perspective on performance by illuminating the multidimensional nature of performance. They (Rothman & Coetzer 2003:68) define job performance as a multidimensional construct which indicates how well employees perform their tasks, the initiative they take and the resourcefulness they show in solving problems.

In this study job performance was defined in terms of key performance indicators (KPIs). Four KPIs (namely, financial, breathe a brand, customer-centric service and productivity) served as measures of performance. Total job performance formed a combination of the four KPIs.

The financial component of job performance relates directly to sales and accurate invoice administration. Breathe a brand as a component of job performance has to do with attitude in terms of willingness to embrace organisational values and teamwork. The customer-centric service component of job performance refers to the client and candidate's experience of service from the consultant. Productivity as a component of job performance relates to specific activities, such as the production and sending of CVs, measured in terms of the frequency at which the activity is performed.

The increasing economic and sociopolitical pressures of the past few years have become a reality which impacts on various aspects of the recruitment industry. The

work environment in which employees currently function demands more of them than it did in any previous period (Storm & Rothmann 2003). The saturation of the recruitment industry market in a time of economic recession, together with a shortage of skilled candidates associated with the trend of emigrating knowledge workers, along with other difficulties, contributes to the challenges and stress of being a recruitment consultant in South Africa.

Organisations need to recruit, train and retain employees who can deliver on performance. Employees who can deliver effective job performance are crucial to organisations' survival in the 21st-century global economy. In the light of both the additional stressors placed on recruitment consultants, and the critical nature of job performance in determining organisational survival, this research aimed to investigate the relationship between two positive psychology constructs and job performance.

The objective of the study was to determine whether sense of coherence, and its components, and general self-efficacy act as predictors of job performance.

Method

Research approach

An exploratory non-experimental field study was conducted. A quantitative relational approach was followed, in which the statistical relationships between the relevant variables were analysed (Durrheim 2007). An attempt was made to predict variance in the criterion variable, total job performance, on the basis of positive psychology variables, namely sense of coherence and self-efficacy.

Participants

The population for the current study comprised 152 recruitment consultants, all from one national recruitment organisation. The consent of the managing director of the organisation was obtained by explaining the potential value the research may have for the organisation. A covering letter explaining the purpose of the research and emphasising that the consent of the managing director had been obtained was sent out electronically to all employees, together with the questionnaires. Altogether 132 employees completed the questionnaire, but only 99 sets of performance data were available for the 132 respondents. The remaining 33 respondents were therefore omitted from the sample because they had not submitted sufficient performance data. The final sample consisted of 99 recruitment consultants.

Measuring instruments

Three instruments were used to collect the data. The Orientation to Life Questionnaire (OLQ) (Antonovsky 1987) was used to measure sense of coherence, the Generalised Self-efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem 1995) was used to measure self-efficacy and a performance appraisal measuring four key performance indicators (internally developed by the organisation) was used to measure job performance. A biographical questionnaire was also administered.

- Orientation to Life Questionnaire (OLQ)

The OLQ measures sense of coherence by a series of 29 semantically differential items on a seven-point scale, with anchoring phrases at each end. High scores indicate a strong sense of coherence (Sagy & Antonovsky 1992). According to Antonovsky (1993), 26 studies using the OLQ reported Cronbach's alpha measures of internal consistency that ranged from 0,82 to 0,95, and test-retest correlations showed considerable stability, for example 0,54 over a two-year period. Strümpfer and Wissing

(1998) reported mean alpha values of 0,87 for 19 studies. According to Eriksson and Lindström (2005), the findings demonstrate that the sense of coherence instrument is reliable, valid, feasible and cross-culturally applicable.

- Generalised Self-efficacy Scale (GSE)

Throughout the text, GSE refers to the instrument used whereas general self-efficacy refers to the construct it measures. The GSE measures general self-efficacy by means of a series of 10 items on a four-point scale. High scores indicate strong general self-efficacy (Schwarzer & Jerusalem 1995). In samples from 23 nations, Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0,76 to 0,90, with the majority in the high 0,80s. Criterion-related validity was documented in numerous correlation studies where positive coefficients were found with favourable emotions, dispositional optimism and work satisfaction. Negative coefficients were found with depression, anxiety, stress, burnout and health complaints (Schwarzer & Jerusalem 1995). Roothman, Kirsten and Wissing (2003) reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0,83 for a multicultural sample of 378 South Africans.

- Job performance

A performance measure consisting of four key performance indicators was used to assess job performance. The key performance indicators included financial, breathe the brand, customer service and productivity indicators. A high score on a key performance indicator indicates better performance on that indicator. The performance measure was developed within the organisation by its own panel of experts. The key performance indicators had been derived from and were therefore directly linked to the corporate strategy of the organisation; they were aimed at driving specific behaviours which ultimately rolled up towards the strategic objectives of the organisation. The key performance indicators had been in use for a number of years after replacing the previously used performance measure, a balanced score card approach. The performance measure is reviewed annually by the organisation's internal experts in order to ensure the validity of the measure, since the organisation is continually adapting and changing along with the dynamics of the environment in which it operates.

Procedure

A front page with the instructions and information on the assessments and research, together with the measuring instruments, was loaded onto an online survey facility. The research participants were each emailed a unique link to the online assessments. The participants were required to click on the link, which directed them to the covering page containing the instructions, purpose and ratification by top management of the research. The respondents first answered the biographical questionnaire, followed by the OLQ and finally the GSE.

The branch managers, the appraisers of the participants' job performance, were requested by the head office administration to submit the available job performance scores of the recruitment consultants for a period of six months (the first two quarters of the financial year 2010/2011). The consultants were appraised on a monthly basis; however, to increase the validity of the scores, it was decided to use the average of available scores for a period of six months. Owing to the individual movements of the recruitment consultants (ie leave, etc) as well as internal organisational factors (resignation of and change of management in various branches), it was impossible to acquire a full six months of scores for every participant. This influenced the decision to take an average of available scores over six months in order to maximise the sample size. Replacing the missing numbers with the average of respondents' other scores is a common method of dealing with missing numbers (Finchilescu 2005). The assessment

and job performance data were captured and stored in a format that would make it possible to perform statistical analysis.

In order to derive a total score for job performance, factor analysis was conducted on its dimensions, namely finance, breathe the brand, customer service and productivity. According to Babbie and Mouton (2009), factor analysis is used to discover patterns among the variations in values of several variables. Factor loadings for each of the job performance dimensions were calculated. The four factor loadings were then added together to derive a total. The factor loadings for each of the dimensions were then converted into percentages which were used to weight each dimension. Total job performance scores were then calculated using their percentage loadings from the factor analysis. The factor loadings and percentages are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Factor loadings and percentage weightings of the job performance dimensions used to calculate total job performance scores

Job performance dimensions	Factor loading	Percentage weight of total job performance
Finance	0,676	24,21%
Breathe the brand	0,791	28,35%
Customer service	0,454	16,26%
Productivity	0,870	31,18%
Total	2,791	100,00%

Results

The biographical properties of the respondents who were included in the study are presented in Table 2 and serve to describe the sampled population.

Table 2
Sample characteristics (n=99)

	Category	Frequency	%
Age	≤ 27	25	25,3
	28–32	29	29,3
	33–37	21	21,2
	38+	24	24,2
Gender	Female	84	84,8
	Male	15	15,2
Race	Black	15	15,2
	White	37	37,4
	Indian	20	20,2
	Coloured	27	27,3
Job group	Permanent	27	27,3
	Contingent	16	16,2
	Project	56	56,6
Education	Postgraduate degree	6	6,1
	Bachelor's degree	16	16,2
	National diploma	21	21,2
	National certificate	16	16,2
	Grade 12	39	39,4
	Grade 10	1	1,0

The age categories of the respondents were relatively evenly distributed with the 28-32 year-old category comprising the largest portion of the sample at 29%. There were far more females than males, with females comprising 85% of the respondents and males 15%. The racial composition of the sample did not reflect the country's demographics, because white people made up the largest race group at 37% of the respondents, and the smallest group was black people at 15%. Project employees made up the largest job type group and comprised 57% of the respondents.

The means, standard deviations and alpha coefficients of the OLQ and its components, as well as the GSE, are presented in Table 3.

Table 3
Descriptive statistics of the orientation to life questionnaire (OLQ)
and the generalised self-efficacy scale (GSE)

Item	Mean	SD	α
Orientation to Life Questionnaire (29 items)	149,65	17,79	0,86*
Comprehensibility (11 items)	50,97	8,24	0,73*
Manageability (10 items)	52,99	7,01	0,69
Meaningfulness (8 items)	45,69	5,99	0,75*
General SE Scale (10 items)	33,82	3,42	0,82*

* Indicates α values of higher than 0,70

According to Table 3, both the OLQ and the GSE yielded satisfactory levels of internal consistency (OLQ $\alpha = 0,86$; GSE $\alpha = 0,82$), with the Cronbach's alpha coefficient being greater than 0,70 (Nunnally & Bernstein 1994). These findings are in line with previous research done by Söderhamn and Holmgren (2004), who reported a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0,92 for the OLQ and Luszczynska et al (2005), who reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranging from 0,79 to 0,90 for the GSE. Rothmann, Steyn and Mostert (2005) reported an alpha coefficient of 0,86 for the OLQ. Roothman et al (2003) obtained a Cronbach's alpha of 0,83 for the GSE for a multicultural sample of 378 South Africans. The components of sense of coherence also yielded satisfactory levels of internal consistency (comprehensibility $\alpha = 0,73$; meaningfulness $\alpha = 0,75$) except for manageability, where the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was slightly lower than 0,70 (ie 0,69). None of the manageability items, if deleted, would have raised the Cronbach's alpha over the 0,70 level.

The relationships between sense of coherence, the components of sense of coherence, general self-efficacy and job performance and its dimensions were investigated. The matrix of intercorrelations is reported in Table 4.

As with previous research (Frenz, Carey & Jorgensen 1993; Gropp, Geldenhuys & Visser 2007), the components of sense of coherence and the total sense of coherence score all yielded significant intercorrelations at the $p \leq 0,01$ level. Sense of coherence and its components also showed significant relationships with general self-efficacy. The dimensions of job performance correlated strongly with total job performance scores and also yielded significant correlations with one another. An exception was that customer service did not correlate significantly with the finance and breathe the brand variables. No statistically significant relationships emerged between sense of coherence and job performance total, nor between general self-efficacy and job performance total. The only statistically significant correlations between the predictor variables (sense of coherence and self-efficacy) and the criterion variables (job performance dimensions) occurred between the comprehensibility component of sense of coherence and customer service, productivity and job performance total ($p \leq 0,05$).

Table 4
Intercorrelations between the constructs of sense of coherence, self-efficacy and job performance

Variable	Sense of coherence (SOC)			Self-efficacy (SE)			Job performance (JP)			
	Comp	Manag	Mean	Total	SE	Finan	BB	CS	Prod	Total
SOC										
Comprehensibility	1,00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Manageability	0,60**	1,00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Meaningfulness	0,42**	0,63**	1,00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
SOC total	0,84**	0,88**	0,78**	1,00	-	-	-	-	-	-
SE										
General SE	0,46**	0,60**	0,52**	0,63**	1,00	-	-	-	-	-
Job performance										
Finance	0,10	-0,00	-0,13	0,00	0,04	1,00	-	-	-	-
Breathe a brand	0,11	0,07	-0,10	0,04	0,04	0,31**	1,00	-	-	-
Customer service	0,24*	0,05	0,06	0,15	0,14	0,15	0,18	1,00	-	-
Productivity	0,24*	0,14	-0,17	0,11	0,12	0,45**	0,61**	0,27**	1,00	-
Job performance total	0,22*	0,09	-0,16	0,08	0,10	0,74**	0,76**	0,35**	0,88**	1,00

** Correlation is significant at the 0,01 level (two-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0,05 level (two-tailed).

The ability of sense of coherence, its components, and general self-efficacy to predict job performance was investigated by means of stepwise regression analysis. Stepwise regression analysis was conducted because comprehensibility showed a significant correlation with job performance and could therefore form the starting point of a stepwise regression analysis. The addition of the other components of sense of coherence to the initial model was investigated in order to determine whether either of them, when added to comprehensibility, was able to increase variance in job performance scores. The statistically significant models that were found are presented in table 5.

Table 5
Multiple regression analysis with job performance as the dependent variable and comprehensibility and meaningfulness as the independent variables

Model	Unstandardised coefficients		Standardised coefficients	t	p	F	R	R ²
	B	SE	β					
1 (Constant)	67,64	6,73	-	10,05	0,000*	4,76	0,22	0,05
Comprehensibility	0,29	0,13	0,22	2,19	0,031*			
2 (Constant)	84,18	8,64	-	9,74	0,000*	6,76	0,35	0,12
Comprehensibility	0,46	0,14	0,35	3,29	0,001*			
Meaningfulness	-0,55	0,19	-0,31	-2,90	0,005*			

* p < 0,05

Sense of coherence and self-efficacy did not emerge as significant predictors of job performance as a total (see table 4). The components of sense of coherence (comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness) were then assessed as possible predictors of total job performance, which resulted in two significant models of prediction. Table 5 shows the results of the stepwise regression analysis, with the job performance total as the dependent variable and comprehensibility and meaningfulness (as measured by the OLQ) as the independent variables.

According to Table 5, comprehensibility is a significant predictor ($p = 0,031^*$) and explains 5% of the variance of total job performance ($R^2 = 0,05$). Adding meaningfulness as an independent variable (in model 2) resulted in a statistically significant increase in the prediction of the variance by a further 7% in total job performance ($R^2 = 0,12$). It must be noted, though, that meaningfulness showed a negative regression to job performance ($B = -0,49; \beta = -0,30$). In sum, comprehensibility and meaningfulness predicted 12% of the variance in total job performance.

Discussion

The aim of the study was to investigate the relationship between sense of coherence, self-efficacy and job performance among a group of recruitment consultants, thereby determining predictors of job performance.

Before the principal aims of the study were investigated, the reliability of the measuring instruments was assessed and total job performance scores were calculated by means of factor analysis. All of the Cronbach's alpha coefficients that were obtained were satisfactory, except for the manageability component of sense of coherence, where a Cronbach's alpha of 0,69 was obtained. Nunnally (1978) suggests that a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0,60 or greater is acceptable for exploratory research such as this study. These results support the findings obtained by Antonovsky (1993) for the OLQ (29 items) and Luszczynska et al (2005) for the GSE. It was concluded that the measures used passed the test and they were therefore regarded as reliable for use in this study.

With regard to sense of coherence, the three subscales were highly interrelated; these results were supported by studies done by Breed, Cilliers and Visser (2006) and by Gropp, Geldenhuys and Visser (2007). The intercorrelations ranged from 0,42 to 0,88. It was not possible to calculate intercorrelations for general self-efficacy as it is a one-dimensional construct. Overall, it was concluded that the OLQ and the GSE met the reliability and validity requirements needed for the present study.

The main aim of the study, namely to assess whether there were any statistically significant relationships between sense of coherence and its components and general self-efficacy and job performance yielded mixed results. Neither overall sense of coherence nor general self-efficacy correlated statistically significantly with job performance or any of the dimensions of job performance. Studies by Moerane (2005), Rothmann and Van Rensberg (2002), and Strydom (2000) also reported no significant relationships between sense of coherence and job performance. Rothmann and Van Rensberg (2002) reported no statistically significant relationship between general self-efficacy and performance. While results for this research are similar to those of Moerane's study (2005), significant relationships were found for the comprehensibility component of sense of coherence. Comprehensibility correlated statistically significantly with total job performance as well as with two of the dimensions of job performance, namely customer service and productivity. It was not possible to find previous research that yielded similar results to the comprehensibility relationships because the organisation-specific job performance construct is not generalisable across other organisations.

It is concluded for this study that there is no statistically significant relationship between either overall sense of coherence or general self-efficacy and job performance. Weak positive correlations representing small effect sizes between comprehensibility and customer service, productivity and job performance did emerge, however.

Antonovsky (1996) referred to comprehensibility as believing that a challenge is understood. Comprehensibility refers to the extent to which persons find or structure their world to be understandable, meaningful, orderly and consistent instead of chaotic, random and unpredictable (Rothmann et al 2005). Comprehensibility exists when stimuli from the environment are perceived to make cognitive sense (Strümpfer 2003).

When interpreting the relationship between comprehensibility and customer service, an explanation may be that individuals who structure their world as understandable and orderly are favoured by clients and candidates, because their dealings with these customers may reflect this sense of order and structure. This may well give the customer a sense of confidence in the consultant, who is portrayed as systematic, reliable and able to meet the client's needs. Productivity, as measured by the frequency with which specific outcome-related activities are performed, also showed a positive relationship with comprehensibility. It makes sense that individuals who structure their world as orderly will be better at systematically working through prescribed sets of activities than individuals who view their world as chaotic, random and unpredictable.

A subaim of the study was to establish whether sense of coherence (or its components) and general self-efficacy could be viewed as predictors of job performance. Multiple regression analysis was conducted first, with overall sense of coherence and general self-efficacy as the independent variables and job performance as the dependent variable. No significant model of regression emerged for this combination of variables, which indicates that overall sense of coherence and general self-efficacy cannot be considered as predictors of job performance in the case of this research. The components of sense of coherence (namely comprehensibility, manageability and meaningfulness) were then entered as independent variables and total job performance as the dependent variable. The stepwise regression analysis yielded interesting results, because comprehensibility emerged as a significant predictor of total job performance in model 1, predicting 5% of the variance of the total job performance score. Meaningfulness, when included with comprehensibility as predictors of total job performance, strengthened the regression model significantly by improving the predicted variance of the total job performance score by a further 7%. Where comprehensibility showed a positive regression to job performance, meaningfulness showed a negative regression. The model implies that a high score on comprehensibility, combined with a low score on meaningfulness, is a good predictor of total job performance. One should nevertheless bear in mind that the obtained multiple correlation coefficient ($R = 0,35$) is based on small correlations.

Although it was not possible to find previous research to substantiate these results, a study by Feldt, Kivimäki, Rantala and Tolvanen (2004) reported sense of coherence as a predictor of increasingly favourable perceptions of organisational climate. Another study by Breed, Cilliers and Visser (2006) yielded a two-factor solution for sense of coherence; the factors were labelled meaningfulness and comprehensibility. The manageability subscale loaded on either of the two factors. Perhaps this helps to explain these results in terms of the components which emerged as predictors.

Comprehensibility, believing that the challenge is understood (Antonovsky 1996), as a predictor of job performance may be interpreted with relative ease as it makes logical sense that believing the challenge is understood is key to succeeding at it. Questions must, however, be raised about the results pertaining to the meaningfulness component.

Antonovsky (1996) referred to the meaningfulness component of sense of coherence as a wish to – be motivated to – cope. Meaningfulness is experienced when stimuli are

perceived as motivationally relevant, in the form of welcome challenges that are worth engaging in, and investing oneself in (Strümpfer 2003). Strümpfer (1990) referred to meaningfulness in the work context as making emotional and motivational sense of work demands, as welcome challenges, worthy of engaging in and investing one's energies in. He goes on to agree that such an orientation of the individual to work can only lead to productive performance. The results of this study, namely that low scores on the meaningfulness component of sense of coherence predict high scores on job performance, therefore contradict the literature.

The results may be interpreted as indicating that individuals who are more able to make cognitive sense of their worlds (although they view their challenges as being of little worth and make less emotional sense of their work) perform better than individuals who are less able to make cognitive sense of their challenges, even though they view their challenges as worthy of engaging in and emotionally relevant.

Meaningfulness refers to the motivational content of sense of coherence (Antonovsky 1987). A possible explanation for the results may be that high performing employees do not feel motivated to invest their energies in their work, even though they demonstrate high performance as they believe they are able to understand the challenges. This invites one to investigate the effectiveness of motivation strategies, such as reward and recognition, offered by the organisation to high performing employees and the things that give meaning to work. Antonovsky (1987) asserted that an individual's job shapes his or her sense of coherence or a positive health outcome. This means that the job may not offer enough to make it worthy of investing one's energies in. These results suggest that one should explore organisational and work-related factors which influence one's sense of meaningful attachment to work. High-performing employees may feel they are not being adequately rewarded. High-performing employees may also possibly feel that they have outgrown their current work role and find the idea of an alternative work role or career more meaningful.

High-performing employees could also be finding their work repetitive and less stimulating than desired. This may be the case for project and contingent consultants who perform more repetitive work than permanent consultants. Their work entails capturing time sheets on a weekly basis for the temporary staff contracted by the organisation, a task which is extremely repetitive and essentially not very meaningful. The contingent and project consultants did perform significantly better than the permanent consultants on job performance.

Antonovsky (1987) viewed meaningfulness, the emotional component of sense of coherence, as the most important of the three components because it provides the individual with the motivation to search for order in the world, to use the resources available and to seek out new resources for managing a demand. Without a sense of meaning, even though the consultants are performing well, the emotionally disconnected consultants may be in danger of burning out or moving on to find greener and more emotionally enriching pastures which motivate their engagement.

A major shortcoming of this research was the fact that it was conducted in one nationwide organisation which used a specific job performance measure. The results of the study are therefore not generalisable across other organisations. Another shortcoming of the study was the availability of performance data. Job performance was rated on a monthly basis in the organisation studied. It was decided, however, to use the average of six months of performance data to bolster the validity of the final performance scores. Because of internal movements in the organisation, it was not possible to obtain a full six months of performance scores for every respondent; this

was addressed by replacing the missing scores with the average of the scores available. A final major shortcoming of the research was the massive disproportion between numbers of males and females who formed the respondent group, with females comprising 85% of the sample and males only 15%.

Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that when employing new consultants it would be wise for this organisation to include a measure of the individual's comprehensibility when making a selection decision. Comprehensibility, a belief that one understands the challenges posed and that one structures one's world as ordered and predictable, as contained in a measure such as the OLQ, which measures sense of coherence, is a good predictor of job performance.

It is also recommended that the organisation launch an investigation into the factors that high-performing consultants may find meaningful about their work. The organisation can then use the results of this investigation of meaningfulness to illuminate this meaning and assist the high performers to become more emotionally connected to what they do on a day-to-day basis. The combination of high scores on comprehensibility and low scores on meaningfulness as a predictor of total job performance is the warning signal which motivates the above recommendation.

It is furthermore recommended that more research be done to investigate the impact of sense of coherence and self-efficacy on job performance within a broader spectrum of industries and organisations. Results that can be generalised could effectively be used in building the body of knowledge currently being expanded within the fairly new field of positive psychology as a subdiscipline of Industrial and Organisational Psychology.

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