Investigating the Level of Empowerment in Employees and Its Relations with Organizational Factors

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Abstract

The objective of this research is to identify the relations between the empowerment levels of the employees and organizational factors. Psychological empowerment model is used to measure the employees' empowerment, having the criteria such as competence, self-determination, meaningfulness, impact, and trust in the occupation. Also, the factors including possession of clear goals, reward system, resource accessibility, organizational structure, performance evaluation and professional development are considered as organizational factors. The investigation method in this research is descriptive-surveying. The statistical population of this research included all the official employees of University of Isfahan having bachelor degrees that were 304 individuals and 57 people were selected as samples by using Cochran formula. Cluster sampling was used for the sampling purpose. The research results show that the empowerment level in the employees is appropriate in all the measures except for the criterion in trust. Moreover, the findings in the relations between organizational factors and the empowerment level show that there is a significant and direct relationship between the level of empowerment of the employees and the factors such as clear goals, reward system, accessibility to resources, performance evaluation systems, and the professional development, but no significant relation exists between the organizational structure and the empowerment levels in employees.

Key Words: Empowerment, Competence, Impact, Meaningfulness, Self-Determination, Trust.

Introduction

Nowadays, the gap between the communities and nations involve wisdom and ignorance. Thus, the main challenge is the challenge for knowledgeable and capable manpower. The importance of the manpower has been approved as the most important factor in the operating chains of organizations and the considering organizations have taken that foe granted in their activities (Abdollahi, Naveh-Ebrahim; 2006). Due to increasing competitiveness in the present era, managers have no enough opportunities to control the employees, and they should spend most of their times and potentials in identifying the internal and external environments of their organizations, leaving the routine daily duties to the employees. Employees could do their duties when they possess adequate skills, knowledge and capabilities and recognize the organizational goals properly. The tool that could help managers in this field is the process of empowerment of the employees.

Empowerment is a new subject in human resource development. However, due to the diversity in research and studies in this field, it has extensive literature to be considered. The diversity has caused development

of the contents in empowerment from one side, and from the other side, it has led to lack of integrity and lack of providing a comprehensive model in empowerment (Litterall, 2007).

Charles Handy (1995) stated that the common and traditional resources of wealth (land, raw materials, technology and even unskilled workers) could be purchased in necessary periods, but the only factor that the work could not be continued without it is the capable manpower that could use all the mentioned resources to achieve the best advantages. The aim of empowerment is to stimulate the brains of individuals as their arms. Empowerment points to an inner sense in individuals that cause them to make decisions in work processes, independently (Mike van & Luarie Thomas, 1995).

As a whole, as a management activity, the employees' empowerment is categorized into two main types: direct and indirect. The direct forms include giving more responsibilities to people or teams to execute and manage their duties and also participation in making decisions. The examples of direct empowerment form include job enrichment, self-managing work teams and many of the total quality control aspects or continual improvement. The indirect forms include the extensive attendance of the groups from quality offices to management boards. However, most of the empowerment innovations are established from the direct method (Leach and Wall, 2005).

A Review on the Research Literature

The word "empowerment" is used for indicating a new form of involving the employees that has become prevalent since 1980s (Wilkinson, 1998). It is a word that is derived from many fields such as psychology, economics, education, and the studies in social and organizational domains (Page and Czuba, 1995). The history of preliminary definitions of empowerment goes back to 1788, where empowerment was regarded as delegation of authority through individuals' organizational roles. This authority should be given to the person or be seen in his/her organizational role (Aghayar, 2003).

There are various definitions of empowerment and the definitions by theorists such as Whetten and Cameron indicate that empowerment means helping people to improve their self-confidence and overcome their sense of inabilities and distress (Yazdani, 2002). Employees do not only need to have authority in empowerment, but they also should have enough trainings and adequate financial credits and information, to be able to be responsible about their decisions (Yoon, 2001). Empowerment is instructing to others what they can do in order to have less reliance on the supervisors (Hog & Hill, 2004).

In a more general classification about empowerment, it can be said that people like Scott & Jaffe (1991), Bowen and Lower (1995), Schoell et al. (1996), Blanchard et al. (1996) and Foy (1997) regard empowerment as delegation of authority, and what is understood from their statements is that managers could empower their employees when they provide organizational information for them, reconstruct the organizational structure, replace working groups to hierarchies and provide training opportunities. On the other hand, specialists such as Conger and Kanungo (1998), Lower (1973) and Bandura (1986) consider empowerment as a factor in motivation. In another definition of empowerment, Conger and Kanungo consider empowerment as a process in increasing the sense of self-efficiency in individuals, via identification and elimination of conditions that cause inability in employees.

By completing the empowerment theory of Conger and Kanungo, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) introduced the psychological empowerment as the process of increasing the inner motivations for doing the obligations. They provided a more complete definition about psychological empowerment as a complex in motivation cognitive fields that in addition to self-efficiency, it consists of another three fields in cognitive aspects; i.e. right to choose (self-determination), meaningfulness and impact. After that, in addition to emphasizing the multilateral aspects of empowerment and confirming the above four criteria, Whetten and Cameron added the criterion regarding trust to it. The following table could be given in order to divide the empowerment approaches (Abdollahi, Naveh-Ebrahim, 2006).

Approach		Target	strategy	Theorist
Mechanical		Empowering the employees	Delegation of authority to the inferiors	Foy(1977) Blanchard et al.(1996) Schoell (1993)
Organic	Motivating	Increasing the employees' motivation	Sense of self-efficiency	Conger & Kanungo (1998)
	Cognitive	Increasing the employees' inner-motivation	Sense of competence Sense of meaningfulness Sense of impact Sense of self-determination	Thomas & Velthouse (1990) Spreitzer (1995)
			Sense of trust	Whetten & Cameron (1998)

Approaches in empowerment of employees (Abdollahi, Naveh-Ebrahim, 2006)

Regarding the history, the first approach (mechanical) was considered by the scientists in this field, until 1980, but after studies by Thomas and Velthouse and also the research by Spreitzer, the inclinations towards psychological empowerment was changed, such that hundreds of scientific works and researches are done in less than 20 years in this regard. In one side, this inclination has been due to the mechanical empowerment not achieving positive and extensive results in different working environments and on the other side, promotion and physical empowering of employees will not be useful before the individuals are not mentally ready and susceptible. However, no research has yet shown which of the two approaches is superior to the other, and these two parts are not mainly separated from each other and their dependence to each other is quite essential (Peterson & Zimmerman, 2004).

The Dimensions of Psychological Empowerment

Meaningfulness

Meaningfulness is an opportunity for the people to feel they are following valuable and important career goals. It is for them to feel they are moving in a road, where their time and potentials are valuable (Appelbeum & Hanger, Abdollahi, 2005). Meaningfulness means capable people consider values for their career goals according to their personal standards and ideal merits. Working is considered important in their valuing systems and these employees feel to be highly important in participating in the activities of their organizations (Tubbs & Moss, 2000).

Impact (Effectiveness)

Effectiveness or accepting personal results is a degree by which the individual could impact on the results and strategic, administrative and operating consequences of his/her occupation (Abdollahi, 2006). Empowered employees believe that by doing their job duties, they could have important roles in verifying the organization goals, control their occupational results and consequences, impact on whatever happens and control the problems and limitations (Lussier, 2002). To feel being capable, individuals should not only feel what they do has got impacts, but they should also feel that they could create the impact themselves. For the results to follow the feeling of empowerment, the individuals should feel they are controlling the production results (Whetten & Cameron, Yazdani, 2004).

Competence

When people are empowered, they feel to be self-effective or feel competence in having the required potentials and skills for successful execution of a task. Empowered people not only have the feeling of competence but also reliability in doing their duties properly (Amichai et al, 2008). These people feel personal superiority and believe that to encounter new challenges, they should learn and prosper (Spreitzer & Doneson, 2005). Some authors believe that this characteristic is the most important element in psychological empowerment, since having the sense of self-effectiveness leads to the efforts by individuals in doing hard works (Bennis and Nanus, 1985, Conger and Kanungo, 1988, Bandura & Kegas, 1989, Zimmerman, 1990). In fact this feeling consists of the individual's beliefs for his potentials in doing his given duties, successfully. In other words, the individual believes in having skills, competence and required ability in proper doing of the assigned tasks. If the duties are such that the person could do them with required skills, it will positively affect his sense about his merits (Spreitzer, 1996).

Bandura (1977) believes that there should be three conditions for individuals to feel self-efficient: 1- Believing that they are able to do the tasks; 2- Believing that they have potentials for putting in required efforts; 3- Believing that no external barrier could prevent them in doing the tasks (Zoe Dimitriades, 2005).

Self-determination

Empowered employees feel responsible and possessing about their activities (Litterell, 2007). They feel that they have independence in doing their duties and could make decisions about their occupations and have the required authorities about the state, time and speed of doing their duties (Vecchio, 2000). The examples in this regard include making decisions for the methods of doing the job or determining amounts of the efforts in doing the activities (Spreitzer, 1995). Having the sense of right to choose in the individuals is divided into three parts: 1- Having the opportunity for choosing; 2- Using this opportunity for choosing by the person; 3- Ability in achieving proper results and success in the choices (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005).

Trust

Trust indicates the relations between the superior authorities and inferiors (trust of managers to their workers and vice versa). Trust is related to interests, competence, receptivity, and having confidence in others (Mishra & Spreitzer, Abdollahi, 1997). Capable people have the feelings of trust and they are certain that they are faced with fairness and assurance. This feeling is usually indicates assurance and certainty for the authorities or the ownerships not to harm them and that they are confronted with, impartially (Whetten & Cameron, 1998).
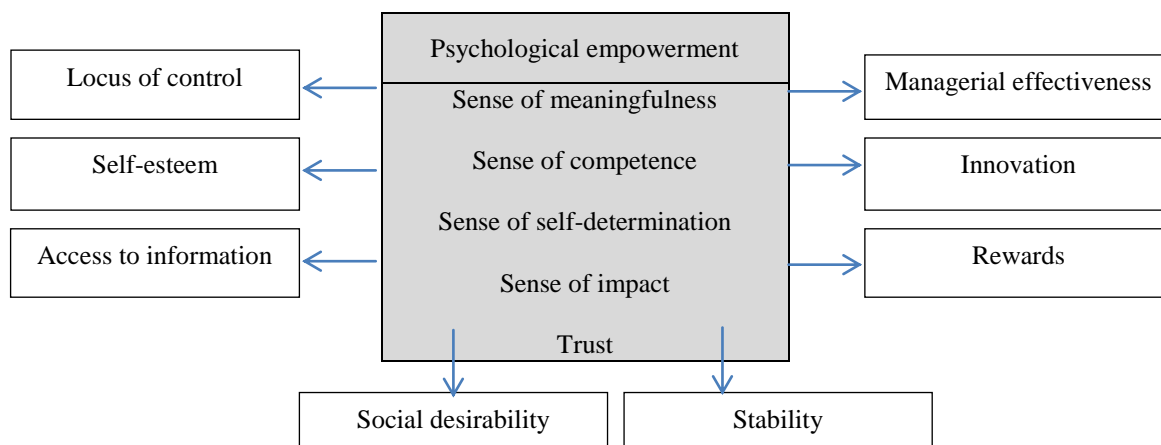
Spreitzer empowerment model (resource: Queen & Spreitzer, 1997) – Courtesy of Bahmani

Organizational Conditions Providing Employees Empowerments

Theorists of management and organizations believe for the employees to feel capable, required conditions and basis should be provided in the organization. Kevin & Spreitzer (1997) considered approaches such as expressing the goals clearly, supporting and establishing groups to empower the employees. Zimmerman (1995) emphasizes on the methods such as supporting, participative management and training the personnel. Thomas & Vaulthouse (1990) proposed the mechanisms including expressing the goals and missions clearly, training, supporting, and delegation of authorities, reward systems and democratic leadership style for empowerment of the employees. For the model of empowerment, Conger and Kanungo (1998) indicated organizational factors (organization structure, reward system, and occupation nature) and management strategies (participative management, targeting, feedback system, modeling, rewards based on performance, contingency rewards and job enrichment) that provide self-efficiency or the personal power. Spreitzer (1995, 1996) found in his studies that accessibility of the employees to information, reward systems, participative atmosphere, social and sentimental supports have relations with psychological empowerment. Shelton (2002) considers building trust to be the prerequisite of the employees' empowerment (Abdollahi & Naveh-Ebrahim, 2006).

Changing the pyramid organization to circular organization, changing the employees' considerations, providing motivations via providing power and prestige, participative management, deploying facilitating leadership and establishing capable groups are among the factors in empowerment of the employees. Three methods are essential for conducting the empowerment program, as follows: sharing the information with the employees, proper organizational structure and establishing work-groups (Randoloph, 2000).

The following approaches are suggested for empowerment of employees:

1- Encounter and contact with the employees as mature people having competence and learning potentials.
2- Provide freedom of action, enthusiasm and energy for the employees.
3- Let the employees participate in the plans and strategies.
4- Balance the employees' needs and the organization requirements.

As a whole, some of the above factors are related to organization conditions, formal structure of the organization and hierarchy, and some others are related to management and leadership proficiency. Some of the factors considered as organization conditions are as follows:

Having Clear Goals and Insight

Clear and challenging goals are considered as the preliminary factors in empowerment of employees (Ramsden, 1997). The first factor in the subject of organizational features that facilitate the people's capabilities is clear and challenging vision (Miraghaei, 2007). The very much capable people feel that they have understood the views of the senior management and organization strategies. Accordingly, they feel they have enough competence in doing the given duties independently, instead of waiting for the instructions by their senior management (Tabora, 2000)

Organizational Structure

Authorities and experts of management field, consider organizational structure as a factor related to empowerment of the employees. Bureaucratic structures and autocratic management styles usually lead to developing dependence of the employees, defying employees' ideas, unskilled performances, meaningless organizational aims and inability of the employees. But, the structure is designed in empowered organizations in such a way that the employees could work to achieve their goals and do whatever is essential and not merely show off to get rewards (Mintzberg, 1998).

Performance Evaluation

It verifies for every task that "There is no possibility in improving, if it could not be evaluated". The main purpose of performance evaluation is helping individuals in better doing the job, and not in punishments and rewards. The authorities consider competence based performance evaluation to be among the factors related to empowerment (Saadat, 2006). In a capable organization that individuals involve in responsibilities, they should participate in performance evaluation; which means both sides (employees and managers) try to do evaluations (Goudarzi & Farahani, 2003).

Reward System

The final control that is the most useful support in empowerment process is the reward. Establishing main values and determining the targets, like the rewards, are recognized methods for obtaining proper results. All types of rewards are not generally interesting, but the interesting ones are the ones that support developing and extending empowerment including the influence based on competence. The share of individuals should be defined in a proper reward system empowering the employees. Although the rewards may be useful for the performance of groups or organization, but most of the people have no clear instincts about their own performances that could impact the high levels of performance (Kinla, 2004).

Employees Professional Development

Training and professional developing of the employees are among the main aspects in empowerment programs. In new organizations recognized as learning organizations, managers are interested in empowerment and managerial actions based on that. This enthusiasm is because empowerment has a great role in prevalence of the learning culture (Abdollahi, 2006).

Accessibility to Resources by the Employees

Empowerment is related to provision of different organizational resources helping the people in doing their duties. The managers empowering the employees are mostly providing the resources and eliminating obstacles. They provide less risk and are mostly leaders. Thus, one of the basic missions of empowering managers is helping the employees in achieving their goals. The managers preparing require resources for increasing capabilities of their personnel try to ensure that employees receive adequate experiences for professional development and continuous training (Spreitzer, 1996).

History of the Research

The results of the research "Analysis of the relation between on-the-job trainings and empowerment of employees of Qom province Agricultural Ministry" showed that all the dimensions of psychological empowerment in the considered community has been in the proper range. It could be related to the factors such as the appropriateness between the education field and occupation, strong organizational culture, compatibility of individual and organizational values and the organizational structure. Also, there have been no correlations between the level of capability of employees in this organization and on-the-job training hours.

The results from the research "Analysis of the relation between empowerment of the employees and organizational effectiveness in governmental offices and organizations of the city of Rafsanjan" that was done by Arsalan (2009), confirmed the relations between empowerment and organizational effectiveness in Rafsanjan governmental offices and organizations. It also showed a significant relation between the senses of competence, sense of trust, sense of impact, sense of self-determination, sense of meaningfulness of the employment of employees and the organizational effectiveness.

In a research "The relation between empowerment and organizational commitment with the intension to leave the job among employees of Esfahan tar refinery Co.", Bahmani (2009) concluded that in relationship between empowerment and intension to leave the job by the employees of that company, there exists only a negative but significant relation between the dimension of trust and intension to leave the job. Furthermore, in relationship between the dimensions of organizational commitment and the intension to leave the job, there is only a negative and significant relation between emotional dimension and intension to leave the job. In the research "analyzing the relation between organizational structure and employees' empowerment in National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company/Tehran district", conducted by Sabzicaran (2010), he found that there is a significant relation between the organizational structure and empowerment of the employees of the mentioned company.

In an investigation, Chow & Chu & Sha & Hon (2006) dealt with analyzing the impacts of three aspects of human resources; i.e. "developmental experience", "organizational support" and "empowerment" on customer-orientation. The aim of this project was to provide opportunities for the employees, to be able enhance their skills by developmental experience, to empower them, and to provide the support needed to deliver quality service. The results of the studies they conducted showed that empowerment and organizational support have a significant effect on customer orientation and empowerment significantly improves performance. Moreover, organizational support increases employees' sense of pride and developmental experience has only a significant effect on the performance.

Liu & Chiu (2007) provided "promotion of commitment via empowerment". In this research, the organizational commitment has two dimensions, including affective and continuance. The research results showed that there is more a relation between empowerment and organizational commitment. When perception of empowerment improves, the organizational commitment increases accordingly, in some respects. They also found that empowerment has more relation with affective commitment.

Hall (2008) studied the effect of comprehensive performance measurement systems on role clarity, psychological empowerment and managerial performance and found that comprehensive performance measurement system indirectly affects managerial performance. He proved the hypothesis about the positive relation between the four dimensions of psychological empowerment and affects managerial performance.

In their research "empowerment in hospitality organizations: Customer orientation and organizational support", Chen & Ro (2011) stated that although empowerment is considered as an effective strategy for hospitals, but it cannot guarantee the success in organizations on its own. The views for empowerment of the employees should be increased by considering organizational and personal factors. They also investigated the impacts of employees' customer orientation and organizational support on the empowerment view in their research. The findings showed that organizations should employ customer oriented individuals and instruct them by on-the-job trainings, create a reward system and facilitate communicative service standards to improve the employees' perception of empowerment.

Research Questions

1- Is the psychological empowerment level of the employees appropriate, with regards to dimension of competence?
2- Is the psychological empowerment level of the employees appropriate, with regards to dimension of self-determination?
3- Is the psychological empowerment level of the employees appropriate, with regards to dimension of meaningfulness?
4- Is the psychological empowerment level of the employees appropriate, with regards to dimension of impact?

5- Is the psychological empowerment level of the employees appropriate, with regards to dimension of trust?

6- Is there a significant relation between the factors having clear goals and empowerment of the employees?

7- Is there a significant relation between the factors reward systems and empowerment of the employees?

8- Is there a significant relation between the factors having access to resources and empowerment of the employees?

9- Is there a significant relation between the factors organizational structure and empowerment of the employees?

10- Is there a significant relation between the factors performance evaluation and empowerment of the employees?

11- Is there a significant relation between the factors professional development and empowerment of the employees?

Questions (1) to (5) are about measuring the level of empowerment of the employees, and questions (6) to (11) are about the relations between empowerment the of employees and organizational factors.

Research Methodology

Regarding the objectives, the present research is an applied type of research and regarding the methodology, it is descriptive- surveying. The statistical population in this research includes all the official employees of University of Isfahan with bachelor degrees. The no. of population is 304 of whom 57 were selected as samples by using Cochran formula. The sampling method is of random clustering type, where groups or clusters of the members are selected for the study among the groups with no homogeneity between their members. The faculties of University of Isfahan are considered as the clusters in this research.

A questionnaire is used to collect the required data. This questionnaire has 33 questions, 15 of which are related to psychological empowerment and 18 of which are about organizational factors. It is designed by using the 5-degrees Likert spectrum. Also to measure the reliability of the questionnaires in this research, after entering the data, using SPSS software, the reliability coefficients of the dimensions were investigated and the data for the questionnaires are separately shown in the following table.

Dimensions	Cronbach's alpha
Competence	0.82
Self-determination	0.76
Meaningfulness	0.80
Impact	0.72
Trust	0.88
Having clear goals	0.81
Reward system	0.87
Access to resources	0.78
Organizational structure	0.73
Performance evaluation	0.82
Professional development	0.83
Questionnaire of psychological empowerment	0.82
Questionnaire of organizational dimensions	0.88
TOTAL	0.90

Reliability coefficients of the questionnaires (resource: research findings)

Data Analysis

In order to investigate questions (1) to (5), single sample t-test is used and the results of these assumptions are shown in the following table.

Dimensions	t-statistic	Significance level	Average	Test results
competence	10.99	0.000	4.11	Confirmed
Self-determination	4.32	0.000	3.43	Confirmed
impact	4.70	0.000	3.39	Confirmed
meaningfulness	11.43	0.000	3.98	Confirmed
trust	-0.32	0.75	2.96	Rejected

Single sample t-test (resource: research findings)

As it can be observed, the obtained "t" in four aspects of competence, self-determination, impact and meaningfulness is greater than the "t" in the table.

Hence, the levels of empowerment of the employees are appropriate in the above four aspects. But for the case of "trust", since the obtained "t" is smaller than the "t" value in the table, employees are not allocated in a proper place for this criterion.

Pearson correlation analysis is used to investigate questions (6) to (11), in order to show the relation between the empowerment of employees and the organizational factors. The results are indicated as follows.

Organizational factors	Correlation coefficient	probability	Test results
Having clear goals	0.51	0.000	Positive & significant
Reward system	0.44	0.001	Positive & significant
Access to resources	0.40	0.002	Positive & significant
Organizational structure	0.05	0.69	Positive & significant
Performance evaluation	0.27	0.045	Positive & significant
Professional development	0.37	0.04	Positive & significant

Correlation test (resource: research findings)

Since the correlation coefficients between 5 factors: having clear goals, reward system, access to resources, performance evaluation, and professional development are positive and the obtained probability is less than 0.05, it can be said that there is positive and significant relationship between these factors and empowerment, but since the amount of probability for the organizational structure is more than 0.05, there would be no significant relation between it and the empowerment of the employees.

Research Results

The research results showed that the amount of empowerment of the employees is appropriate with regards to dimension of competence. Thus it can be said that employees have adequate competence in doing the assigned duties and feel certain that they do their duties effectively. In other words, they believe that they have mastered the skills which are required for performing job duties; they are assured about their abilities and generally feel that the work is within their potentials and skills. Regarding the aspect of independence, the employees are also in appropriate situation. In other words, they feel that they have freedom of action and necessary independence in pioneering and continuity of behaviors and processes, personal decisions about the state of their occupations and the opportunity in using personal creativities for their occupational duties.

Regarding the dimension of impact, the employees feel they have adequate abilities in influencing strategic, administrative or operative consequences, in their duties and enough control on what happens in their work units and believe that their views were used in decision making processes in their departments. Regarding meaningfulness, the employees are also in appropriate situation, which means that they regard their career goals to be valuable. They have a great inner interest toward their jobs and believe that the work they are doing is meaningful and important for them.

Regarding the criterion about trust, the obtained results showed that the ability of the employees in this case is not appropriate. In other words, they believe that their coworkers are not entirely honest with them, do not share the important information with them and are inattentive towards their success. The reason for this issue may be due to the fact that the employees feel they are not treated fairly.

For the obtained results about the relation between empowerment and organizational factors, it can be said that there is a significant and positive relation between empowerment and having clear goals. Thus, the clearer the goals and targets of an organization, the higher will be the level of empowerment of the employees; and vice versa.

Regarding the relation between empowerment and reward system, the results indicate a positive and significant relation. If the reward system in the organization is based on empowering the employees, they feel more abilities and empowerment in themselves; and vice versa.

Regarding the relation between empowerment and having access to the resources, the results also indicate a positive and significant relation between them. The more accessibility to the resources, the more the employees feel capabilities in themselves; and vice versa.

Regarding the relation between empowerment and performance evaluation, the results indicate a positive and significant relation between them. It means that if the performance evaluation of the employees is based on the empowerment of the employees, they feel more capable.

Regarding the relation between empowerment and professional development of the employees, the results show a positive and significant relation. This indicates that the higher the level of professionalism of the employees, they feel more empowered; and vice versa.

But, regarding the relation between empowerment and organizational structure, the results did not show any significant relations between them. It therefore indicates that employees' empowerment has no relations with the organizational structures.

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