

Workplace Productivity Challenges of Business Course Graduates

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Abstract:

This qualitative study explored the challenges encountered by business graduates in relation to their work productivity. The participants are business graduates from Isabela State University – Cauayan Campus (ISU-CC), Isabela Province, Cagayan Valley (CV) – Region 2, Philippines, who are currently employed within three years. The study adopted a phenomenological approach to understand the lived experiences of the participants. An open-ended interview was used as data collection method and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed seven themes of work productivity challenges: educational job mismatched, challenges for effective communication, burnout and disorganization, poor work-life balance, lack of relevant work experience and insufficient skill development opportunities, stressful workplace and interpersonal conflicts, and limited career growth and job insecurity. The study highlights the need for curriculum enhancement, stronger industry partnerships, and for graduates themselves to engage in continuous professional development for competency enhancement.

Keywords: Business Graduates, Challenges, Workplace Productivity

Introduction:

In today's highly competitive global economy, workplace productivity is a critical performance indicator for both individuals and organizations. Business graduates' workplace productivity encompasses the ability to think creatively, collaborate with others, manage time, adapt to changing corporate environments, and more, importantly, the ability to produce results quickly. Companies all over are looking for business graduates that are directly employable and able to help organizational goals as soon as they join the workforce. Previous studies, however, have revealed that, despite the high graduation rate, a significant number of business graduates encounter challenges such as a lack of skills that match the job requirements, unpreparedness in education for workplace transition, and limited real-world exposure, which impacts their workplace productivity [1].

In the Philippines, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED), has consistently promoted the alignment of educational outcomes with the requirements of the job market in pursuit of developing employable and productive graduates. Notwithstanding, previous studies revealed a persistent gap between academic readiness and productivity among graduates in the workplace. While education provides graduates with a vast array of theories and principles, there remain deficiencies in terms of soft skills and practical experiences, which can have a significant impact on their productivity.

Numerous studies have delved into the realm of employability of graduates such as studies that emphasized the importance of periodic curriculum reviews and strong industry partnerships to enhance

graduate employability [2]; [3]. To further improve graduate employability, researchers suggest offering more terminal programs, improving facilities, and strengthening partnerships with industry stakeholders [3];[4]. Senior high school graduates in the Philippines show high employability, with technical and emotional skills as major predictors [5]. A study found high employability and satisfaction among graduates of a state higher education institution's graduate programs in the Philippines. Although many graduates were able to secure employment, often times, they fall short of what was expected of them by industries, such as real-world experiences, soft skills, and adaptability [6]. In a local study, competencies such as communication skills, human relations skills, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving skills are found to have a significant impact in terms of the employability of the graduates in the region [7]. A study found out that there are at least five components of employability skills – problem-solving and analytic, learning, personal organization and time management, creativity, innovation and change, and personal strengths – which were found to be crucial in employment [8]. While there is growing literature on employability and skills mismatch, both internationally and nationally, there remains a noticeable gap in research that directly addresses the workplace productivity challenges faced by business graduates—particularly those from ISU - CC in CV–Region 2, Philippines. Most studies tend to focus on employment outcomes or general workplace readiness without isolating the specific factors that affect productivity after employment. Therefore, this study aims to examine the workplace productivity challenges encountered by business graduates from a state university in Cagayan Valley - Region 2. It will investigate both internal and external factors that influence their productivity in the workplace. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the ongoing national discourse on improving higher education outcomes and aligning graduate competencies with the demands of the Philippine labor market.

Methodology:

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to examine the lived experiences of business course graduates in relation to challenges they encountered in terms of workplace productivity. A phenomenological approach is appropriate because it enhances understanding of how people perceive and interpret their experiences [9]. The participants of this study consist of business course graduates from ISU – CC who have been employed within the last three years. Further, this study utilized semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to share their experiences and insights on the issue under consideration. The responses from the interviews were analyzed, and themes were generated based on the patterns and insights elicited from the participants; thus, thematic analysis was used. The results of the study may not reflect the general picture of the whole sample in the context of the issues under consideration.

Results:

The data analysis revealed seven themes of the challenges encountered by the participants in terms of their workplace productivity:

1. Educational Job Mismatched

Graduates revealed that they often struggle with applying their academic knowledge to real-world scenarios. While college provided a wealth of principles and theories, many felt that these rarely translated into practical experience. For instance, graduates working in accounting found that theoretical knowledge did not fully prepare them for actual bookkeeping tasks, leading to a challenging adjustment period. Some grads also said that most of what they studied in college is not relevant to their present positions, thereby

compelling them to grab chances as they come. Outdated knowledge of technology also creates a hurdle, thereby hindering the efficient use of their education. A participant remarked,

"I have to put in some extra time to learn since my skills and education do not match with what my current job requires"

Educational mismatches directly affect productivity. Research has indicated that undereducation, particularly during economic instability, can exacerbate the negative effects on productivity [10]. Horizontal mismatch, characterized by a misalignment between the academic qualifications and job requirements, has been associated with reduced job satisfaction and, worse, with salary [11]. Moreover, studies suggest that overeducation, wherein graduates possess more education than necessary for their jobs, may result in lower job satisfaction [12].

2. Challenges for Effective Communication

Some graduates encountered challenges related to language proficiency, writing business letters, and engaging in professional interactions. The fear of embarrassment often led graduates to avoid seeking clarification despite confusion regarding the new task. They also claimed that the lack of familiarity with business formats and poor grammar lead to slower task completion. Sometimes graduates actually have difficulty expressing themselves, hindering their ability to communicate clearly ideas, suggestions, or points of view because of a lack of confidence, being amenable, have difficulty in handling criticism, and being conscious of their communication weaknesses, such as grammar. Additionally, some employees hesitate to speak up or share ideas with the fear that their input will be ignored. One participant said, *"Dealing with other colleagues in the office, and sometimes even with bosses who do not listen to their subordinates, is stressful."*

Effective communication within an organization is crucial for employee performance. Studies have shown that poor communication among employees or between employees and superiors can reduce productivity and hinder organizational efficiency [13]. Additionally, when employees perceive their leaders as untrustworthy or there is a general lack of trust between employees and management, it can lead to disloyalty, decreased motivation, and lower productivity levels [14]; [15]). According to Tristeza (2015), effective communication is crucial for workplace efficiency and effectiveness. Studies have shown that poor communication can lead to decreased job performance, which in turn affects overall productivity [16].

Positive organizational cultures that prioritize a conducive workplace environment can enhance employee productivity [17]. However, negative organizational cultures characterized by micromanagement, favoritism, and lack of transparency can lead to demotivation, low job satisfaction, and decreased productivity [18].

Furthermore, soft skills, including communication skills, are increasingly valued by employers as they contribute to increased job performance and productivity [19]. Barriers to communication, such as misunderstandings due to ineffective communication practices, can slow down processes and impede productivity in multinational workplaces [20].

3. Burnout and Disorganization

For new graduates, the transition from education into the workplace is sometimes accompanied by insufficient orientation and a lack of clarity in task prioritization, leading to difficulties in meeting deadlines, hence, graduates reported difficulties in managing time effectively. Some graduates find themselves scrambling to finish main tasks due to multitasking, which resulted in disorganization – physical spaces, time management, and prioritization. Moreover, high job demands requiring longer hours

of work often interfered with personal life, leading to stress and burnout. One participant noted, *"I feel I am always tired. It seems that work never stop no matter how I tried."*

According to research, workplace burnout is a significant issue that can severely impact not just mental health but also workplace productivity [21]. Addressing burnout is crucial for improving individual well-being and productivity. An employee may be experiencing burnout when he/she shows some dramatic changes, such as being irritable or often late or absent from work, or his/her enthusiasm and productivity may have dropped, and the issue has to be resolved [22]. Moreover, the lack of control over an employee's workload could cause exhaustion and ultimately burnout, and the demands placed on the employee could lead to a sense of inefficacy, which is one of the aspects of burnout [23].

4. Poor Work-Life Balance

Employees who have a poor work-life balance consistently experience a variety of negative outcomes impacting their productivity. Graduates felt they lacked sufficient time off to recharge and manage personal responsibilities. Some graduates claimed that balancing workload and deadlines while maintaining balance is challenging. A scenario emerged differently for mothers who had to juggle career opportunities with caregiving responsibilities. A participant who felt overwhelmed by his workload said, *"There is no work-life balance because we tend to spend our weekends and holidays with overtime and even extend working hours beyond."*

Research indicates that when employees experience poor work-life balance, they are more likely to face issues such as stress, burnout, headaches, depression, and poor psychological well-being [24]. This can lead to increased absenteeism and decreased job performance due to the demands of a stressful work environment [25]. Additionally, studies have also shown that poor time management can lead to increased stress, employee turnover, and reduced job performance [26]. Work-life balance is crucial for increasing employee retention and productivity, as it directly influences employee satisfaction and organizational commitment [27].

5. Lack of Relevant Work Experience and Insufficient Skill Development Opportunities

Graduates faced significant challenges due to a lack of relevant work experience and insufficient training. Employers preferred candidates with practical knowledge, leaving recent graduates at a disadvantage. The disconnect between academic skills and employer demands hindered graduates' ability to adapt to new technologies and workflows. Limited internet access and inadequate computer education further restricted their digital skills. Additionally, graduates reported a lack of mentorship and guidance because, according to them, much focus has been given to assignments and exams rather than on practical real-world preparedness. One participant said'

"We learned a lot of theories but I think what was lacking is actual practice and also development of some skills needed in the real world of employment."

Work experience is crucial for employability and productivity. Studies indicate a strong correlation between work experience and job performance, with experienced employees frequently demonstrating heightened levels of job satisfaction, which, in turn, contributes to enhanced performance outcomes, suggesting a cyclical relationship where positive experiences reinforce motivation and commitment [28]. Conversely, the lack of experience may result in lower engagement and productivity [29]. Inadequate training negatively impacts productivity and can lead to high turnover rates [30];[31]. As a matter of remedy, it is recommended that organizations implement training programs on a continuous basis, rather than only when faced with difficulties, to maintain a proactive approach to skill enhancement and adaptation [32].

Additionally, the rapid growth of advanced technologies has led to increasing skill gaps in the job market, highlighting the urgent need for programs to retrain and improve the skills of the current workforce [33]. Effective mentorship is also essential, as mentors can provide invaluable insights and feedback on various facets of the mentee's development [34].

6. Stressful Workplace and Interpersonal Conflicts

Many graduates found the workplace environment to be stressful and not conducive to productivity. Tensions from office and interpersonal matters, conflicting personalities, and differing working styles within teams made collaboration challenging. Graduates also reported trust issues, disagreements with co-workers, and difficulties dealing with unreasonable bosses. Adjusting to the company culture and environment, particularly in interactions with colleagues, posed significant challenges.

Handling customers also presented its own set of challenges for graduates, who found it difficult to manage stress related to customer interactions. Managing customer attitudes and handling rude clients were common difficulties, especially for those in sales roles who had to interact with customers continuously.

"I work in the sales department so I'm always interacting with customers. Different customers have different attitudes, so I need to use various approaches. At first, I was irritated by some of the difficult customers."

Workplace conflicts can negatively affect employees' work performance [35]. These conflicts, occurring at various organizational levels, have been linked to decreased productivity [36]. Conflict between employees and their superiors is significantly related to higher levels of employee turnover [37]. Interpersonal conflicts within the workplace can result in damaged relationships, reduced productivity, and diminished job satisfaction [38]. Poor customer-employee relations can also significantly impact productivity within an organization. High employee turnover rates [39], can result from poor customer-employee relations, leading to the loss of experienced employees and established customer relationships, ultimately affecting customer satisfaction and organizational productivity.

7. Limited Career Growth and Job insecurity

People frequently reported challenges with motivation, career growth, and job security. Many felt their efforts were unrecognized, leading to decreased productivity and low morale. One graduate noted,

"There is no recognition for good performance, only limited to those who are favored."

Graduates also faced issues with delayed salary payments, insufficient supplies, and financial problems affecting their job satisfaction and performance. Job security was a significant concern, with difficulties in securing permanent positions, particularly in government services, due to eligibility requirements.

Financial incentives, recognition, job security, and job satisfaction are crucial motivators for improving worker productivity [40]. Motivation significantly influences productivity, with psychological and physical health factors playing key roles [41].

Low salaries correlate with reduced motivation and performance [42], as misalignment between effort and compensation decreases morale and job satisfaction, affecting productivity [43]. Job insecurity leads to decreased job satisfaction, poor working conditions, and strained organizational relationships, resulting in reduced productivity, increased errors, and higher accident rates [44]. Job security is essential for improving employee engagement and performance, especially during financial crises [45].

Recommendations:

Based on the findings drawn, the researcher recommends the following:

1. The University may consider enhancement of the curriculum by integrating more real-world learning

activities such as simulations, case studies, and immersion to bridge the gap between education and workplace practice.

2. The University may offer trainings, seminars, and workshops regularly that focus on enhancing soft skills.
3. The University may establish stronger academic-industry partnerships to ensure that education is aligned with the demand of the job market and implement mentorship to help graduates adjust to the expectations of the industry.
4. The graduates may consider pursuing professional development to enhance their competencies.

Conclusion:

As graduates made their way to workforce, they encountered various workplace productivity challenges which are caused by a wide range of factors that may emanate from the educational factors, work environment, and personal issues. Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate strategy that encourages educational enhancement, purposeful approach that promotes positive work environment, and continuous skill improvement.

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