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Quality of Working Life – What's Important to you?

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An Introduction to ATINER's Conference Paper Series

ATINER started to publish this conference papers series in 2012. It includes only the papers submitted for publication after they were presented at one of the conferences organized by our Institute every year. The papers published in the series have not been refereed and are published as they were submitted by the author. The series serves two purposes. First, we want to disseminate the information as fast as possible. Second, by doing so, the authors can receive comments useful to revise their papers before they are considered for publication in one of ATINER's books, following our standard procedures of a blind review.

Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
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Abstract

This study used Thurstone's (1927) Case V Method of paired comparisons to derive a ranking of the relative importance of a set of variables identified in the literature and the author's empirical work as impacting on Quality of Working Life. This study aimed to assess the degree of homogeneity / heterogeneity in the rankings for a range of demographic groupings, including: public versus private sector, gender and grade in organisation. A sample of employees (N=215) undertook pairwise comparisons for all permutations of pairings of nine variables. Results revealed a range of demographic differences.

Keywords:

Corresponding Author:

Introduction and Context

The literature relating to Quality of Working Life (hereafter QoWL) presents a diverse array of possible influencing factors at the organisational and individual levels, both intrinsic and extrinsic. The result is a plethora of sometimes complimentary, sometimes conflicting influencing factors with little consensus as to a subset of key variables. Further complicating the identification of key variables is the lack of a broadly accepted definition of the concept of QoWL.

A number of studies explore the impact of QoWL on economic performance, some of which suggest a link between improved QoWL and increased economic performance. deCarufel and Schaan (1990), for example, report the introduction of flexible working hours resulting in increased job satisfaction and productivity and decreased absenteeism and need for overtime. Similarly, Baltes' (1999) also found productivity, job satisfaction, absenteeism and satisfaction with work schedule to be 'favourably influenced' (p505) by flexible working arrangements. However, positive effects did diminish over time as employees acclimatised to flexible working. Lau (2000) concludes that service sector employees provide higher quality customer service when they experience higher standards of QoWL.

Recruitment can be an expensive endeavour, so retaining employees is an important asset. Curtis and Wright (2001) estimate that recruiting new staff can cost up to 150% of annual salary. They suggest that organisational commitment can be engendered through competitive pay, career development opportunities, flexible working arrangements and employee benefits.

Research by Vandenberghe et al (2004) found organisational commitment to have a significant indirect effect on intention to quit, while employee commitment to their supervisor and work group were also found to have an indirect impact on organisational commitment. Although it might be argued that commitment embodies more than QoWL, Fields and Thacker (1992) found organisational commitment to be increased following the implementation of a QoWL programme that was deemed to have been successful. As such it might be indicated that if QoWL has a positive impact on organisational commitment and this in turn, impacts upon other work related outcomes, then investing in QoWL does have merit.

Advancement in technology also has the potential to impact on QoWL with increasing capability for working remotely and in particular, working at home. According to Shamir and Solomon (1985) working at home can result in decreased task significance, feedback and social relations. They suggest flexible work location to be a viable alternative to mediate these potential negative outcomes. Baruch (2000) found 'teleworking' (remote working/working from home) to yield positive benefits in terms of balancing family life, increased performance due to reduced distraction, greater satisfaction, reduced stress and improved support. However, teleworking could have a detrimental effect on career aspiration and prospects.

Hardill and Green (2003) suggest that 'telework' offers increased flexibility in achieving work outcomes by removing time and place constraints, but conclude that 'teleworking can mean that long distance commuters can spend more time at home, but it is not always possible to organise this to fit with the work schedules of colleagues' (p221).

It could be argued that the range of influencing factors proposed by existing research provides a varied view of a complex subject. However, for businesses it can surely serve only as a source of confusion when they try to address QoWL related issues. Without some form of consensus, where should a business start? The current study seeks to identify the key QoWL related variables and to explore whether or not there is consensus amongst groups of employees as to which are more or less salient in influencing their QoWL. If a broad consensus of ranking of the relative salience of the QoWL variables is evident, there is potential that businesses can use this ranking to target QoWL interventions to achieve maximum benefit on investment.

Aim

The aim of this study was to gain insight into employee perspectives on the relative salience of variables identified as impacting on QoWL, and the extent to which this could be considered universal, i.e. which variables are considered most important and the degree of consensus / social difference in these ratings.

Method

The ranking method applied in this study is based on Thurstone's (1927) Case V method of paired comparison. The technique allows for the ranking of variables as well as the positioning of variables on a psychophysical scale, thus enabling the relative salience of each to be established. Response groups can be reliably compared against each other on the basis of these subjective psychophysical scales. Advantages over direct ranking are that it shows the relative distance between variables within psychophysical space and it is also a 'constant method' in that it shows whether variables can be reliably ranked and distinguished in ways that are replicable, particularly when presented with complex variables (Bock & Jones, 1968).

The following study design was devised in order to address the question of whether universality exists in the rank order employees assign to variables relating to QoWL. The complete Case V (1927) method presents the variables included in random pairs, for all permutations of pairings, so that all variables are presented with all other variables. Respondents are asked to decide which of each pair presented they prefer, or in this instance which they feel has greater impact on their QoWL, until all pairs have been presented. Variables must share common characteristics so that they are comparable, but must also be distinct enough that respondents can discriminate between them. The Paired

Comparisons Method allows not only for the ranking of a group of variables, but also for a value to be put on each on the basis of how many times a variable is selected as being preferable to that with which it is compared in each presented pairing. As such, the method allows for seemingly unquantifiable variables to be assigned a value through the series of judgements that stimulus *a* is preferable to stimulus *b*, stimulus *b* preferable to stimulus *c* and so forth. The method makes the assumption that each of the respondents is placing the variables presented against an internal psychological scale, thus allotting each variable a value on the subjective psychophysical scale.

The inclusion of an anchor variable, similar in nature to the core set of variables, but distinct enough that is not directly included in the set creates a point of reference against which the variables of interest can be positioned (Thurstone, 1927; Ostberg, 1980). The presentation of pairs positions each variable as both test stimulus and standard for comparison, making paired comparison a constant-method technique. By presenting pairs of variables, rather than a list of all variables as a direct ranking technique would do, variables are compared only against one other, removing possible judgement bias and subjective opinion about where each variable might sit on the scale as a whole.

The psychological scale that results from the paired comparison exercise is "at best an artificial construct" according to Thurstone (1927), and to make any assumption as to the nature of the distribution would be to assume that the scale is pre-existing when in fact, it is the process of paired comparisons that produces the scale (Thurstone, 1927). The degree of ambiguity presented by any variable can be assessed using what Thurstone calls the 'discriminal dispersion' of the scale. This is done through the calculation of the standard deviation of a particular variable on the scale relative to the distribution of the discriminal dispersion on the constructed scale. A variable with a large discriminal dispersion can be interpreted as presenting a high level of ambiguity.

Difficulties and ambiguity may arise when respondents show indifference to variables presented. When the just discernible difference is too slight to be identified and the scale becomes insensitive to detecting the differences. It could be argued that in such instances indifference is not necessarily transitive. In light of such an outcome, the design of the present study needed to be such that there was sufficient discernible difference between variables that any ambiguity due to lack of discernible difference between variables be avoided.

Ostberg (1980) applied a variation of Thurstone's Case V (1927) method in exploring differences in risk judgements between groups rather than universal differences, and it is from this that the current study method has been derived. Ostberg (1980) recognised that the responses obtained from the paired comparison study were judgements and so overcame this issue by transforming these judgments into arcsine deviates. Ostberg also introduced an anchor variable against which all other variables could be referenced. To do this in a sophisticated way means not just looking the rankings by group but looking at the variables as a source of variables as well.

Hypotheses

(i) Employees exhibit a consistent perspective on variables impacting on their quality of working life.
(ii) There will be consensus between different demographic groupings of employees regarding their rankings of variables that influence their quality of working life.

Procedure

Identification of Variables and size of the set of variables
Variables for inclusion in the paired comparison study were generated from quantitative empirical work undertaken by the author. A total of six variables were identified from a Factor Analysis of survey of employees (N = 215); the survey being grounded in earlier qualitative work. The variables: Reward, Recognition and Fair Treatment; Leader-Member Exchange; Training, Development and Career Opportunities; Flexibility; Job Satisfaction and Work/Life Balance, derived from the factor analysis, were supplemented by the addition of two further variables identified in the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Quality of working life survey (HSE 2011). These variables were; Pay and Benefits and Colleague Support &Team Work.

Format of variables
Due to the nature of the variables considered for inclusion, pictorial representation as employed by Ostberg (1980) was discounted. The variables relating to QoWL considered for inclusion in the study did not lend themselves to pictorial representation due to the fact they were not action related verbs and as such could be misinterpreted if it were at all possible to depict them. In the current study, described textural representation was considered to be the most appropriate method of representation in light of this. However, complex descriptions also needed to be avoided in order that respondents could quickly decipher between variables and make an instantaneous decision on their preference in each pairing. Variables needed to be a clear and succinct, expression of the intended meaning, with no room for misinterpretation. With this objective in mind, descriptions of variables were drafted and considered in consultation with an expert in the field.

Cognitive Piloting of the Variables
In the absence of any similar paired comparison study in this area a small pool of respondents were invited to participate in a cognitive pilot. The respondents were from a range of educational and vocational backgrounds in order that interpretation of the meaning of each variable could be confirmed. The respondents were split into two groups. The first group was presented with each of the eight variables in turn and asked to describe their understanding of the variables. Responses were recorded wrote for later analysis.

The second group was presented with eight descriptions of the variables, in turn, and asked to give the researcher a short title to define what they thought the description was portraying. Again, the responses were recorded for later analysis.

Once all eight respondents had completed their assigned task, the researcher compared the definitions and interpretations and reviewed the set of variables in light of the cognitive pilot responses. Minor amendments to wording of variables were made as a result of the cognitive pilot and in discussion with an expert in the field.

The Pilot

The refined set of variables was configured into the pairings ready to pilot. The pilot was conducted in person with the researcher presenting the pairs printed in type font Arial, size 16 on strips of paper on a one to one basis to eight respondents. Prior to presentation of variables respondents were instructed that they were to respond as quickly as possible and without deliberation to each pairing and not to consider in too much depth the response they selected so as to get their first instinct response to the variables. Variables were presented in random order in each case so as to remove any possible order effect.

Following the study respondents were asked if they had felt unsure about the meaning of any of the response variables. All respondents stated that they felt confident they understood the meaning of variables and that the variables were discernibly different. Internal consistency calculations (Kendall's *k* calculation) indicated high within respondent consistency for all eight respondents supporting the verbal assertions of respondents that the variables were easy to distinguish from each other and unambiguous (Table 1). However, on closer inspection it was noted that the internal consistency coefficients improved for most respondents when variable 1 'Reward, recognition and Fair Treatment' was removed from the set of variables. In response to this finding it was decided that this variable would not be included in the final set (Table 2).

Between participant concordance calculations produced a modest level of concordance across the group (W=0.46) and a significant Chi Square value (χ^2=29 with df=7) suggesting that the question of universality was worth pursuing.

Final set of variables

The final set of variables consisted of eight QoWL related variables with the addition of one anchor variable 'Satisfaction with Life Outside of Work' which was selected on the basis of it being linked to the area of interest, but set outside of the work-related variables the paired comparison was based upon. This variable was drawn from the 2011 Office of National Statistics 'Initial Investigation into Subjective Well-Being from the Opinions Survey'. The variable was first added to the ONS Survey in April 2011 and is described in the report as 'The 'eudemonic' approach, sometimes referred to as the

psychological or functioning/flourishing approach which draws on self-determination theory and tends to measure such things as people's sense of meaning and purpose in life, connections with family and friends, a sense of control and whether they feel part of something bigger than themselves' (p4). The variable fit well with the overall group of variables in that it aimed to reflect peoples' perceptions of how their everyday life felt across similar aspects to those identified in the previous studies reported here in relation to what employees described as having an impact on their QoWL.

Nine variables making up the final set of variables was considered an acceptable number in terms of the number of pairings this would result in. It was felt that any more than thirty-six pairings would prove too much for respondents, risking the outcome that they would become disengaged or even fail to complete the study should they be presented with any more pairings. Furthermore, the key areas identified through studies one and two of this research alongside the additional variables drawn from the unpublished HSE research meant that all of the significant areas of enquiry to be raised thus far were represented in the set of variables. The final set of variables is presented in table 2.

Sample

The data was gathered using a bespoke software package designed specifically for the task. The software was web based and could be accessed via a link to the study. The link was made available to those wishing to complete it via social networking sites FaceBook and LinkedIn. The software randomised presentation of pairings of variables to remove the possibility of order effects.

In total 234 complete response set were completed. Due to the nature of how the study link was made available to potential respondents a diverse range of organisations, job roles and levels are represented through an opportunity sample. Although arguably a stratified sample would have been a more targeted approach, the method applied met with the objectives of the study to collect as diverse a sample as possible within the confines of the sampling strategies available, in order to establish if universality exists across different forms and levels of employ.

Analysis of Results

Pre-analysis Checks

Low levels of internal consistency in a sufficiently large proportion of the responses set (>10%) would indicate that the variables selected for inclusion in the set of variables were ambiguous in nature or ill-defined and could invalidate the study if significant in number. The coefficient of consistency (k) calculation was carried out to assess the level of within respondent consistency. K values range from zero to one, with 0 indicating absolutely no consistency and 1 indicating perfect consistency. The k value can be checked using a chi^2 calculation, as was done in this instance. Application of these criteria for

significance resulted in 17 (7.3%) of the data sets being excluded from further analysis on the basis that their significance was too low to render them suitable. The coefficient of concordance *(W)* indicates the degree of agreement between respondents as to the order in which they ranked the set of variables presented. A *W* value close to zero indicates little or no agreement, while a score closer to 1 indicates a high degree of agreement.

In order to apply the concordance *W* calculation all variables must be assigned a rank position of one to nine on the basis of the number of times each variable was 'preferred' within each response set. The ranks are assigned on the basis of the highest rank (9) being assigned to the variable preferred the most often with each subsequent rank being assigned to the next least preferred variable. Inevitably, some variables are preferred the same number of times and as a result fall into the same rank position, this must be controlled for. A tied ranks calculation was applied as a correction for these instances.

Each response set was presented in a frequency table and converted into judgement proportions. In accordance with the method developed by Ostberg (1980) these proportions were then transformed into arcsine deviates (table 4). The arcsine transformations were summed and the mean calculated for each variable resulting in the QoWL value on the psychophysical scale. Comparisons of demographics groupings by age, sector and level in organisation were conducted to assess relative salience of QoWL variables across the different groupings (figures 1,2,3,4).

Figure 1 presents whole group mean ranking of variables, against anchor variable 1. Overall, variable 5 (Job satisfaction) was ranked highest, closely followed by variable 6 (Balance between work and home life). Variable 3 (Staff development and training) was ranked lowest overall.

In accordance with the method outlined by Ostberg (1980) it can be observed that salience of QoWL variables tends to increase relatively with age (figure 2), plateauing at its highest point at around the age of 40 years. Public sector workers (figure 3) tend to rate QoWL variables as more salient than private sector workers and relative salience of QoWL variables tends to increase at lower levels of employment level (figure 4).

Discussion

The method of paired comparisons produces an interval scale of the relative salience of variables within a given set. The results in this insistence indicated high levels of internal consistency (k), which indicated that respondents were able to distinguish between the scale variables in a reliable and reproducible manner. A key question related to the degree of agreement (concordance) between individuals over their relative salience of the ranking. Exploring this using Kendalls' W revealed that the degree of agreement between individuals was modest. This would seem to suggest that people vary in the value they place upon the QoWL variables.

To examine this, further demographic differences were explored by age, employment sector, and grade. This analysis revealed a modest increase in the degree of concordance between members of the constituent groups.

Whilst we were unable to locate any literature directly exploring the relationship between age and QoWL, Rhodes (1983) in her review of literature found age related differences across various work attitudes and behaviours, most notably relevant to this study in relation to age and job satisfaction. Rhodes (1983) cites a number of studies supporting this assertion (Aldag & Brief, 1975; Near, Rice & Hunt, 1978; Staines & Quinn, 1978; Weaver, 1978, 1980). As early as 1960, Hoppock (1960) in a study involving 286 respondents found 'a slight but clearly positive tendency for satisfaction to increase with age' (p117) going on to hypothesise that this is most likely a result of the 'increasing pleasure and satisfaction which may come to the worker as a result of gradual proficiency and familiarity with his work' (p117).

In relation to sector, again no research relating directly to QoWL was identified, however research by Karl and Sutton (1998) found that job values for public and private sector workers were significantly different with private sector workers valuing good wages as most important and public sector workers preferring their work to be interesting. The authors found no significant difference in the importance assigned to job security between private and public sector workers. The findings of the current research would seem consistent with those of Karl and Sutton (1998) in that public sector workers places greater salience on variables relating to QoWL than private sector workers.

The demographic breakdown of employment level suggests that QoWL becomes increasingly salient for lower level employees. Perhaps this can be interpreted in light of the rank order of variables presented in figure 1. Job satisfaction and Balance between work and home life were ranked the two most salient variables of QoWL overall; if this is the case perhaps lower level employees assign higher salience to QoWL variables than higher level employees due to the fact that they are often in less skilled and more repetitive work resulting in lower job satisfaction (Hackman & Oldham, 1971; Walton, 1974; Buchanan & Boddy, 1982; Lambert et al, 2001;) and often have little or no flexibility with which to achieve greater work life balance (Batuch, 2000; Hardill & Green, 2003). In the absence of past research exploring QoWL differences between levels in organisation, the authors propose that this would be an interesting area for future research.

Results might indicate that the ranking measure would be useful for establishing relative salience of QoWL related variables within departments of an organisation where the sub culture is similar. Once the sample is expanded too widely the diversity of organisational cultures and individual preferences create noise in the data making concordance unlikely. i.e. need to break it down to smaller components to find a level of concordance amongst colleagues working in the same area or department of an organisation and at the same employment level. It may also be possible to expand this to similar

departments in large public sector organisations like education institutions and find concordance between respondents or groups.

Conclusion

Despite low to moderate concordance between respondents it would appear that there are areas of broad agreement in relation to job satisfaction and work life balance being more salient variables in relation to QoWL. Although it is not always possible to offer greater flexibility in some work settings (e.g. production lines), where possible it would appear that affording employees the opportunity to exercise some autonomy over how they organise their working day and manage their hours to accommodate work/life balance may enhance QoWL. Furthermore, an understanding of how employees draw satisfaction from their work may allow employers to enhance those aspects of work through job rotation to enhance task variety, for example that might enhance the employee sense of job satisfaction.

The current study goes some way towards establishing a set of key QoWL related variables and their relative salience. While it is acknowledged that more research needs to be commissioned to further clarify these results, the findings do go some way to providing a roadmap for business as to how to prioritise QoWL interventions in an effort to maximise positive outcomes.

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Table 1. *Internal consistency calculations*

Respondent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
All Variables	0.77	0.67	0.9	0.7	0.87	0.6	1	0.97
Variable 1 removed	0.9	0.85	0.95	0.75	1	0.8	1	0.95

Table 2. *Final Set of variables for Paired Comparison Study*

Variable	
1*	Satisfaction with Life Outside of Work
2	Relationship with your Manager
3	Staff Development and Training
4	Flexible Working Arrangements
5	Job Satisfaction
6	Balance Between Work and Home Life
7	Pay and Benefits
8	Colleague Support and Team Work
9	Fair Treatment and Equality

*Variable 1 is the anchor variable relating to quality of life

Table 3. *Demographic Breakdown of data groups*

Gender	Male	56
	Female	49
Age	20s	8
	30s	46
	40s	30
	50+	21
SES	Front Line	37
	Supervisor	33
	Senior	10
Sector	Public	88
	Private	54

Table 4. *Scale values referenced to variable 1*

	Whole group	Female	Male	Age: 20s	Age: 30s	Age: 40s	Age: 50+	Public sector	Private sector	SES: Senior	SES: Mid	SES: Front line
1	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
2	0.184	0.238	0.262	-0.127	0.138	0.791	0.832	0.265	0.000	0.104	0.000	0.383
3	-0.257	0.000	-0.155	-0.127	-0.782	0.636	0.674	-0.072	-0.695	-0.335	-0.777	0.000
4	0.092	0.104	0.281	-1.165	0.222	0.791	0.674	0.057	0.245	-0.175	0.095	0.228
5	0.430	0.590	0.477	0.000	0.393	1.050	1.209	0.518	0.456	0.388	0.346	0.613
6	0.320	0.437	0.457	-0.204	0.346	1.082	0.902	0.404	0.429	-1.076	0.257	0.383
7	0.222	0.180	0.355	-1.165	0.222	0.955	0.832	0.146	0.309	0.000	0.257	0.410

8	0.160	0.180	0.321	-0.127	0.079	0.887	0.994	0.213	0.204	0.057	0.052	0.435
9	0.060	0.000	0.101	-1.165	-0.782	0.791	0.927	0.057	-0.096	-0.175	-0.153	0.228
Total	1.210	1.729	2.099	-4.081	-0.163	6.982	7.044	1.590	0.852	-1.213	0.078	2.681
Mean	0.134	0.192	0.233	-0.453	-0.018	0.776	0.783	0.177	0.095	-0.135	0.009	0.298
SD	0.197	0.206	0.212	0.537	0.450	0.323	0.336	0.194	0.354	0.408	0.334	0.204
95% CI	0.015	0.016	0.016	0.040	0.034	0.024	0.025	0.146	0.027	0.031	0.025	0.015

Figure 1. *Overall rating of QoWL variables*

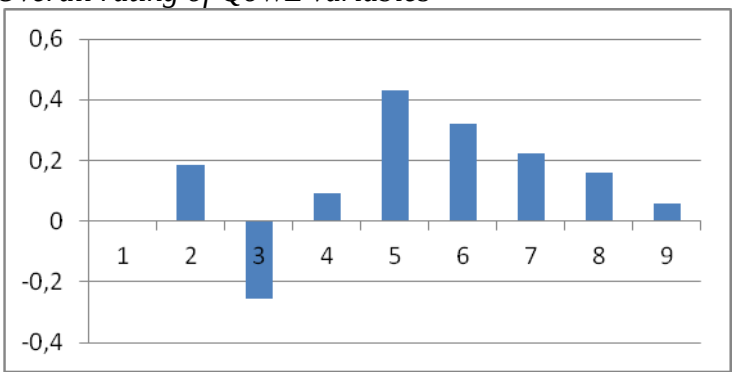

Figure 2. *Salience of QoWL variables by Age*

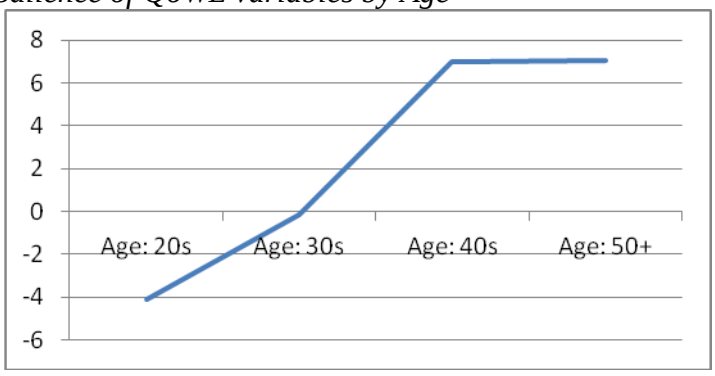

Figure 3. *Salience of QoWL variables by Sector*

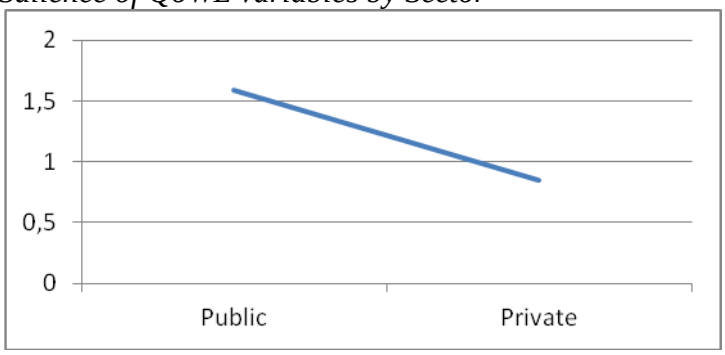
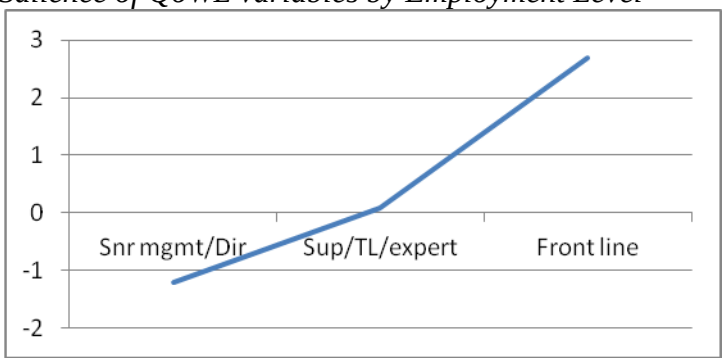
Figure 4. *Salience of QoWL variables by Employment Level*