

Working on projects: career satisfaction of employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities for project delivery

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to investigate factors affecting the career satisfaction of vendors' employees who perform project tasks on-site at clients' owned facilities for several years as part of project delivery in Sri Lanka. The study identified six factors that influence the career satisfaction of these employees, namely, work content, financial rewards and other gains, work relationships, supervisor support, general working conditions, and opportunities experienced due to being stationed at clients' firms. Overall, the study context is novel and the findings make contributions to the advancement of project management literature and practice.

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1. Introduction

The use of project-based work structures can be identified as one of the most popular and effective innovations in managing business enterprises even though the extent of use can vary from business sector to sector and over time. Evidence suggests that project-based work structure is popular in software development and software development firms tend to engage employees in projects in the most efficient manner (Wickramasinghe & Liyanage, 2013). Still, the career mobility of employees attached to software development firms is relatively high, and these firms record higher rates of employee voluntary turnover. In this regard, individuals' career satisfaction is identified as one of the main determinants of the voluntary turnover of employees, who are engaged in projects (McKevitt et al., 2017; Nauman et al., 2021). An individual's career satisfaction is a product of a variety of job-related experiences. The literature suggests that individuals' career satisfaction needs to be investigated and interpreted within their work context (Morgeson et al., 2010; Spurk et al., 2015).

The research context of the present study is such that vendors' (service providers/suppliers') employees provide services to clients (service hiring firms) while being stationed on-site at clients' facilities as part of the project delivery. Hence, the location of the job changes; sometimes engages as the only employee providing services on behalf of the vendor at a particular client's site for several years. For example, a software development firm (client) contracts out some software development activities to another software development firm (vendor). The vendor engages its employees to perform the tasks on-site at the client's facilities. In a similar vein, a software development firm (firm A - client) uses another software development firm's (firm B - vendor) software in its projects. To facilitate the use and to further develop the software to be used for the client's projects (firm A's), firm B engages its employees on-site at the client's facilities. Since development work takes time, many of such vendors' employees perform tasks on-site at clients' facilities for several years. With globalization, while offshore software development prevails, the present study investigated internal (within a country) software development projects.

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The purpose of the present study was to investigate factors that affect the career satisfaction of vendors' employees who perform project tasks on-site at clients' facilities for several years as part of the project delivery. The study attempted to identify important human resource management practices related to pay, career advancement, general working conditions, job design, and supervisor support that could influence the career satisfaction of these employees, which are of interest to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. When considering the significance of the study, first, the literature provides the rationale and implications of software development projects from the perspective of client and vendor firms (Khan & Khan, 2017). However, previous research that explicitly considered the career satisfaction of vendors' employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities is scarce. We studied the context of software development projects where vendors supply and manage all inputs (including skilled personnel), which are delivered on-site at clients' facilities. As a result, vendors must station some of their employees on-site at clients' facilities for several years to accomplish project targets. Second, it is important to understand the human resource system applied by vendors for their employees who are stationed on-site at clients' facilities. Third, an employee who is stationed on-site at a client's facility continuously interacts with his or her organization (vendor) and gets exposed to the client's work environment. Therefore, the project delivery while having vendors' employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities makes changes in the way work is performed. This suggests the importance of understanding the implications of this work context for the career satisfaction of vendors' employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities for several years. Hence, the study intended to advance the literature by enhancing the understanding of people management in this type of projects.

2. Review of Literature

2.1. Career satisfaction and factors that influence career satisfaction

Today, employees are less inclined to pursue a lifelong career in a single organization; a career is more broadly identified as an individual's lifelong sequence of role-related experiences. Career satisfaction is a subjective measure of career success - a self-judgement of one's satisfaction with his or her career so far. For example, Nauta et al. (2009) identified career satisfaction as an evaluation of career accomplishments an individual has had so far and opportunities for future advancement. Investigations on the career satisfaction of individuals have become important since employees who are satisfied with their careers are less likely to be absent from work and voluntarily quit their workplaces. The present study was designed to investigate whether work content, financial rewards and other gains, work relationships, supervisor support, general working conditions, and opportunities experienced due to being stationed at clients' firms influence the career satisfaction of the employees under consideration. Accordingly, the research model developed for the study is shown in Fig. 1.

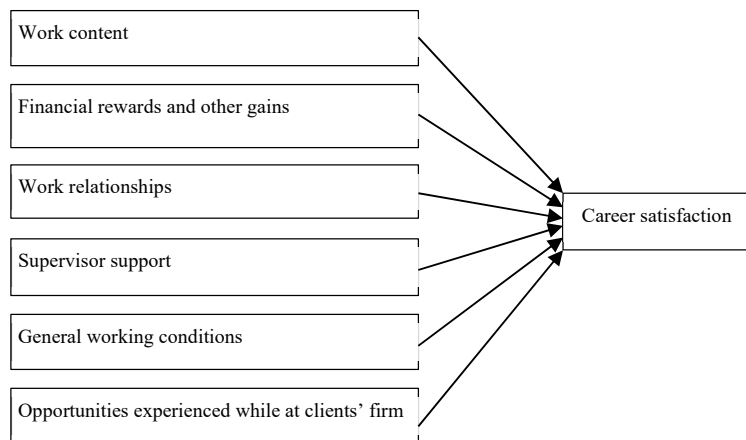


Fig. 1. Research Model

2.1.1. Work content

Work content, which is used as a proxy to assess career satisfaction, describes features of the job performed, such as job challenge, autonomy, opportunities for learning, and task significance. For instance, recent studies such as McKeivitt et al. (2017, 2022), Wickramasinghe and Premachandra (2021), and Wickramasinghe and Wickramasinghe (2017) showed that meaningful and interesting job assignments and opportunities for learning from the job operate as substitutes for hierarchical progression and have significant positive effects on career satisfaction when opportunities for promotion are limited. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H₁: *Work content has a significant positive effect on career satisfaction.*

2.1.2. Financial rewards and other gains

Previous studies provide evidence for the importance of financial rewards and other gains received by employees such as benefits, opportunities for advancement, job security, and recognition for job-related achievements for career satisfaction

(Wang et al., 2014). With the globalization of business operations and due to uncertainties in the business environment, firms place a premium on employees' capabilities. In this regard, previous studies in Sri Lanka suggest that in addition to financial rewards and benefits, firms in the information technology sector strategically provide skill development opportunities for employees for effective task completion (Wickramasinghe & Liyanage, 2013; Wickramasinghe & Ramanathan, 2022). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H₂: *Financial rewards and other gains received by employees have a significant positive effect on career satisfaction.*

2.1.3. Work relationships

Interpersonal relationships and group dynamics are primary human concerns, and employees expect pleasant relationships involving managers, co-workers, and subordinates. In this regard, employees may learn about each other over time, such as whether colleagues are fair, reliable, and responsible (Wickramasinghe & Pathirana, 2022). Further, Wickramasinghe and Wickramasinghe (2017) showed the importance of employees' involvement and participation in decision-making for positive psychosocial outcomes at work. Furthermore, the context of the present study creates uncertainties for vendors' employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities. The literature describes uncertainty as an individual's inability to predict something accurately and experiencing a sense of doubt about current or future events. Employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities may experience uncertainty due to the lack of sufficient information, ambiguous information, or contradictory information received from unreliable sources about activities or the status of his or her organization (i.e., vendor firm). Therefore, vendors that station employees on-site at clients' facilities should take special steps to provide and update these employees with rich, credible, and trustworthy information on what is happening in the work organization in a timely, coherent, and continuous fashion (see Angwin et al., 2016). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H₃: *Work relationships have a significant positive effect on career satisfaction.*

2.1.4. Supervisor support

Support from supervisors for task accomplishment and career advancement is important for career satisfaction (Tahiry & Ekmekcioglu, 2023; Huo & Jiang, 2021). Individual employees, though they are committed, may not be able to fully manage their job tasks and fulfil their career aspirations without support from supervisors. Supervisor support takes many forms such as the provision of challenging work assignments, visibility for good work done, and counselling (Gardner & Wickramasinghe, 2023). Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H₄: *Supervisor support has a significant positive effect on career satisfaction.*

2.1.5. General working conditions

The literature shows the importance of general working conditions such as hours worked and the feeling of a safe and comfortable work environment for the total well-being of employees (Sarker et al., 2010). Working time describes a contextual factor related to the pattern of work and working time could create physical and psychological strain on employees influencing their psychological outcomes such as career satisfaction (Sarker et al., 2010). The availability of flexible work schedules provides greater control over working time. Wickramasinghe et al. (2019) identified the importance of working time as an important work characteristic as perceived by employees in the information technology sector. Hence, it is important to investigate the general working conditions experienced by the employees. Therefore, it is hypothesized:

H₅: *General working conditions have a significant positive effect on career satisfaction.*

2.1.6. Opportunities experienced due to being stationed at clients' firms

The context of the study, i.e., vendors' employees stationing on-site at clients' facilities as part of the project delivery, is novel and getting greater importance. Still, we have not found previous research that is similar to ours. We believe that certain experiences these employees may be exposed to while at clients' facilities for several years, such as stationing in a new work environment, having social relationships with new people, and meeting the management of the client's firm may influence their perceptions of career satisfaction. Therefore, it is proposed:

H₆: *Opportunities experienced due to being stationed at clients' firms have a significant positive effect on career satisfaction.*

3. Method

3.1. Sample and method of data collection

Employees engaged in projects in software development firms in Sri Lanka were targeted. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were used to identify employees who were completing project tasks while being stationed on-site at the client's facilities on behalf of his/her firm of employment (vendor). To become eligible to be included in the sample, both client and vendor firms should be located within the country, Sri Lanka. Further, these employees should have at least six months of work experience in completing project tasks while being stationed on-site at the client's facilities. A survey questionnaire was

used for the data collection. The participants were informed of the objectives of the study; their participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous. A total of 170 valid responses were received from those who fulfilled the above-mentioned criteria. Concerning characteristics of the sample, the mean age was 29 years (standard deviation = 2.50, minimum = 24 years, maximum = 37 years). 58% were male while 42% were female. Total tenure (mean) with the employing firm was 3 years (standard deviation = 2.0, minimum = 1 year, maximum = 10 years). The duration (mean) of being stationed on-site at the client's facilities was nine months (standard deviation = 0.70, minimum = 6 months, maximum = 3 years).

3.2. Measures and data analysis

Work content was measured with a five-item scale developed for the study. Financial rewards and other gains were measured with a seven-item scale developed for the study. General work conditions were measured with a five-item scale developed for the study. Opportunities experienced due to being stationed at clients' firms were measured with a five-item scale developed for the study. Work relationships were measured with an eight-item scale developed for the study. All the scales used for work content, financial rewards and other gains, work relationships, general working conditions, and opportunities experienced due to being stationed at clients' firms were on a five-point scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied). Supervisor support was measured on a seven-item scale by Greenhaus et al. (1990), which was on a five-point scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 5 = very satisfied). Career satisfaction was measured on a five-item scale by Greenhaus et al. (1990), which was on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Regression analysis was used to identify associations between the independent variables and the dependent variable. Beta coefficients (β) and the adjusted coefficient of determination were used to interpret the results of regression analysis.

4. Results

As shown in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 factor analysis yielded one factor for each variable - work content, financial rewards and other gains, general working conditions, and opportunities received due to being stationed at clients' firms. Table 5 shows the results of factor analysis for work relationships; the analysis yielded two factors. One of the factors was named as communication and engagement while the other factor was named as relationships with others. Table 6 shows the results of the factor analysis for supervisor support; the analysis yielded two factors. One of the factors was named as task performance-related while the other factor was named as advancement-related. Table 7 shows the results of the factor analysis for career satisfaction; the analysis yielded one factor. Means and standard deviations and correlations between variables are shown in Table 8.

Table 1
Work content

Item	Factor loading
Opportunity to utilize your skills and abilities	.797
Clarity of purpose of the job	.797
Variety in job responsibilities	.773
Having resources (other than knowledge, skills, and abilities) to perform job tasks	.723
Degree of independence associated with your job tasks	.677
Eigenvalue	2.848
% of Variance	56.958
Cronbach's Alpha	.808
AVE	.570
CR	.868

Table 2
Financial rewards and other gains

Item	Factor loading
Recognition for work accomplished	.823
Your monthly salary	.786
Feeling of job security	.771
Extra allowances due to relocation	.766
Opportunities for training and development	.736
Opportunities for career advancement	.680
Benefits you receive	.624
Eigenvalue	3.870
% of Variance	55.287
Cronbach's Alpha	.859
AVE	.553
CR	.896

Table 3
General work conditions

Item	Factor loading
Flexibility in work schedules	.828
Feeling of comfort	.809
Work hours assigned	.791
Location of work	.776
Feeling of safety	.673
Eigenvalue	3.021
% of Variance	60.425
Cronbach's Alpha	.832
AVE	.604
CR	.884

Table 4
Opportunities due to being stationed at clients' firm

Item	Factor loading
Opportunity to have exposure to new subject domains (at client's firm)	.841
Opportunity to work in a new work environment (at client's firm)	.807
Opportunity for social interactions with new people (at client's firm)	.732
Opportunity to undertake challenges while performing your job (at the client's firm)	.725
Opportunity to interact with the management (of the client's firm) while performing your job	.673
Eigenvalue	2.873
% of Variance	57.461
Cronbach's Alpha	.812
AVE	.575
CR	.870

Table 5
Work relationships

Item	Communication and engagement	Relationships with others
Your involvement in decisions that affect your work	.872	
Information you receive from management on what is going on in your firm	.758	
The way your firm keeps you informed about matters affecting you	.740	
Information you receive from management on what is going on in your division	.721	
The encouragement to come up with better ways of doing things	.702	
Relationship with your subordinates		.852
Relationship with your co-workers		.786
Relationship with your supervisor		.722
Eigenvalue	4.099	1.168
% of Variance	48.232	17.605
Cronbach's Alpha	.856	.759
AVE	.579	.622
CR	.872	.831

Table 6
Supervisor support

Item	Task performance-related	Advancement-related
Supervisor gives you helpful feedback about your performance	.886	
Supervisor makes sure that you get the credit when you accomplish something substantial on the job	.815	
Supervisor gives you helpful advice about improving your performance when you need it	.773	
Supervisor provides assignments that give you the opportunity to develop and strengthen new skills	.676	
Supervisor cares about whether or not you achieve your career goals		.913
Supervisor takes time to learn about your career goals and aspirations		.836
Supervisor keeps you informed about different career opportunities for you in the organization		.723
Eigenvalue	3.324	1.110
% of Variance	45.394	28.495
Cronbach's Alpha	.836	.802
AVE	.626	.685
CR	.869	.866

Table 7
Career satisfaction

Item	Factor loading
I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career	.852
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my overall career goals	.723
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for income	.656
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for the development of new skills	.806
I am satisfied with the progress I have made toward meeting my goals for advancement	.816
Eigenvalue	2.993
% of Variance	69.857
Cronbach's Alpha	.831
AVE	.599
CR	.881

Table 8
Correlations

Variable	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
1 Age	29.12	2.50	-												
2 Gender	-	-	.250**	-											
3 Firm tenure	3.28	2.34	.452**	.095	-										
4 Tenure- at client's	.75	.70	.235**	.137	.215**	-									
5 Gen. work cond.	4.12	.67	.021	.095	.092	.098	.77								
6 Financial rew. and other	3.94	.60	.186*	.248**	.185*	.104	.373**	.74							
7 Com. and engage.	4.07	.61	.046	.083	.188*	.103	.398**	.463**	.76						
8 Relation. others	4.32	.49	.009	.065	.229**	.082	.369**	.386**	.342**	.79					
9 Oppo. at clients'	4.26	.53	.051	.131	.114	.079	.371**	.346**	.316**	.360**	.76				
10 Work content	4.22	.53	.001	.074	.173*	.065	.366**	.483**	.475**	.492**	.312**	.75			
11 Task perf-related	4.02	.61	.047	.066	.093	.103	.441**	.351**	.349**	.318**	.359**	.365**	.79		
12 Adv-related	3.96	.75	.006	.074	.104	.081	.313**	.324**	.323**	.333**	.365**	.336**	.489**	.83	
13 Career Satis.	4.37	.52	-.036	.057	.088	.120	.431**	.450**	.378**	.331**	.349**	.345**	.545**	.333**	.77

Note: **p < 0.01, diagonal entries denote the square root of AVE where relevant; off-diagonal entries denote correlations.

The results of the regression analysis are shown in Table 9. All the factors investigated had significant effects on career satisfaction, supporting all hypotheses. Task performance-related supervisor support ($\beta = .283$, $p < 0.001$) has the highest effect on career satisfaction followed by financial rewards and other gains ($\beta = .214$, $p < 0.01$). Overall, a regression coefficient of 0.589 ($p < 0.001$) suggests that all six variables account for 59% of the variation in career satisfaction.

Table 9
Results of regression analysis

Step	Variable	β	R^2 (Adj.)	Change statistics		
				R^2 Change	F Change	Sig. of F Change
1	Age	-.012	.009	.080	0.753	p > 0.05
	Gender	.087				
	Firm tenure	.062				
	Tenure at client's site	.102				
2	Age	-.013	.589	.587	28.875	p < 0.001
	Gender	.019				
	Firm tenure	.012				
	Tenure at client's site	.014				
	Gen. work cond.	.179*				
	Financial rew. and other	.214**				
	Com. and engagement	.174*				
	Relationship with others	.166*				
	Oppo. at clients' site	.145*				
	Work content	.167*				
	Task perf-related	.283***				
	Adv-related	.117*				

Note: *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001

5. Discussion of findings and implications

Stationing vendors' employees on-site at clients' facilities as part of the completion of projects has also been observed across different sectors. However, stationing professional employees like software developers on-site at clients' facilities as part of the service provision is novel, and warrants investigations on how work context influences employees' psychological outcomes such as career satisfaction. The study identified six factors that influence the career satisfaction of vendors' employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities for the completion of projects. All six factors, namely, work content, financial rewards and other gains, work relationships, supervisor support, general work conditions, and opportunities experienced due to being stationed at the client's firm have significant positive effects on career satisfaction.

When considering contributions to the existing literature, few specific contributions of the findings can be identified. First, the focus of the study was on situations where a vendor firm stationing its professional employees on-site at the client's facilities as part of the completion of projects. While these employees are stationed on-site at the client's firm, interactions occur between them and their immediate supervisors, subordinates and colleagues who are stationed at the original site of vendors. Further, being stationed at the client's site exposes them to a different organizational setting and allows interaction with different personnel engaged in the client's firm.

Second, the career satisfaction of vendors' employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities for several years remains an under-investigated area of study and is poorly understood in the literature. We found that work design characteristics such as work content and general working conditions at clients' sites significantly influence the career satisfaction of these employees. These findings imply the importance of capitalizing on the non-financial desires of employees in terms of work content such as work autonomy and opportunities to learn from the job, and general working conditions such as work hours assigned and flexibility in schedules for career satisfaction. Further, it was found that these employees experience financial rewards, such as extra allowances due to relocation and other gains such as recognition for work accomplished, which gave them significant career satisfaction. Furthermore, we found that specific occupational experiences such as communication and engagement, relationships with others and supervisor support, which stem from vendors' site of origin significantly influence the career satisfaction of these employees. The findings especially emphasize the importance of the supporting role of supervisors, who are stationed at the vendor's site, in the task performance of employees stationed on-site at the client's site. In addition, it was found that special experiences like opportunities received due to being stationed at the client's site bring significant career satisfaction for these employees. This implies that career satisfaction is influenced not only by the practices designed for this type of employees by vendor firms but also by their work-related experiences at the client's site. In this regard, Nauman et al., (2021) emphasized the importance of understanding factors influencing the career satisfaction of employees and updating the literature on careers in the view of different types of employees. The findings of the study showed the factors that affect the conceptualization of career satisfaction of vendors' employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities as part of accomplishing project tasks.

Third, organizations' management practices are open to changes due to changes in business models. The context itself makes to rethink management practices used by vendors to engage professional employees on-site at clients' facilities as part of delivering project work. The findings showed the importance of maintaining appreciable levels of communication with these employees, continuously engaging them with the vendor organization, and helping to maintain relationships with the supervisor, subordinates and colleagues stationed at the vendor organization. Further, support from the supervisor who is stationed at the vendor organization site is also important for these employees in their task performance and career advancement. These findings suggest the importance of creating innovative approaches to manage vendors' employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities for the satisfaction of vendors and their employees. Vendor organizations need to recognize challenges stemming

from inter-organizational relations with clients, the delivery of expected project outcomes, deployment of employees to be stationed at clients' sites and institutional context involving employment terms and conditions, which could influence the career satisfaction of these employees. Therefore, our study context provides a novel and interesting context for the advancement of project management literature.

When considering contributions to practice, first, the study identified the importance of management practices of work design (work content and general working conditions), rewards management (salary, allowances, benefits, and learning and advancement opportunities), and the management of the work environment (work relationships and supervisor support) for career satisfaction of vendors' employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities. Still, employees experience not only the practices of vendor organizations while stationed at clients' sites but are also exposed to work context at client firms. The findings revealed the importance of opportunities experienced due to being stationed at clients' firms such as exposure to new subject domains, social interactions with new people and a new work environment. In addition, the findings suggest that employees receive opportunities to undertake challenges while performing their jobs at clients' firms. Performance goal orientation allows an individual to demonstrate his or her capabilities to others and to receive positive evaluations from others, which will ultimately influence their career satisfaction. Overall, this finding suggests that these employees get exposed to new knowledge and technologies as well as social relationships, which otherwise may be outside their reach. Therefore, stationing vendors' employees at clients' sites may be attractive to vendors' employees as an additional source of career satisfaction.

Second, projects with vendors' employees stationed at clients' sites make additional demands and require additional effort in managing vendors' employees, such as continuous communication and engagement and maintaining relationships with relevant others stationed at vendors' sites. As part of project delivery, vendors' employees are stationed on-site at clients' facilities for several years. Though employees' experiences may be favourable in the beginning, if vendors fail to maintain an appreciable work context, employees may experience difficulties leading to disadvantages for all parties – the employees, vendors, and clients. Further, stationing vendors' employees at clients' sites represents challenges for clients', and both firms should have a collaborative approach to make the work lives of vendor's employees satisfying while stationed at client's facilities. Overall, it is not only stationing vendor's employees at the client's facilities per se which is important, but also how the entire work context is managed for the advantage of the employee, vendor firm and client. Hence, the findings of our study set the context for broadening our understanding of different management practices that should be implemented to enhance the career satisfaction of vendors' employees stationed on-site at clients' facilities as part of the project delivery.

Third, organizations that intend to station employees on-site at clients' facilities as part of the project delivery should consider developing characteristics of proactive personality (Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015) in employees. Individuals who develop characteristics of proactive personality are found to enhance their ability to adjust to ever-changing work conditions, improve personal networks and take responsibility for career progression (see Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015). Individuals who develop characteristics of proactive personality believe in their abilities to overcome constraints stemming from situational forces (while being stationed at clients' facilities), look for opportunities, show initiative and act on them; as a result, they depict abilities to affect changes in the work environment. These qualities are important for all three parties involved in the project delivery – the employee stationed at the client's facility, the vendor, and the client. Therefore, any initiatives by organizations to develop these characteristics in employees will lead to important consequences for employees as well as for organizations, when considering the changing nature of work.

6. Conclusion

The context of the study is an important area for research since this type of work provision in the delivery of projects is increasing and the number of employees who are getting stationed on-site at clients' sites for several years as part of the project delivery on behalf of vendors is growing. We investigated a set of professional employees, who got stationed on-site at clients' sites for several years on behalf of vendors. Drawing on the empirical evidence in Sri Lanka, the investigation revealed the importance of work content, financial rewards and other gains, work relationships, supervisor support, general working conditions, and opportunities experienced due to being stationed at clients' firms for career satisfaction. The findings contribute to the debates in the project management literature on the effect of work context on the career satisfaction of professional employees engaged in projects.

7. Limitations and future research

Career outcomes can be viewed from the external perspective, i.e., as judged by the employing organization, and the internal perspective, i.e., as judged by individual employees. We investigated one of the career outcomes, namely career satisfaction, from the employees' perspective. Second, we investigated limited workplace practices that could influence the career satisfaction of employees who were stationed on-site at clients' sites. Future research could expand the depth of the variables studied. Third, the literature identifies career satisfaction as relatively stable over time (Spurk, Abele & Volmer, 2015). Hence, our study is cross-sectional in nature. Since the population under study is required to stay on-site at clients' facilities for several years, it is possible to assume that employees who were initially satisfied with their careers may become less satisfied over time due to the context of the job. Therefore, future research studies of longitudinal in nature could identify whether there are any changes in their career satisfaction over time.

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