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High Performance Working Practices: The New Framework for Nurturing Sustainability

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Abstract: A new organisational paradigm demands ethical commitment as well as committed agents towards society, visible practices which are exemplary in the citizenship domain. Within this domain, a culture of social and human solidarity is highlighted, so as to demonstrate to the economic agents that immaterial capital in society functions as the main artery of economy, even if those that are more inclined towards materialistic mindsets, do not understand this natural order within society. It is in this context that we intend to reflect upon the future ways that organisations foster creativity, based on intangible resources to leverage their sustainability and financial independence. Thus, the objective of this paper is to reflect upon the high performance work organisations framework, which is influenced by Learning Organisations as well as the development human and intellectual capitals in order to structure organisational competitive advantage. Our aim is to bring some light to this framework and demonstrate the importance of its implementation in a society dominated by the information revolution.

Keywords: high performance work organisations; performance; human capital.

1. Introduction

The main goal for contemporary organizations is to increase productivity and a sustained competitive advantage without detrimental impacts upon workers. An assumption revolves around the models that purport to answer this question, namely, the High Performance Work Practice (HPWP) [1] and Learning Organisations (LO) [2]. Many authors on the subject of high performance would not draw divisions between high performance, people and culture; the right culture should concern itself with people in order to achieve success for the organisation through consideration of its human, emotional, social and knowledge capitals [3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9]. Institutions, as well as society in general, are searching for a new organisational paradigm. However, these paradigms are demanding in ethical commitment as well as committed agents towards society, visible practices as well as exemplary within the domain of citizenship. Within this domain, a culture of social and human solidarity is highlighted, so as to demonstrate to the economic agents that immaterial capital in society functions as the main artery of economy, even if those that are more inclined towards materialistic mindsets, may not understand this natural order within society. It is within this context that we intend to reflect upon the future ways that organisations may be creative, based on intangible resources so as to leverage their sustainability as well as their independence. In light of this reality, our objective is based upon the high performance work organisations (HPWO) framework, which is influenced by LOs as well as the development human and intellectual capitals so as to structure organisational competitive advantage. Our aim is to bring some light to this framework to demonstrate the importance of its implementation in a society dominated by the information revolution.

2. Theoretical Principles

High levels of organisational performance are important for sustainability of organisations. This point of view is also accepted by OECD which, in this context, refers to HPWO as a framework towards energising organisational texture. It has been defined as organisations that are moving towards a flatter and less hierarchal structure where the emphasis is upon autonomy, team work, trust and communication [10]. This reality alludes to the need to implement a new organisational culture based on values and the de-materialising of strategic value assets [11]. In addition, The International Labour Organisation (ILO) describes high performance working as the achievement of high levels of performance, profitability and customer satisfaction through the development of employee's skills and

their enthusiastic engagement in their roles and their importance to the organisations success [12]. This human capital approach to human resource management, is a hard asset for competitors to replicate, it propagates less traditional sources of competitive advantage, a motivated, skilled, empowered and loyal workforce [13].

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) ascribe a lot of emphasis on the importance of motivation in HPW, stating that motivation is the vehicle which determines employees disposition towards key components of HPWOs [14]. The CIPD and DTI have defined the component parts of high performance working as: High employee involvement practices – self-directed teams, quality circles and sharing/access to company information; Human resource practices – sophisticated recruitment processes, performance appraisals, work redesign and mentoring; Reward and commitment practices – various financial rewards, family friendly policies, job rotation and flexi hours [15]. Thus, in order to facilitate high performance working, leadership must come from the top and throughout the organisation with an emphasis on leading by example, there needs to be minimal disparity between stated and acted values [16].

Trust is fostered both inside and outside the organisation; achieved by fair treatment of those who not only work for the organisation but also for those who leave and the community in which the organisation operates [17]. High performance working [18] involves an intricate dalliance of factors, internal and external stakeholders, the complete involvement and commitment of the workforce, policy makers and social partners towards the sharing of resources such as knowledge [19, 20, 21, 22].

In fact, in this competitive asymmetric usage of information, values seem to be the core of competencies in the construction of the knowledge economy, as can be seen in figure 1 below. This occurs due to the dissemination of innovation as well as the organisational entrepreneurial capacity, which will be greater than the pool of intellectuality, sensitivity and humanism, within the organisation. In this way, the knowledge economy is intensely linked to the utilisation, production and diffusion of knowledge, which demand sensitive human and connectedness towards those objectives.

Figure 1:   *Knowledge Economics Factors*
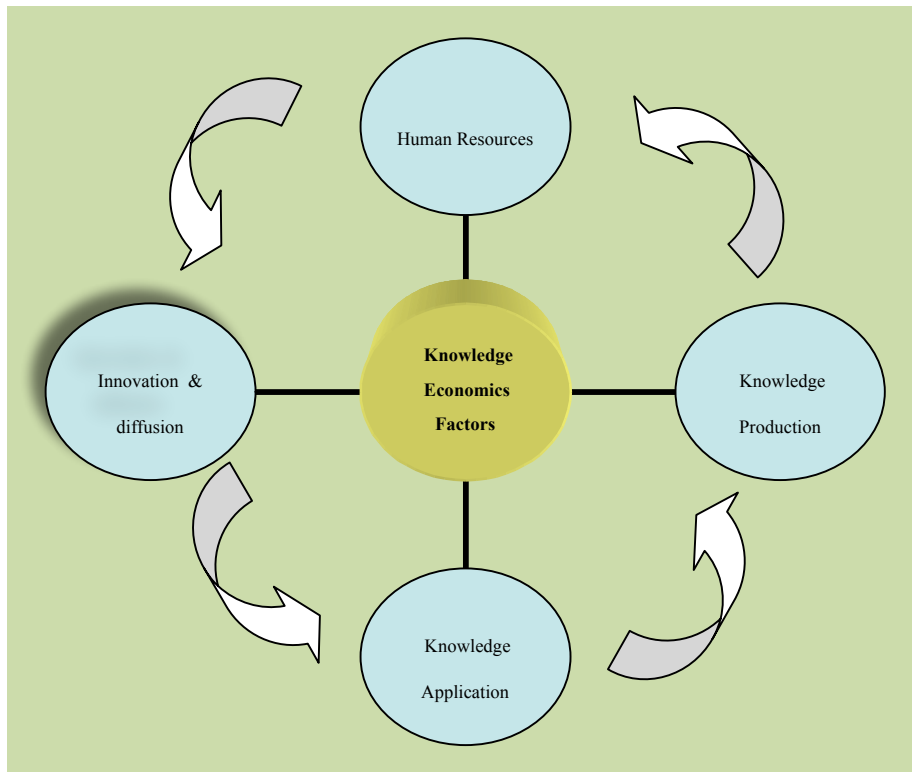
Source: Authors

HPWOs [23] are unique in that within them, management is no longer the sole repository of knowledge, the workers need to harness the social and problem solving skills required to manage production, empowerment of the workforce, which [24] generates a climate where knowledge acquisition and sharing becomes a continuous process. The right organisational environment will enhance employees with a high level of tacit knowledge even if these do not have formal qualifications [25]. Knowledge workers [26] possess more power and as such are not assets in the same way as machines. They are more transient if their knowledge remains tacit they retain the power. *"Social and organisational capital are concerned with the embedding of tacit knowledge"* [27].

The HPWO will have fluid frameworks which facilitate creativity and innovation through knowledge sharing, feedback and incentives [28, 29, 30, 31]. The keystone of the HPWO is, it would seem the culture of the organisation. Proponents of High Performance Work Practices (HPWPs) [32] claim success due to the enabling, motivating nature of workplace culture upon workers, encouraging them to share their own knowledge and skills which increases performance more fully than traditional practices. Other authors [33, 34, 35] have argued that the high performance paradigm also improves the employment relationship, creating more of a partnership between stakeholders [36].

3. High Performance Working and the Role of Organisational Culture and Values.

The cooperative relationship is not, however, without its critics. HPWPs are simply a new management technique [37] for the accumulation of capital and whilst these new methods secure cooperation, it is argued, this can eventually lead to job intensification, insecurity and work stress [38]. If the predominant culture of the organisation is 'caught in a time warp' [39] and not conducive to the attainment of great results, even with the best talent an organisation it is likely to flounder in the current climate. Having the right people is not enough if the organisational mindset is not focused on the right goals, culture therefore, [40] is the keystone to high performance, getting the right people, whilst of crucial importance is not enough if the structures, practices and values etc are not focused on how to deliver results. 'Human Capital' theory [41] and its influence upon organisational success underpins the philosophies of human resource management, viewing people as adaptable/transient assets unlike plant and machinery, organisational knowledge is only as good as the total sum of useful knowledge [knowledge capital] of its employees and customers [42]. Rather than viewing workers as performers, the new paradigm seeks 'the thinking performer' [43] in order to succeed, this must be reflected in the culture [44]. If we are to acknowledge that intangibles are a necessary feature for future organisational success, then this requires us to accept the incompatibility of measurement and value as appropriate methods of gauging performance, which means academics and practitioners alike need to give up chasing the idea making an "intangible tangible" [45].

Performance depends directly on productivity and organizational competitiveness. In turn, these depend on human capital and on the motivation policies. Therefore, [46] amongst the positive effects of High performance working (HPW) for both employers and employees are: increased productivity, profitability, low staff turnover, improved teamwork, enhanced training opportunities and skills development as well as higher commitment which leads to increased profitability and therefore higher potential earnings for employees. Negative outcomes, [47] include: increased worker responsibility and workload which can impact negatively upon the employees work – life balance and increase stress or 'work intensification. These authors also refer to values. Thus, [48] it is the fundamental responsibility of the organisational culture and values to ensure that the practices involved in HPW do not negatively impact the workers, if due consideration is not given to the organisational culture and shared values and HPWP's are introduced without exploring the impact of those practices on employees intrinsic satisfaction [the worker-centred approach] workers are unlikely to buy into the idea viewing the new practices as exploitative; giving credibility to the work intensification argument

[49] . Therefore, a high degree of effort is required to create the positive environment needed to gain the full benefits of HPW, in order to reap rewards careful proactive consideration must be given to the organisational culture prior to setting off on the high road to high performance, simply adopting those practices to reap the rewards without 'paying the toll' 'the low road to high performance' will lead to failure [50, 51, 52].

Despite the importance of this perspective, there are opposing views on the ability to manage culture, and its influence on a organisation's performance. The functionalist perspective postulates that every organisation has a culture, just as it has a strategy, structure and employees [53]. The strength of the culture is a key determinant of organisational success and sustained competitive advantage [54, 55, 56, 57]. The success of organisations like IBM, Hewlett-Packard, MacDonalds and Proctor and Gamble in part on their strong cultures [58]. The functionalist perspective holds that the culture is an attribute held by the organisation; quantifiable and measurable, an objective reality consisting of artefacts, values and meanings which are handed down to employees when they join [59] providing a lever for change which management can use to effect outcomes, to steer the organisation onto the 'high road to high performance' [60].

The academic or cognitions perspective [61] views culture as not having such a strong impact on the organisation's success [62, 63, 64]. It is the belief, in this camp, that as culture cannot be easily measured; it is simply a by-product of routine interactions between people within and around the organisation rather than a phenomenon which can be designed, implemented and manipulated by the leaders, its power is questionable. Leaders merely play the same part as other members, one of contributing to culture shaping, to understand culture is a way of trying to understand the social relationships within the organisation as opposed to a means to manipulate culture leading an organisation to success [65, 66]. Therefore, making it more difficult to effect change through culture and more difficult to forecast positive outcomes of HPWPs without the full co-operation of the employees.

Working environment and culture are key determinants in attracting the right people who will fit the culture, thereby aligning with the functionalist perspective in so much as the culture has been created by the management and the maintenance of it is a matter for the organisations recruitment policies. CIPD's definition of HPWPs, i.e. high employee involvement, shared knowledge, sophisticated recruitment procedures, a myriad of rewards in addition to financial payment, open plan offices and shared facilities *"provides an environment designed to make workers as effective as possible"* [67].

Employees are recruited for their ability, and encouraged to *"learn, discover, innovate...and to achieve efficiency and financial benefit"* [68].

It should be stated, however, that whilst a values statement is an effective way to publish an organisations ideology [69] or its 'core values', "this is only the tip of the iceberg" [70] the entire arsenal of actual values held within an organisation being much more vast than those outlined in a values statement [71]. Organisational values are considered [72] as the essential and enduring doctrine, guiding principles which wield intrinsic value to the members of the organisation, steering them in a harmonious march towards mutual goals. The notion of harmony is seen to describe [73] values as the fundamental binding agent that connects the best companies. However, [74] to simply assume that values are shared between all members of an organisation is a somewhat simplistic perspective, as there is a myriad of confusing terminology surrounding the subject of organisational values [75, 76, 77], a full and frank discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper [78, 79, 80, 81]. It is often overlapping value sets which [82] are associated with the organisations culture. Indeed, it is highly plausible that in order for something to act as 'the glue' [83] there should be some sort of 'shared' element to an organisations belief system. It can therefore be determined that in order to truly reflect in an organisations culture the values held by the members of the organisation will not be simply those contained in a written values statement, but those that are brought to life or acted out in the behaviour of the management [84].

HPWOs, just as occurs with LOs, Intellectual Capital, Knowledge Management and other frameworks, demonstrate similar areas in their objectives and the actioning of their components in the quest for organisational performance. On the other hand, performance is dependent on organizational human capital and on the HPWS. However, the organisation needs to be abundant in the elements of human values and organisational strategies in order to leverage organizational performance, as figure 2 below demonstrates, in the path towards the implementation of practices of high performance and profitability.

Figure 2: Research Framework
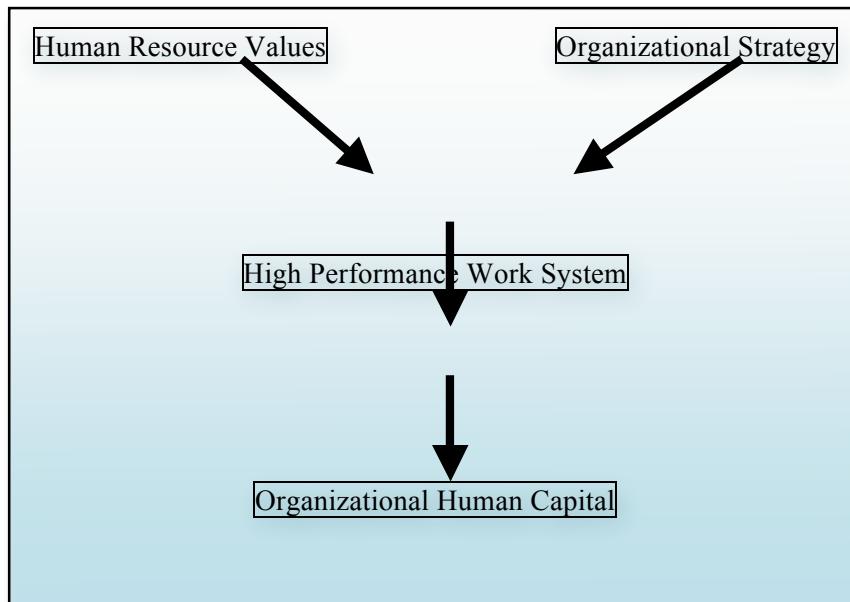
Source: Adapted [85]

4. Results and Discussion

The main objective of this paper focuses on organisational performance and its founding pillars in a dynamic perspective and in accordance with the renewal of the existing knowledge paradigms, which are in turn influenced by the principles of learning organisations and HPWOs. In addition, the development of human and intellectual capitals is also necessary in order to structure organisational competitive advantage. Our aim, therefore, is to bring some light to this framework and demonstrate the importance of its implementation in a society dominated by the information revolution as well as to highlight the importance of values related to social capital.

The sample was made up of graduates and post graduate students at the Universities of Minho (UM) and Porto (UP) both situated in the North of Portugal. Valid returned questionnaires from UM and UP included 125 and 174 respectively, which are graphically represented in table 1 below.

Table 1: Sample population distribution among Masters programmes

Programme	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
MGRH	34	11,4	11,4
MMSM	52	17,4	28,8
MAc	39	13,0	41,8
MENG	174	58,2	100,0
Total	299	100,0	

The sample includes a total of 299 respondents, of which 181 are male and 118 are female, 60,5% and 39,5% respectively. Of this total, 161 (54%), are gainfully employed, and 138 (46%) are not in the workplace, as can be seen in table 2 below.

Table 2: Respondent distribution according to programme work status

Gainfully employed student		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	MHRM	23	14,3	14,3
	MMSM	25	15,5	29,8
	MAc	24	14,9	44,7
	MENG	89	55,3	100,0
	Total	161	100,0	
No	MHRM	11	8,0	8,0
	MMSM	27	19,6	27,5
	Mac	15	10,9	38,4
	MENG	85	61,6	100,0
	Total	138	100,0	

A comparison of attitudes is set forth to demonstrate the findings from the two types of populations in the sample (sample from the workforce which is gainfully employed versus sample of the workforce which is unemployed) given that the graduates are gainfully employed have different attitudes towards the concept of trust as compared to those that are not employed. The sample is made up of 299

respondents, which are divided into two parts, the gainfully employed representing 161, and the remaining unemployed representing 138. The sample of gainfully employed includes 95 (59%) male and 66 female (41%). Their age group is between 25 to 30 years entails 42,9% , while 28,6% are younger than 25 years old. It can be stated that 28,6% are over 31 years, and this is of relevance to the lifelong learning perspective and the need to update skills and competencies arising from the technological developments (see table 3 below).

Table 3: Respondent distribution according to age group

Age Group	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Up to 24 years	46	28,6	28,6
From 25 to 30 years	69	42,9	71,4
From 31 a 35 years	21	13,0	84,5
From 36 a 40 years	13	8,1	92,5
Over 40 years	12	7,5	100,0
Total	161	100,0	

The research tool used in this study includes a questionnaire with the Likert scale. The primary data was gathered via the distribution of the questionnaire during November and December 2010. The questionnaire included the Likert scale to provide various possible responses; the items were evaluated on a six-point scale (1, totally agree; 6, do not know/ prefer not to respond). Through an analysis of the primary data gathered, the objective of this study focuses on determining whether there is a close relationship between the academic degrees and the levels of trust, loyalty, commitment and enthusiasm, and whether these are considered as a means of application, distribution and creation of knowledge. As these elements support the innovation process, the study also aims to ascertain whether these values are indeed shared in organisations, in order to nurture learning environments where knowledge is created and shared to ensure organizational sustainability. This study includes values which, despite being different, they present similarities. Their interaction can simultaneously be viewed as a creative circle to sustain organizational and individual performance. The study demonstrates an analysis of the following values:

➢ **Respect for others** (**Q51**): to highlight what type of acceptance individuals have for others, and how individuals value and show consideration for each other;

➢ **Autonomy** (**Q53**): to identify whether individuals are responsible for their actions and if there is a feeling of self-confidence in individuals;

➢ **Team work** (**Q55**): to ascertain the degree of joint effort and collaboration between individuals in the organisation;

➢ **Creativity** (**Q56**): to determine whether individuals apply originality and imagination in their activities;

➢ **Enthusiasm** (**Q57**): to seek evidence whether individuals have eagerness and dedication towards their work;

➢ **Individual commitment (Q60**.): to identify whether individuals are dedicated to their own goals and values as well as aligning these personal goals to those of the organisation;

➢ **Collaboration** (**Q64**): to find out whether individuals are able to create an environment which is tuned towards creating alliances between individuals revealing more openness and enthusiasm;

➢ **Social commitment (Q65)**: to ascertain whether the organisations adheres to a pledge towards solidarity, social innovation and is dedicated to nurturing social networks

➢ **Tolerance** (**Q67**): to ascertain the quality of dialogue and open-mindedness amongst individuals, so as to create an organizational culture which instils openness for self-development of individuals with the aim of producing spillovers in favour of the organization;

➢ **Solidarity** (**Q68**): to perceive the degree of harmony, unity, collegiality, team spirit and shared values amongst individuals in organisations

Our objective was to reflect on the importance of some specific individual workplace behaviours arising from the importance given to the values in this study regarding development and sustainability of organisational performance. Therefore, Spearman (*rho*) correlation coefficient was used to analyse the relationship between different pairs of variables and as was expected, all the results are positive with a high degree of significance (at the 0.01 level, with 2-tailed), as can be seen in table 3 below.

Table 3: Correlations (*Spearman's* rho)

		Q51	Q53	Q55	Q56	Q57	Q60	Q64	Q65	Q67	Q68
Q51 **Respect for others**	Correlation Coefficient	1,000									
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.									
	N	299									
Q53 **Autonomy**	Correlation Coefficient	,557**	1,000								
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	.								
	N	299	299								
Q55 **Team work**	Correlation Coefficient	,436**	,593**	1,000							
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	.							
	N	299	299	299							
Q56 **Creativity**	Correlation Coefficient	,466**	,570**	,559**	1,000						
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	.						
	N	299	299	299	299						
Q57 **Enthusiasm**	Correlation Coefficient	,449**	,613**	,561**	,631**	1,000					
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	.					
	N	299	299	299	299	299					
Q60 **Individual commitment**	Correlation Coefficient	,503**	,531**	,449**	,426**	,502**	1,000				
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	.				
	N	299	299	299	299	299	299				
Q64 **Collaboration**	Correlation Coefficient	,481**	,545**	,645**	,523**	,558**	,552**	1,000			
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	.			
	N	299	299	299	299	299	299	299			
Q65 **Social commitment**	Correlation Coefficient	,524**	,564**	,480**	,582**	,575**	,582**	,655**	1,000		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	.		
	N	299	299	299	299	299	299	299	299		
Q67 **Tolerance**	Correlation Coefficient	,549**	,559**	,502**	,486**	,527**	,578**	,560**	,658**	1,000	
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	.	
	N	299	299	299	299	299	299	299	299	299	
Q68 **Solidarity**	Correlation Coefficient	,584**	,562**	,512**	,479**	,511**	,585**	,655**	,653**	,781**	1,000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000	.
	N	299	299	299	299	299	299	299	299	299	299

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Three coefficients can be further developed to analyse the intensity of the relationship despite there being a more frequent substantial positive correlation:

    (i)   *moderate positive correlation* (for the intervals from 0,30 to 0,49),

    (ii)   *substantial positive correlation* (for the intervals from 0,50 to 0,69) and

    (iii)   *very strong positive correlation* (for the intervals from 0,70 to 0,90).

Moreover, the variables Q**67** (*Tolerance*) and Q**68** (*Solidarity*) demonstrate a positive and strong Spearman (*rho* = 0,781) correlation coefficient. This can be an indicator for the fact that solidarity is essential for the organisation leading to stronger internal relationships and is also one of the pillars of productivity. Therefore, it seems that ethical, spiritual and moral values make up social and organisational capitals. The variable **Q53** (*autonomy*) represents a strong and substantial Spearman correlation coefficient together with variables, Q**67** (*Tolerance)* and Q**68** (*Solidarity*), presenting a *rho* = 0,559 and 0,562, respectively. This result reinforces the strategic importance of these qualitative variables with regard to organisational performance.

The relationship between the variables Q57 (*Enthusiasm*), Q64 (*Collaboration*), is interesting in that they represent a *rho* = 0,558. This reveals the abstract and spiritual importance inherent in the factors the same happens with variables Q56 (*Creativity*) and Q57 (*Enthusiasm*), representing a *rho* = 0,631. By the same token, the relationship between the variables Q68 (*Solidarity*) and Q65 (*Social commitment*), between variables Q67 (*Tolerance*) and Q65 (*Social commitment*) as well as between Q68 (*Solidarity*) and Q64 (*Collaboration*), demonstrate *rho* of, respectively, 0,653, 0,658 and 0,655; these seem to be variable indicators pertinent in creating a system for sustaining organisational knowledge. These values can be supported by the relationship between variables Q64 (*Collaboration*) and Q55 (*Team work*), representing a *rho* = 0,645. Moreover, there is a possibility to redefine a new organizational culture which is nurtured on the trust between he organisation and its employees. This possibility arises from the abstract and spiritual realm within the composite triangle of values, namely, ethical, spiritual and moral.

From the encountered coefficients, it can be noted that if an organisation's internal context is strengthened with values such as, friendship, tolerance, respect for others, solidarity, enthusiasm, among others, this results in a context which favours the employee's unconditional commitment. This occurs because the employee feels part of the organisation and in turn feels respected by all which results in interactive and proactive behaviours wherein knowledge flows, especially tacit in nature. Furthermore, individual and group creativity flourishes and further increases the innovation process. It is this very organisational context of internal social peace and tranquillity which harnesses individual performance leading to positive and strong externalities in individual and organisational performance.

Therefore, the organisational capital values which are intangible, qualitative and tacit in nature, lead us to infer that they are, in essence, strategically paramount in order to sustain organisational performance and also to support its competitive advantage.

5. Conclusion

In this paper the assumption entailed that various factors impact upon the organisation's performance, namely, organisational culture, performance and human capital. We need to be aware of not oversimplifying this relationship. Rather than favour one area over another, it is necessary to extrapolate elements from both schools of thought and deduce that whilst it is originally the remit of the managers/owners to decide the organisations culture and draw up its values, it is important to set the bench mark for favourable behaviours [86, 87, 88, 89]; the maintenance of the culture lies in the hands of all stakeholders through the social interactions and beliefs of those involved. Managers therefore set the direction of travel, while it depends on the employees to decide if they want to reach the destination. If the journey does not offer suitable incentives for the employees then the goal may never be reached in its entirety. The success of 'excellent' organisations [90] with their strong cultures, momentarily leaving aside the questions around definitions of strong culture and adopting the view [91] that a strong culture provides shared values that ensures everyone is on the same track. True competitive advantage is obtained through shared values and a coherent distinct culture which invokes at its heart all the elements of human capital theory, the organisation being only as good as its people. Human capital represents the combined intelligence, skills and expertise that give the organisation its distinctive character. The HPWO manager must appreciate the value that employees bring to the organisation, and allow room for them to experiment within their roles rather than constrain them within an organisational culture that stifles true aspiration and individuality. High performance work organisation status, by utilising a conducive culture formed of shared values, which the organisation espouse as their stated values, organisational culture fills the gaps between what is formally announced and what actually takes place, culture is more reflective of reality than rhetoric. These overlapping values cultivate the culture further through trusting these values to attract the right people who will be in harmony with the organisation. Therefore, it would seem appropriate to conclude that the impact of intangibles inherent in organisational culture and values upon high performance work systems is second only to the impact of management, whether they take the high or low road to high performance. However, the implementation of a new organizational culture based on values requires the sensitivity of economic agents, i.e., it requires a more humane society, one which is more entrepreneurial and

more committed towards social capital. Herein, we believe, lie the factors that foster both high performance and high profitability.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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