

## Exploratory Study in Conceptualizing Individual Work Performance (IWP) Construct in Three Different Industries in Sri Lanka

GGTY Gunathilake

*ICC (Pvt) Ltd.*

ggtharinduyg@gmail.com

**Abstract—** This research attempts to explore the conception of Individual Work Performance (IWP) construct among construction, IT, and manufacturing industries in Sri Lanka. Focus group discussions using 50 respondents, 5 interviews, and 108 responses for a brief questionnaire were used for the analysis. The majority was found conceptualizing IWP as the capacity to keep producing desired results where capacity was interpreted as future potential with predictive nature. Behaviours were preferred as performance in both construction and manufacturing industries while results were regarded predominantly as performance in the IT industry. Indifference towards multidimensionality of IWP in conceptualizing the said construct was observed, which could be a potential reason for methodological deficiencies in designing and executing performance management systems in Sri Lankan organizations. Performance was mainly viewed as a static phenomenon as over 75% measured performance annually or bi-annually. IWP was viewed as a predictive measure in the selected industries while the composite criteria of measuring performance were mostly found inadequate and far from global standards. Performance measuring mainly serves as a feedback mechanism than developmental or administrative purposes. The author presented a simplified model of the IWP construct using the existing literature while at the end proposed a model to conceptualize the meaning of IWP using research findings. It was revealed how we perceive IWP, and the instruments used to measure the same are mutually inclusive. More inclusive research on the multidimensionality of IWP, appropriate composite criteria, and the right mix of behaviour and result could be considered as future research areas.

**Keywords—** *individual work performance, behaviour, capacity*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The definition of management by Daft, (2012, p.6) was found as the most compelling and all-encompassing account where he described the construct as “the attainment of organizational goals effectively and efficiently through planning, organizing, leading and controlling organizational resources.” According to Daft, this definition holds two important ideas namely the four management functions and the attainment of organizational goals effectively and efficiently whereas the author believes the most underlying idea behind this definition should be the nature of organizational resources being inherently scarce or limited yet demand to satisfy unlimited needs. It is the scarce resources that necessitate them to be managed. If the resources were plentiful the need for management would not be required. Accordingly, the author constructed a definition of performance management as the attainment of organizational goals effectively and efficiently through planning, organizing, leading, and controlling the performance of individuals and groups of an organization. In this context, the author identifies IWP or employee performance (EP) as a resource thereby acknowledging the scarcity of IWP.

The meaning of individual work performance has been a fundamental question in research and practice which has been answered by many scholars and practitioners in diverse ways. The difficulties associated with the process of understanding and measuring performance construct which is typically multidimensional, dynamic, and context-dependent were identified as “criterion problem” mostly by behavioral scientists. (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008)

This research primarily aimed to ascertain the nature of conception or the primary assumptions of IWP construct among three different industries in Sri Lanka namely construction, information

technology (IT), and manufacturing in the context of already established theoretical explanations in popular literature. Further, exploring the underlying purpose, theoretical and methodological characteristics of the current practices, and expectations of performance management among such industries constituted secondary objectives of this study.

The literature revealed behavior or the results argument in defining employee performance, as an example of a typical metaphoric delima of chicken or the egg, which usually resulted in a draw having both being important yet mostly context-dependent according to the nature of the work. (Aguinis, 2014). The works of Opath (2019) revealed a lack of theoretical rigor and methodological soundness of the existing practices of performance management among Sri Lankan organizations while Gunathilake (2021) highlighted the same with a special reference to the construction industry. This constitutes the primary gap that this research attempted to address in addition to the effort to propose a model in understanding the construct of IWP in broader terms.

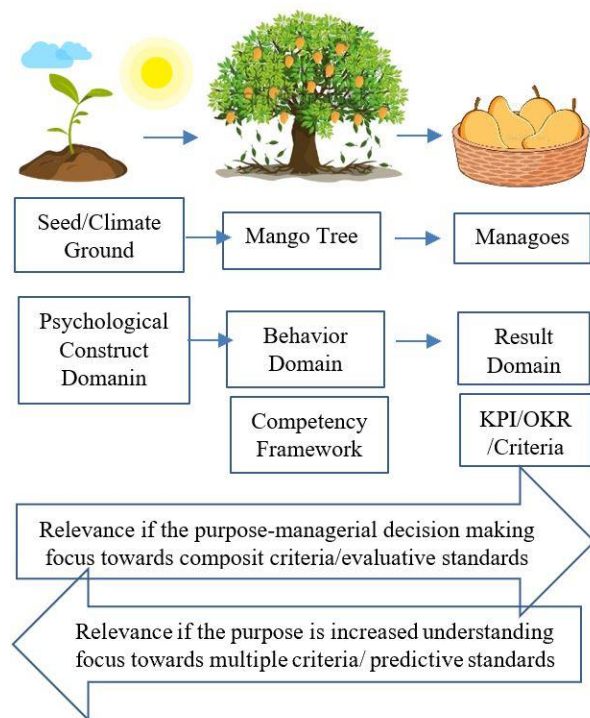


Figure 01: Illustration of IWP in terms of psychological, behavioral and results domains based on the past literature.

#### A. Literature Review

As cited in Armstrong (2014), Brumbach defined Performance as a certain way of behavior that brings out a particular result. According to Campbell, et al. (1990) performance is observable things people do that are relevant for the goals of the organization. Further performance has also been described as a process with behaviors as inputs and results as outputs (Armstrong, 2014) whereas Aguinis (2014) reject the conception of performance as results but regarded purely as behavior. Alternatively, Armstrong explained behaviors as a product of mental and physical effort applied to tasks according to which behavior also stands as an outcome in its own right (2014). Accordingly, both results and behavior could be regarded as two sides of one coin.

Human resource is widely accepted as the most important resource that helps create sustained competitive advantage (Armstrong, 2014; Daft, 2012) whereas it is the IWP dimension of Human resource that actually creates value for organizations where performance could be conceptualized as a resource characterized by being valuable, rare, inimitable, and could be organized to capture value (VRIO) according to the resource-based view of strategy (Barney, 2001). Managing the cattle is the means to managing a better yield of milk so it is justified managing behavior is the right way to manage results which is usually what matters the most in a managerial or business context. Since other factors beyond the control of the individual such as market conditions, climate, management decisions could also contribute to shaping the results, it is more appropriate to consider behavior in evaluating, predicting, and developing performance. This idea was illustrated in figure 01 using the analogy of a mango where mangoes are depicted mostly as the expected value which could not be conceptualized without the tree and its antecedents.

IWP is characterized by being evaluative and multidimensional. (Aguinis, 2014). Accordingly, performance could be judged and scaled as per their contribution to the success of individual jobs, teams, or the overall organizational goals. Further, we would be missing the whole idea of a good performer in terms of leadership if we consider only his or her decision-making aspect as there are many dimensions to leadership such as charisma, communication, negotiation, assertiveness, etc.

This constitutes the multidimensionality of performance.

Literature mostly conceptualized the multidimensionality of IWP as task and contextual performance. Task performance (TP) is closely related to actual work and contextual performance (CP) with personality variables (Aguinis, 2014; Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Viswesvaran and Ones (2000) theorized organization citizenship behavior (OCB) and counterproductive work behavior (CWB) as components of contextual performance. Koopmans, et al. (2014) developed a four-dimensional conceptual framework of IWP including adaptive behavior in addition to TP, OCB, CWB.

Contextual performance literature has heavily been contributed by Borman & Motowidlo who have duly recognized two related notions that describes CP as Organization Citizenship Behavior (OCB) and Prosocial Organizational Behavior (POB) where first was defined as extra-role discretionary behavior intended to help other co-employees (altruism) and/or a demonstration of conscientiousness in support of the organization as generalized compliance, following rules and regulations of the organization while the latter was defined as behavior intended to promote the welfare of individuals and groups of the organization (1993). They also distinguish the two concepts POB as either role-prescribed or extra-role whereas OCB solely as extra-role making POB possibly causing negative impact towards the organization at the expense of helping a co-employee. (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993,p.100). Williams and Anderson (1991) have further classified OCB as organizational citizenship behavior targeting specific individuals (OCBI) and organizational citizenship behavior targeting the entire organization (OCBO) in addition to in-role behavior (IRB) which corresponds mostly to task performance. They defined in-role task performance as “behaviors that are recognized by formal reward systems and are part of the requirements as described in the job description” (Williams and Anderson, 1991, p.606). According to Motowidlo, et al. (1997), task performance bears a direct relationship to an organization’s core business by directly contributing to its core functions that support the core business.

Aguinis described the performance as a product of three determinants in an equation as given below. (2014) He identified declarative knowledge as requirements, goals, principles related to the task, procedural knowledge as the skills required to perform the task, and the motivation under three choice behaviors namely the choice to expend effort, level of effort and persist that level of effort.

$$\text{“Performance} = \text{declarative knowledge} \times \text{procedural knowledge} \times \text{motivation”}$$

MARS model of individual behavior could be identified as another model in describing performance in terms of behaviors (Wang, et al., 2016) which is illustrated with the following equation as cited by Gunathilake (2021, p.27).

$$\text{“Job performance (JP) = Motivation} \times \text{Ability} \times \text{Role Perception} \times \text{Situational Factors”}$$

Further, as figure 01 highlights psychological constructs such as values, beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, etc. influence behaviors which in turn cause results. If the purpose demands a more analytical approach to deepen the understanding of the associated constructs such as in the case of a research effort, it is advisable to focus on multiple criteria in measuring performance whereas, for managerial decision making particularly for training, promotions, increments, etc. during typical performance appraisals, composite criteria or evaluative standards are recommended. (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008) Composite criteria of performance advocate a single measure as the performance which denotes relative contribution of the employee to the overall effectiveness of goal achievement of the organization. Use of weighted scores such as calculating the weighted proficiency ratings (WPR) in competency frameworks (Ali, et al., 2021), composite scores of key performance indicators (KPI), and objective key results (OKR) are some of the examples of composite criteria. Multiple criteria stand for predictive measures that aim to predict future behaviors which are also useful in making recruitment and selection decisions. (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008)

## II. METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional study was conducted as exploratory research to expand the understanding of the individual work performance construct (IWP) in the Sri Lankan context. The scope of the research was confined to three broader industries

namely construction, information technology (IT), and manufacturing. The selection of the industries was based on the requirement to cover both production and service sectors and their impact on the national economy. Mix method was used based on pragmatic research philosophy (Saunders, et al., 2014) employing both quantitative and qualitative techniques such as questionnaire survey together with focus group discussions and interviews respectively. The study was based on the deductive approach as it utilizes several established models and theories. Qualitative analysis was given priority and the quantitative findings were used to support, compare, and contrast the former in the backdrop of established related models and constructs.

The data collection was primarily done using 5 focus group discussions including one exclusive discussion with each industry representative and two discussions with professionals from all three industries. Each group comprised 10 individuals. The same 50 participants were given a simple pen and paper questionnaire. Five in-depth interviews with three senior HR professionals representing each industry, one academic, and one chief executive officer were also conducted. Opinion of individual employees from the three identified industries formed the unit of analysis in sourcing quantitative data. As the population was considerably large, no sampling frame was used. A convenient sampling technique was used to identify a sample of 150 professionals including 50 from each industry. The questionnaire was distributed online to another 100 respondents in addition to the participants in focus group discussions and altogether received 114 responses with a response rate of 76%. Six responses were rejected being incomplete leaving 36 responses from each industry making a sample of 108 for the analysis. All modes of data collection were designed and carried out after an in-depth review of the literature.

Since the primary aim of the study was exploratory, no in-depth empirical analysis was conducted except for descriptive statistics using MS Excel 360. Content analysis technique was used in analyzing qualitative data where patterns of meanings, interpretations of IWP construct domains were identified.

According to the analysis of qualitative data behaviors, traits, results, and capacity were identified as facets of IWP which was questioned in the quantitative study as to what IWP means to respondents out of the following propositions.

- Employees' ability & **capacity** to keep producing desired results.
- To what extent employees display **behaviors** required.
- To what extent employees embody **traits**/qualities that are required to produce desired results
- To what extent employees have achieved desired **results**.

The primary reason or the purpose of measuring IWP was asked to choose between the following as highlighted during qualitative data.

- To communicate how competent employees are in delivering the required performance. (**Informational**)
- To identify performance gaps & address them accordingly. (**Developmental** purpose)
- To pay according to their contribution. (**Administrative** purpose)

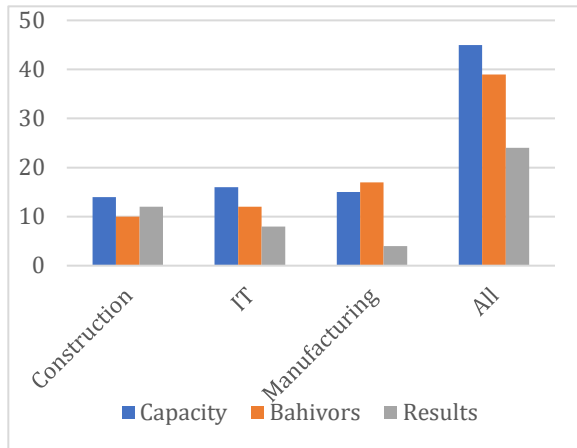
Respondents were asked to mark the current practice and their expectations separately out of measuring behaviors, results, or both as performance along with the frequency of measurement.

### III. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

#### A. Findings

Since traits are not under the control of individuals which are fairly stable and developed beyond their control (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008), it was replaced with the behavior as the verbal expression of behaviors and traits had been used interchangeably. For example, the following expression of one of the respondents during a focus group discussion suggests what she meant was the behaviors although the word traits were used in verbalizing the idea.

“Performance is the qualities or traits that are used and displayed on a day-to-day basis in achieving the tasks entrusted to employees during their



work”.

Figure 2: Conception of IWP construct in Construction, IT & Manufacturing industries in Sri Lanka.

Figure 02 illustrates the conceptualizing of the IWP construct among the respondents in the quantitative study where employees of IT and construction industries mostly interpret IWP as the capacity to keep producing desired results as a predictor measure which is also the case in the cumulative results of all three industries. Furthermore, according to figure 03 both the above industries seemed to be operating under the assumption that the performance is a static construct that remains fairly unchanged for a prolonged period which is the opposite according to past literature. (Aguinis, 2014; Cascio & Aguinis, 2008; Koopmans, et al. 2014) On the contrary, the manufacturing industry perceived IWP mostly as behaviors and relatively dynamic construct.

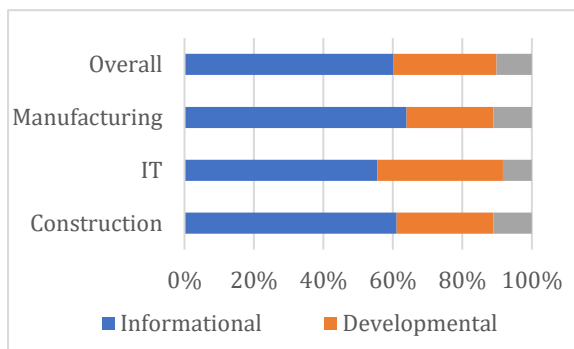


Figure 03: Conception of IWP in terms of Static and dynamic/temporal dimensionality.

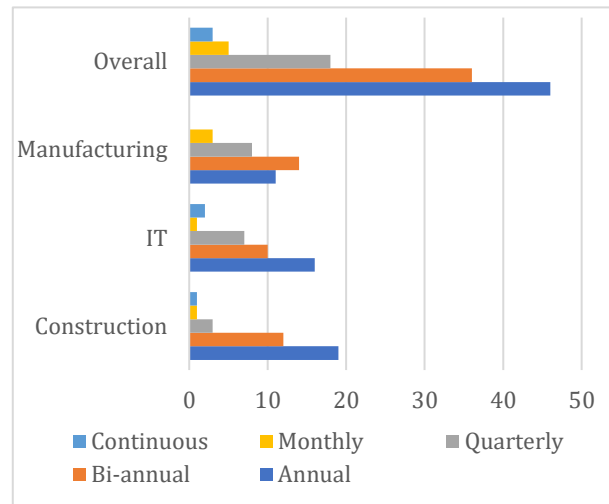


Figure 04: Main Purposes of Performance Management in Construction, IT & Manufacturing industries in Sri Lanka.

According to the results of the quantitative analysis, nearly 60% of the respondents believe managing IWP serves an informational purpose as a feedback mechanism for both individual and management and around 30% as a developmental tool to identify performance gaps while around 10% believe it to be driven by administrative purpose as valuable input for reward management, employee movement, etc.

As illustrated in figure 05, the majority expect measuring both behaviors and results as the performance which is not a reality in practice. According to qualitative analysis, an overlap of KPI/OKR being used both as a measure of results and behaviors was observed. Behavioral indicators in competency frameworks displayed many parallels with KPI/OKRs measuring results. Competency frameworks were found with many methodological loopholes such as no scientific approach for establishing relevant competencies, mostly relying on core competencies across organizations without generic or role-specific competencies, absence of weighted proficiency ratings (WPR), etc. Although the multidimensionality of IWP in terms of task, contextual, adaptive performance was not considered in quantitative analysis, qualitative study reveals a poor distinction of such dimensionality among respondents in interpreting the IWP construct.

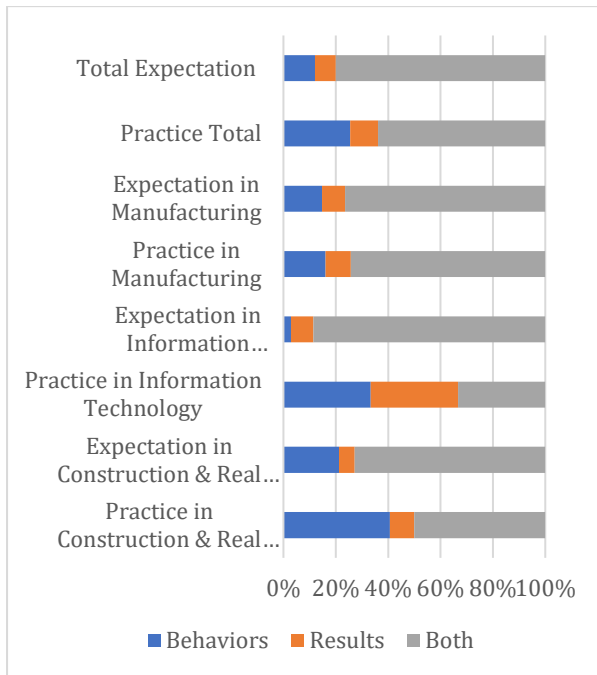


Figure 05: Conception of IWP in terms of practice & expectation.

In summary, the construction industry perceived IWP as a static capacity to keep producing desired behaviors while IT and manufacturing industries perceive it as a static capacity to keep producing desired results and mildly dynamic behaviors respectively.

**B. Discussion**

As illustrated in Figure 06, the author developed a framework for better comprehension of IWP based on the findings of this study. The developed model was inspired by the works of Armstrong, (2014), Cascio & Aguinis, (2008), and the MARS model of behavior (Wang, 2016). This model was based on three dimensions of performance namely capacity, behaviors, and results. The capacity, which could be argued as already being captured both behaviors and results as predictors of future potential, was still incorporated in the model to emphasize the importance of being forward-looking or the predictive nature of performance. Further, the relationship of underlying psychological constructs domain, behavior, and results domains were illustrated in the proposed model. As advocated in the MARS model of behavior impact of motivation, ability, role perception, and situational factors were also highlighted.

The behavioral approach to performance is most appropriate when the link between behavior and

results is not obvious, outcomes occur in the distant future and poor results are caused due to reasons beyond the performer. (Aguinis, 2014) Although this corresponds to service sector, the IT industry reported contradictory results by having a significant practice of measuring results. Results approach to performance, which, according to Aguinis (2014), is mostly appropriate when behaviors & results are obviously related, employees are sufficiently skilled or show improvement in required behaviors or when there are multiple means to achieve desired ends, typically corresponds to the manufacturing sector. On the contrary, the manufacturing industry reported behavior-based measurement of performance both in practice and expectation.

Therefore, these findings clearly contradict the contemporary theoretical understanding of the IWP construct among the selected industries which could be attributable to either lack of theoretical know-how of the respondents or the poor practice of performance management systems (PMS).

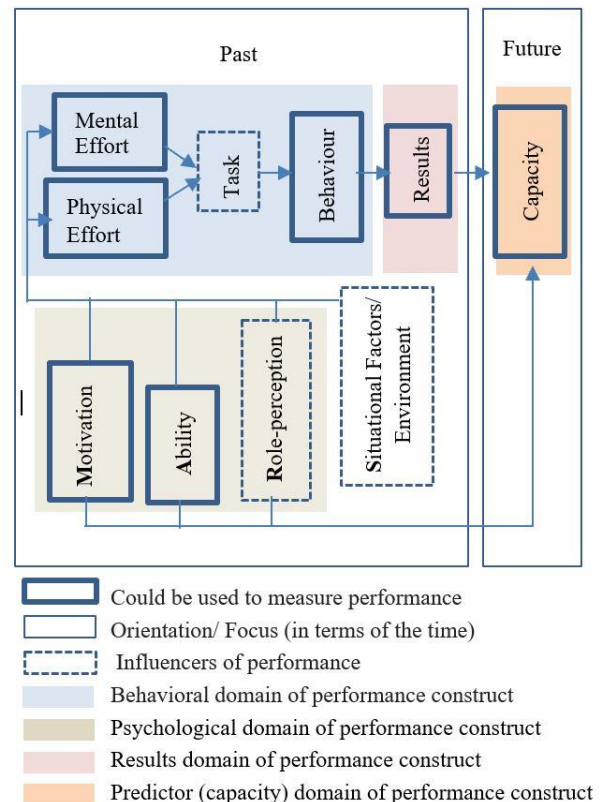


Figure 06: The model of IWP developed by the author using the insights gained from the study.

According to the comments expressed during the qualitative inquiry and interpreting past literature,

it is mostly viewed that the results or the outcome aspect of the performance were mainly misinterpreted as pure outcomes or results whereas they were used to measure behavioral capabilities or capacities as measuring them objectively is extremely difficult. Results were measured as they were the projections or the interface of performance and thereby the best means to judge behaviors or capacities as performance.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, IWP was mainly conceptualized as a capacity to produce desired outcomes characterized by predictive nature. Further, behaviors were favored against results and a mix of both could be identified in interpreting performance in construction, IT, and manufacturing industries. Construction industry IWP was predominantly identified as a static construct thereby justifying its measurement mostly annually or bi-annually. There is a demand for a combination of measuring both behaviors and results and the right composition of both constructs within the IWP domain in each industry remains to be explored. Qualitative investigation revealed considerably poor theoretical knowledge and practical exposure towards proper PMSs among the respondents. This could be regarded as a potential cause for the absence of proper PMSs among Sri Lankan organizations, particularly in the selected three industries.

Opinions expressed during qualitative study raised a serious question of the effectiveness of PMS mostly in construction industry which is attributable to the poor conceptualization of IWP. Multidimensionality of performance mostly in terms of task, contextual and adaptive behaviors, developing proper composite performance criteria to identify a single measurement of performance for managerial decision making and a multi-criteria for predictive purposes in widening the conceptualization of IWP construct could be stated as insights for future research. Further, this study could be made more rigorous by changing the research design to develop a statistically validated model of IWP through exploratory or confirmatory factor analysis. The proposed model of IWP and the simplified model based on past literature could be regarded as major contributions of this research towards the body of performance literature.

#### REFERENCES

- Aguinis, H., 2014. *Performance Management*. 3rd ed. Uttar Pradesh, India: Dorling Kindersley (India) Pvt. Ltd.
- Ali, M. Q. S. M. M. S. & R. M., 2021. Competency Framework Development for Effective Human Resource Management. *Sage*, 15(1).
- Armstrong, M., 2014. *A handbook of Human Resource Management Practice..* 14th ed. New Delhi: Kogan Page Publishers.
- Barney, J. B., 2001. Resource-based theories of competitive advantage: A ten-year retrospective on the resource-based view. *Journal of Management*, 27(6), pp. 643-650.
- Bohlander, G. W. & Snell, S. A., 2017. *Principles of Human Resource Management*. 16 ed. Delhi: Cengage.
- Borman, W. & Motowidlo, S., 1993. Expanding the criterion domain to include elements of contextual performance. In: N. S. & W. Borman, ed. *Personnel selection in organizations*. s.l.:Jossey-Bass, pp. 71-98.
- Campbell, J. M. J. & W. L., 1990. Modeling job performance in a population of jobs. *Personnel Psychology*, Volume 43, pp. 313-333.
- Cascio, W. F. & Aguinis, H., 2008. *Applied Psychology in Human Resource Management*. 6th ed. New Delhi: Prentice-Hall of India.
- Daft, R. L., 2012. *New Era of Management*. 10th ed. Delhi: Cengage Learning India.
- Gunathilake, G. G. T. Y., 2021. Extrinsic factors influencing job performance of engineering staff of a leading construction company in Sri Lanka. *Journal of HRM Perspective*, 5(1), pp. 27-35.
- Koopmans, L. B. C. H. V. d. V. H. V. d. B. A., 2014. Measuring individual work performance: Identifying and selecting indicators. *Work*, 48(2), pp. 229-238.
- Opatha, H. H., 2019. *Human Resource Management Personnel*. 8 ed. Colombo: Sharp Graphics House.
- Ramos Villagrasa, P. F. d. R. E. K. L. a. B. J., 2019. Assessing job performance using brief self-report scales: The case of the individual work performance questionnaire. *Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 35(3), p. 195.
- Rao, C. A., 2015. *Performance Management*. Delhi: Himal Impressions.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A., 2014. *Research Methods for business students*. Delhi: Pearson Education in South Asia.
- Viswesvaran, C. O. D., 2000. Perspectives on models of job performance. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 8(4), pp. 216-226.

Wang, Y. Y., Lin, T. C. & Tsay, C. H., 2016. Encouraging IS developers to learn business skills: an examination of the MARS model. *Information Technology & People*, 29(2), pp. 381-418.

Williams, L. & Anderson, S., 1991. Job satisfaction and organizational commitment as predictors of organizational citizenship and in-role behaviors. *Journal of Management*, 17(3), pp. 601-617.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

This research received no funding. All respondents who volunteered in qualitative and quantitative data collection were gratefully acknowledged.

#### **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES**



The author is a Lecturer and a Chartered Member serving at the Applied Research Committee of the Chartered Institute of Personnel Management (CIPM) Sri Lanka. Also serves as Manager – Administration at ICC (Pvt) Ltd., one of the leading Construction Companies in Sri Lanka, and a Visiting Lecturer at Rajarata University. He holds a B.Sc. and an MBA degree from the University of Colombo and Professional Qualifications in HRM from CIPM.