

Pay Strategy: Resolving Tension between Institutional Conformity & Organizational Differentiation

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The standard choices before organizations for its pay practices are either to abide by institutional norms or to incorporate firm-specific behavior (idiosyncratic fit) or to follow a combination of the two. Organizations' choice of a practice is based on the human capital it has or the ones it seeks to acquire. This article examines how workforce characteristics and job characteristics among gold, white, pink and blue-collar workers act as the key to determine organizational pay strategy. The article outlines the pay strategy continuum based on workforce characteristics and use Institutional Theory and Resource Dependence Theory to support the propositions. It concludes that a combination of the three based on the distribution of various worker categories would contribute more significantly to organizational efficacy.

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Introduction

Attracting, motivating and retaining the best talent are the biggest obstacles to the growth of Indian industries. In the past few years, Indian e-commerce startups have provided high compensation, including equity compensation, to attract top engineering and data science talent. Earlier, in the high growth phase of the Indian IT industry (1990s/2000s), IT service companies and multinational software product companies provided relatively high wages for Indian employees to leverage their engineering talent. Compensation practices are crucial for organizations in order to attract, motivate and retain competent employees (Gerhardt & Milkovich, 1992; Lawler, 1995). Organization's pay strategies vary with respect to pay level and pay mix and are highly influenced by the internal structure that determines pay distribution. Pay strategies adopted by different organizations are either based on their business needs or are aimed at gaining institutional legitimacy. Where some organizations follow market pricing, matching their competitors for its pay distribution, other

organizations assign their pay distribution based on the uniqueness of different jobs and skills required for performance (Balkin & Gomez Mejia, 1990). The constraints enforced by institutional factors of coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991) on pay strategy decisions have been looked into. Such constraints leave little freedom of choice in incorporating elements of the organization's idiosyncratic characteristics in designing pay strategy. Government regulations on basic salary levels for labor might limit variations in salary in certain segments, for instance.

However, Lawler (1990: 5) argued against "vanilla, me-too flavor that provides no competitive advantage" while designing the organization's pay strategy and instead suggested that specific organizational features be utilized in making such decisions. While institutional pressures force organizations to become more similar in order to acquire legitimacy, Scott (2008) advised organizations to be bold and courageous and adopt non-legitimacy practices for better performance. Further, drawing from Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003), it can be argued that an organization's behavior is determined by the criticality of the resources it needs. Specific job characteristics may make certain employee characteristics more salient for the organization. The resulting dependence relationship would then

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make specific job characteristics play a crucial role in determining pay strategy. It has been documented that a specific employee group comprising mainly executives, sales representatives, scientists and engineers influences the pay strategy decision by using their relative power (Balkin & Bannister, 1993).

Being owners of unique and critical skills they hold specialist positions in organization vis-à-vis other employees who possessed general capabilities, as their expertise is very much essential for organizational performance. Scholars have so far examined pay strategy decisions either abiding by institutional conformity for gaining legitimacy (Eisenhardt, 1988), or formulating pay strategy based on their business conditions (Balkin & Gomez Mejia, 1990). Moreover, all current studies examined the categories of workers for differential payments based on the job or skills (Gomez-Mejia, Berrone & Franco-Santos, 2014), individual performance (Gerhart & Fang, 2014), group performance (Kehoe & Wright, 2013), seniority (Larkin, Pierce & Gino, 2012), or short-term- and/or long-term-orientation (Wowak & Hambrick, 2010).

However, the impact of job characteristics based classification on establishing pay strategy seems underexplored in research. It is in this context that the collar based pay strategy decision-making holds promise. This paper attempts to study how different types of workforce – such as blue-collar, white-collar, pink-collar and gold-collar can influence the pay strategy decision. The paper addresses the question how

workforce characteristics – in terms of collar classification – acts as a key determinant of selecting a pay strategy by either conforming to institutional legitimacy or differentiating it with the unique value proposition offered to its employees. It explores the relationship of employee type with determination of an organization's pay structure through either institutional conformity or competitive non-conformity of organizations. It argues that a third strategy for firming up pay structure would be for the organization to strike a balance between institutional conformity and the idiosyncratic value proposition offered to its employees. The article draws from Institutional Theory and Resource Dependence Theory for supporting the propositions.

Pay Strategy

Compensation practices in an organization work as the foremost constituent of its controlling mechanism. Compensation practices can facilitate an array of objectives, specifically the kind of employees the organization is looking at attracting, motivating and retaining (Lawler, 1995).

A pay strategy is a statement of organizational values and ideas that provides basic rules for management's expectations and returns (Milkovich, 1988). It represents a compensation decision model that is critical to organizational performance. Organizations differ in their compensation policies and practices depending on their employee's characteristics. Compensation policy

would then be influenced by the type of workforce they have, right from the upper echelons of executives to the middle level managers, from research & development to production, from finance to administration, from engineers to sales people.

It is commonly believed (Newman, Gerhart & Milkovich, 2017) that determination of an organization's pay strategy falls within the domain of managerial action. However, this view seems simplistic as it ignores the larger forces at work which would constrain the latitude available to an HR Manager. It can be appreciated that both the internal objectives as well as the external forces of various government regulations and labor market characteristics would eventually drive the organization pay strategy decision. Not surprisingly, such influences would further constrain the freedom available to organizations in deciding upon a distinctive compensation policy (Lawler, 1990).

Differentiation Strategy

It refers to an organization being different or perceived to be different in its approach by offering unique products and services that outperform its competitors in the market (Porter, 1991). Organizations even use differentiation strategy for its compensation policies in order to be unique, well known and to be perceived better by its employees within organiza-

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tion and as well as among competitors (Lawler, 1990). Each individual pay may be different with respect to basic, bonus, incentives, perks, benefits and other allowances, all depending on the employee's value contribution to business. Drawing from the above, scholars and practitioners place the employees in various "baskets": blue-collar, white-collar, pink-collar, and gold-collar workers.

Blue-Collar Worker (BCW) referred to as manual laborer in a factory employed for hourly pay, who works physically and is involved in repetitive operations, accomplishing tasks using hands (Borland & Foo, 1996). For instance, person employed as tradesman and production process worker, craftsman, mechanic, assembly line worker, machine operator, plumber, foreman, electrician etc. is considered to be a blue collar worker.

White-Collar Worker (WCW) refers to a person working in managerial, professional, or technical specialties, performing some administrative work, generally non-production work (Borland & Foo, 1996). They are considered to be salaried workers, working in an office involved in general affairs, human resources, financial management, marketing, sales, design, etc. and are comprised middle-range employees (Weaver, 1975).

Pink-Collar Worker (PCW) term was coined during the First World War, initially meant for the clerical support jobs of typists, transcribers and secretaries, and considered to be less valued and less paid jobs in comparison to white collar

jobs. Later the pink collar workers expanded to administrative supporters including clerical, sales, and service occupations (Morris & Vekker, 2001). These jobs comprising employees having less skills compared to white collar workers and are paid less with limited career growth. Constant changes in the nature of work and the workplace have largely resulted in the growth of a specific kind of knowledge workers known as the "gold-collar workers".

Gold-Collar Worker (GCW) indicates employees who are intelligent, talented, creative and are considered to be the most valuable asset of an organization, possessing an array of competencies (Roongrerngsuke & Liefoghe, 2013). In this manner they are distinguished from blue-collar and white-collar workers. Wonacott (2007) defined gold collar workers as those who are experts in performing non-repetitive and complex work and uses their interdisciplinary knowledge and experience for creating solutions. These are the workers who preferred to be self-managed. For instance: gold collar worker in IT industry like software engineer over input operator who is a lower-level knowledge worker. Others such as lawyers, researchers, airplane systems maintenance technicians, analysts and designers are also considered gold collared workers.

Idiosyncrasy

Idiosyncrasy refers to an individualistic quality or a peculiar way of thinking or behaving (Scott, 2008). It is a unique characteristic of an individual or a group,

for instance, organization strategy of promoting a unique set of policies and practices altogether. The emergence of idiosyncratic differences among industries, especially between modern compensation practices over traditional ones, by following innovative pay practices have influenced workforce and organizational performance significantly (Lawler, 1995).

While the discussion above privileges the internal aspects of the organization on influencing its pay strategy decision, it is only fitting to factor in the role played by various external elements as well. Two particularly influential currents in this direction have been the Institutional Theory and Resource-Dependence Theory. We now examine essential features of these two theories to explore their role in influencing pay strategy choices made by organizations.

Institutional Theory

Organizations adopt structures and behavior in such a manner that it meets the environmental expectation of rationality and appropriateness (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Many organizations are shaped, mediated and directed by institutional arrangements and end up having similar structure (Scott, 2008), indicating a certain organizational homogeneity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Institutional Theory claims that an organization's formal structure is neither driven by competition nor from the need of efficiency, but rather is determined by the structure of the organization fields (Scott, 2008). Faced with environmental uncertainties and constraints, organizations make rational

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choices that eventually result in homogeneity not only in structures but also in organizational practices. Organizations in a field compete for resources, customers, political power, institutional legitimacy, social and economic fitness (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) creating a pressure of institutional isomorphism. Institutional conformity is seen as an intra-organizational phenomenon in which certain organizations have predictable trends or tendencies that change when dealing with institutional pressures. Therefore, internal factors within the organization are identified as potentially critical to the likelihood of conformity (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

In particular, three kinds of isomorphism – coercive, mimetic and normative – offer different justifications for claiming legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Where coercive isomorphism is the result of political influences, centrality of resources and problems of legitimacy signifies domination or dependency over other. For instance, employment regulation with respect to minimum wages, non-discrimination among men and women pay, maternity and paternity rights, retirement benefits, social security rules, number of working hours and so on. Mimetic isomorphism occurs as a convenient response to uncertainty about goals or means by imitation of other organizations that are perceived to be legitimate or successful (DiMaggio &

Powell, 1983). Normative isomorphism results from factors like the influence of experts, professional networks resulting in an organization becoming similar to another from where the network has developed. Such a network develops uniform occupational standards, attitudes and opinions and a particular frame of orientation among members of an occupational group. Networking with trade associations, compensation forums and compensation consultants (viz., Aon Hewitt, Hay Group), by increasing the pressures to conform can be seen as efforts towards gaining legitimacy among organizations.

It can be argued that institutional pressures such as the ones listed above make organizations adopt industry practices of pay for performance and flexible benefits under internal and external pressures, even when their influence on organizational performance may still be unverified (Lawler, 1995). To balance the institutional perspective, we now explore the other scholarly area that helps explain determination of organizational pay strategy: its dependence over critical resources.

Resource Dependence Theory

Resource Dependence Theory (RDT) argues that the connection between external interdependence and internal organization processes affects the behavior of organizations. There is an inherent desire among individuals and organizations to be less powerless by reducing their dependency on others (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). The litmus test

of a resource's criticality would be to explore the organizational consequences of its withdrawal. Should the performance be impacted negatively in significant ways, we can conclude that the resource is critical (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003).

Pfeffer and Salancik (2003) address both external and internal agents as critical resources which can command control over the other. External agents are those on whom organizations are dependent for resources such as other organizations, government, government agencies, trade associations etc. Internal agents comprise employee's positions in organizations that are deemed to be critical when organizational business operations are dependent on them (Balkin & Bannister, 1993). Therefore, signaling that lack of replacement for these critical resources with respect to their competence and skill set they possessed, it results in the concentration of power in the hands of these specialist jobs such as executives, scientists and engineers, thus influencing organizational pay strategy decision. Perhaps, this kind of idiosyncrasy in organization's pay strategy would result in building such organization culture which helps in attracting, retaining employees of particular kind. Having looked at the two strands of organizational theories, we now advance a few basic propositions.

Pay Strategy: For Gold-Collar Workers

The term gold-collar worker was used initially to define knowledge workers who are highly intelligent, highly cre-

ative and extremely talented and whose occupation is highly desired by elite firms. Typical employees in this category would include doctors, scientists, engineers, and lawyers. Gold-collar workers are considered as a critical resource for organization development (Balkin & Bannister, 1993). Gold-collar workers have a tendency to be more loyal towards their career growth unlike traditional blue-collar workers who were loyal to their employer (Holland, Hecker & Steen, 2002). They often switch from one organization to another in search of huge salaries, special perks, benefits, career growth, self-development and better work–life balance (Pardue & Morgan, 2008).

Traditional reward systems might not be sufficient for retaining this segment of the workforce.

Their lack of commitment to one organization creates a problem for employers in retaining them. Elite organizations such as software, financial services consulting firms, law firms typically call for change and new methods for serving their clients. These firms are highly dependent on gold-collar workers for their expertise and specialized knowledge for driving excellence in organizations (Roongrerngsuke & Liefoghe, 2013; Wonacott, 2007). As gold-collar workers are in short supply and their skill set is very critical for business operations, they are consequently needed to be courted appropriately. It becomes difficult to find their replacement (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Hence, traditional reward systems

might not be sufficient for retaining this segment of the workforce.

Organizations' higher dependence on this group of knowledge workers could significantly impact the pay strategy decision (Balkin & Bannister, 1993). As gold-collar workers are highly educated in comparison to white collar workers, their compensation practice may need to be more transparent. The pay package is likely to not conform to the institutional trend, but be highly customized according to each individual's requirement. Organizations, instead of imposing standard pay plan of benefits and perks on gold-collar workers, routinely offer competitive and customized pay package to gold-collar workers (Roongrerngsuke & Liefoghe, 2013; Pardue & Morgan, 2008). Gomez -Mejia & Balkin (1992) noted that the pay package of these critical groups should be tailored as per their need. However, organizations are seen exercising strategic choice, greatly influenced by the degree to which they desire and are capable enough to resist institutional pressures. Based on the above, we place forward the first proposition:

Proposition 1: An organization pay strategy with respect to gold-collar workers will be negatively related to institutional conformity and positively related to idiosyncrasy following differentiation strategy.

Pay Strategy: For White-Collar Workers

White collar workers are educated and their expertise is more than pink col-

lar workers but less than gold-collar workers. They are competent enough to perform assigned tasks successfully. Performing managerial and professional specialty occupations they add value to the organization, but not to the extent of gold-collar workers. Thus, it would be only fitting to expect that the pay strategy for white-collar workers would be driven by a combination of institutional pressures and the resource dependence. Organizations go with the mixed approach and neither abide completely by institutional conformity nor completely follow differentiation approach. As organization's pay strategy decision would be highly influenced by its dependency on them and their value contribution to business objective, it would be a conscious decision of organizations to adopt a hybrid form of compensation for its business model (Norman, Artz, & Martinez, 2007).

Proposition 2: An organization will follow a hybrid pay strategy with respect to white collar workers, conferring to a combination of institutional conformity and idiosyncrasy following differentiation strategy.

Pay Strategy: For Pink-Collar Workers

Pink-collar workers are less educated and less skilled, performing clerical, sales and service jobs (Morris & Vekker, 2001). Pink collar workers' average contribution to business and value addition is considered to be less in comparison to white collar workers or gold-collar workers (Aigner & Cain, 1977). Pink-collar work-

ers perform tasks that are more repetitive and less challenging in nature and to a certain extent are of standard nature. Therefore, the pay strategy followed by organization is just meeting the bare minimal, as neither it is difficult to find substitutes for pink-collar workers nor they create any unique value to business.

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The pay strategy comprises institutional expectation of abiding the government regulations of social security laws such as provident fund, gratuity, medical benefits and so on (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991), resulting in a coercive isomorphism in designing the pay policy. Moreover, as no unique deliverables are being expected of this kind of workforce, organizations for the sake of convenience tend to copy the best pay practices of other comparable organizations. Even there is a normative pressure on the organization to follow industry norms and trends. Thus, in order to attract, motivate and retain pink-collar workers, organization tends to pay along the lines of peer organizations. Pink-collar workers not being a critical resource for organizations, organizations do not differentiate and pay them in accordance with market rates. Based on the argument derived from the theoretical background presented above, the proposition is:

Proposition 3: An organization pay strategy with respect to pink-collar work-

ers will be positively related to institutional conformity and negatively related to idiosyncrasy following differentiation strategy.

Pay Strategy: For Blue-Collar Workers

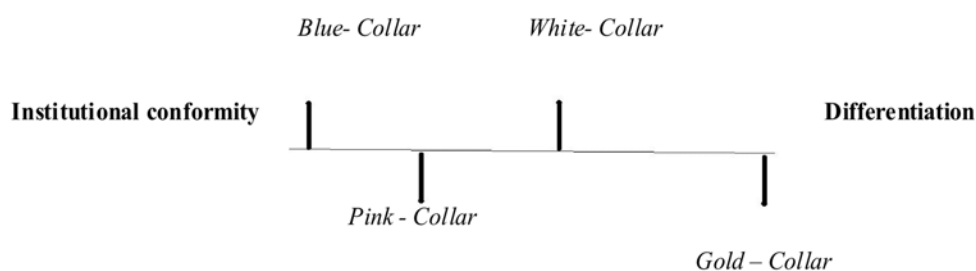
Human resource management policies and practices not only vary with the industry but even within the same industry, based on whether it is a blue-collar or a white-collar employee (Delery & Doty, 1996). On similar lines, there have been notable changes in compensation practices over the reviewed researches. There happens to be a continuous dramatic expansion in the pay strategies, consequentially leading to changes in compensation practices (Van Essen, Otten & Carberry, 2012). The managements differ in their pay mix, because of the difference in the job characteristic amongst employees in the top hierarchy and those at the lower level of the job responsibility. This low job respon-

sibility refers to blue-collar workers performing unskilled or semi-skilled manual task using standard operating procedures with similar sets of technologies. Blue-collar workers are not considered as a critical resource for organizations as they lack unique skill or expertise necessary for value addition.

It can thus be argued that they cannot exercise power on organizations in dictating the terms and conditions related to pay. Therefore, organizations would follow standard pay practices for blue-collar workers by meeting bare minimum conformity to government rules and regulations and institutional expectations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). The organizations would, therefore, follow the institutional practices in paying blue-collar workers.

Proposition 4: An organization pay strategy with respect to blue collar workers will be positively related to institutional conformity and negatively related to idiosyncrasy following differentiation strategy.

Fig. 1 Pay Strategy Continuum Based on Workforce Characteristics



Discussion

This paper examines the institutional and idiosyncratic patterns of pay strat-

egy across industries and the dynamic trends in compensation practices over time. Organizational performance is influenced by the type of pay strategy

it adopts (Milkovich, 1988). Past research supports the effect of organization's dependence on employees for their valuable contribution and the criticality of their expertise in determining pay strategy (Milkovich, 1988). To complement such a view, another body of research states that country specific legal regulations and economic conditions too affect the compensation policies and practices. Moreover, organizations that are comparable with respect to workforce, jobs, market share, products and services, might end up choosing similar pay designs for attaining set goals. And thus the race of legitimacy is forcing organizations to implement standard pay practices.

But in this competitive scenario when borders are blurring and markets are breaking regional barriers, a pressing challenge of the modern organizations is to manage the diverse workforce. However, the questions still remain: does it really pay to be different? Competitive non-conformity for different government regulations, or divergence from recognized norms, might impact organizational performance negatively (Norman et al., 2007). A congruence between pay policy and business strategy seems to be the most reasonable way out in this context.

The right compensation strategy needs to be used to actively try to ensure organizational high performance. Because compensation and benefits are largely hygiene factors, if the level of compensation is perceived to be below the threshold, it would have a negative impact on talent attraction and retention. Therefore, Indian companies

need to combine compensation strategies with business strategies with the goal of consolidating a talent task force that can sustain organizations in market pressures and economic risks. In order to create a competitive advantage in a time of incompatibility, organizations need to understand what distinguishes them from their competitors and develop compensation systems to strengthen this.

Conclusion

Scholars note that compensation policies and practices are a significant means to achieve organizational goals. While organizations currently classify their employees based on job characteristics, skills, performance, seniority or short-term versus long-term orientation, it is argued that the under-explored utilization of collar classification - referring to gold, white, pink and blue-collar workers - needs to be corrected. Organizations having diverse workforce are therefore advised to design their pay practices using a combination of internal managerial choices of differentiation along with following institutional norms or by following a mixed approach for retaining its critical resources. Correlating the collar classification with the Institutional and Resource Dependence Theory prescription holds promise of helping organizations make better pay strategy decisions. It can be argued that such a pay design would result in better organizational performance.

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