

Employee Empowerment Research – Current Status and Future Trend

A 26-Year Snapshot of Empowerment Literature (1987 – 2013)

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Abstract- This paper presented a snapshot of employee empowerment research studies from 1987 to 2013. It was aimed at fulfilling two objectives: diagnosing the current status of employee empowerment research, and contributing to the understanding and shaping of future research on the subject. To accomplish this, all scholarly articles published from 1987 to 2013 in the ABI/INFORM global database under direct and related subjects of employee empowerment and empowerment tools and techniques were compiled and analysed to present the current status, past trends, and potential future directions. The results indicated a decrease in the total number of articles on the subject in the 26 years under review after a peak in 1997, a marked increase from 165 publications in 2009 to 217 publications in 2010, and an increase in the study of management practices that influence empowerment perceptions. Additionally, articles on leadership management support, people-based management, employee involvement and participation, discretion, and autonomy, which create an empowering environment for organizational success, have been on a slight increase. These findings suggested that research on employee empowerment has moved from organizational performance to individuals in recognition of the criticality of individual contributions. It was concluded that employee empowerment is critical to organizational success and survival.

Keywords- *Employee Empowerment; Management Empowerment Practice; Future Trend in Empowerment Study*

I. INTRODUCTION

The scholarly roots of employee empowerment can be traced to the emergence of the focus on human relations in organizational theory [1]. Up until the 1970s, employee empowerment was perceived as interesting fodder for academic debates [2] or as socialism, democracy gone wild, or a form of communism [3]. In more recent times, empowerment was thought of as having achieved “old-school” status [4]. By the 1980s, the adoption of employee empowerment initiatives by American companies was necessitated by growing global competition and the performance imperative to improve quality [5-8]. Today, it is estimated that over 70 percent of global firms have implemented empowerment initiatives [9]. Research on employee empowerment has highlighted its use in improving job satisfaction [10-12], organizational commitment [13], innovativeness [14], and performance [15, 12, 16]. For practical purposes, the strategies that improve staff confidence and effectiveness in delivering task objectives are all part of employee empowerment [17]. Consequently, the adoption of empowerment practices has continued to be a subject of great interest to researchers [18, 19]. Studies on employee empowerment have been growing around the world from Honduras [20], to Nepal [21], Brazil [22], Ethiopia [23], Indonesia [24], Peru [25], Russia [26], and others.

However, this fairly intense interest in worker empowerment by academic scholars and organizations has given way to concerns about its effectiveness. The question has arisen on whether the concept of employee empowerment was a fab or a fad [27-29]. The reason for this concern has been attributed to the perceived inability of empowerment initiatives to deliver sustainable organizational change, which in itself is hindered by the lack of clear explanation on how empowerment constructs are formed and influenced at the individual level. In both non-management and management literature, empowerment has been defined differently [30], which adds complexity to its implementation, and observing that most of the so-called empowering programs are never truly empowering. This situation suggests that the impact of empowerment has not been fully explored due to the confusing concepts defining it. However, the notion of empowerment has opened doors to research on leadership styles and management practices that have continued to evolve. This snapshot will show the following:

- The status, in terms of quantity, of all published research papers on employee empowerment within the selected key empowerment areas.
- Development patterns and trends of the past 26 years.
- Potential future direction(s) or trend(s) in empowerment research.

It is, therefore, the expectation of the researchers that this snapshot will provide to academicians and organizations alike a general and overall view of the concerted efforts of the studies related to empowerment in the 26 years under review, enabling them to shape the direction of future trends and moreover, contribute to its understanding.

II. EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT TAXONOMY

The concept of empowerment has been viewed from diverse perspectives without much resolution on its true definition. For example, it has been viewed as relational concept [2], as a multi-dimensional motivational concept [8], and as a multi dimensional concept [28]. Other terminologies used when referring to or discussing empowerment include “state of mind” [31, 32], an “approach to service delivery” [33], “an outcome of participation” [34], a managerial approach, discretion, autonomy, self-direction, self-confidence, and self-worth. Due to the constantly changing contexts of empowerment [35], misperceptions, debates, controversies, and hence, frustrations, have also arisen with questions on whether the notion is a fad or a fab [32]. The misperceptions and ambiguity have been related to conceptual or implementation aspects; some of the re-occurring conceptual aspects include the following:

- The definitional challenge of empowerment (i.e. what empowerment really is)
- Categorization of the concepts (is it relational, motivational, etc.)
- What aspects are covered by empowerment
- Suitability of terms to use in the categorization of empowerment
- What the relationships are between empowerment, motivation, involvement, participation, interventions, management practices
- The uniqueness of empowerment

The implementation aspects include workability of empowerment, what boundaries/contexts there are (if any), what is the best implementation strategy, what are the critical success factors, and how to choose the best roadmap and tools.

Empowerment measures have posed a challenge to organizations, scholars, and policy makers. According to [36], there are direct and indirect measures that need to be distinguished. Reference [37] categorizes the challenges as bordering on the measurement of either intrinsic or instrumental aspects, context specific or universal aspects, individual or collective aspects. Furthermore, psychological determinants, appropriate unit of analysis, causality issues, and decision on collection of quantitative or qualitative data pose a challenge. These conceptual and implementation challenges have been the concern of scholars and organizations, and early researchers, such as [38-41, 7, 5, 36] amongst others, have carried out studies in an attempt to address some of the prevalent issues. Reference [42] report showed planning and organization, problem-solving techniques, role and objective clarification, information dissemination platform/forum, monitoring, motivation & inspiration, consultation, delegation, support, development and mentorship programs, conflict management and team building, networking, and a recognition and reward system as some management practices targeted at empowering employees.

Empowerment practices are used to address effectiveness and efficiency in organizations, especially in environments that are constantly changing. Organizations rely collectively on their people for success. However, unless employees are aligned with the vision, strategies, and goals of the organization and know what their individual roles are to get the organization to the next milestone, the organization will not succeed. According to [53], empowered teams achieve tangible business results. Consequently, as indicated by [27], the concept of empowerment will continue to be a significant subject of interest. Research, according to [43] cited in [44], is “an attempt to increase the sum of what is known, usually referred to as a body of knowledge, by the discovery of new facts or relationships through a process of systematic scientific enquiry, the research process.” Although there are growing numbers of review publications on employee empowerment literature in the last decades, they have centred on the discourse within the empowerment literature itself. For example, [32] conducted a literature review of 112 published empowerment articles from the 20 years leading up to 2007, as indicated by the list of references. His review highlighted the need for a theory of work empowerment that is holistic, specifying not only “definitions, measures, antecedents, and consequences of empowerment, but also *identifying* the mechanisms and processes of empowerment, and *specifying* the individual and organizational boundary conditions of when and under what conditions empowerment has potency.” Reference [27] conducted a multilevel review on empowerment over the past two decades, analysing 187 articles in the process. Findings of his research demonstrated that empowerment is considered a fab that continues to transform.

The limitations of the above-mentioned studies are defined by their focus, which is based on context analysis. Also, there is no updated literature that covers the contents and development of employee empowerment. This review, which is systematic in nature, covered the contents and development of the employee empowerment concept, thereby bridging the gap with a broad examination of published research articles spanning 26 years (1987 to 2013). One indication of whether interest on empowerment research is waning will be evidenced from the quantity of published literature, in this case from 1987 to 2013. This will enable researchers and organizations alike to have a picture of where the trend is going. According to [45], “a management technique/topic is viewed as unfashionable when it is not popular and there is no research around it.”

III. METHOD

A. Systematic review methodology (SRM)

This method has been adopted due to its wide use in review research owing to its replicable, scientific, and transparent process. SRMs aim to minimize biases through exhaustive literature searches and can be used to identify knowledge gaps,

hence useful in identifying future research priorities. The review process was divided into three stages including planning, conducting, and reporting [46].

1) Planning

Activities involved in the planning stage include identification of review objectives, review protocol with clear review criteria together with inclusion and exclusion process of published articles. Criteria for inclusion, exclusion, and review of published articles was based on

- Selected Database- ABI/INFORM complete periodical. Launched in the early 1970s, the database as indicated by proquest.com is regarded as the most comprehensive business and management database in the market. According to [45], it has in-depth coverage of over 6,800 publications, most of which are available in full text;
- Selected document type – Article (research papers);
- Search word- Document title with key word;
- Subject-related keywords to include most relevant articles.

In this study, the following management empowerment tools/practices were selected: recognition and rewards, motivation and inspiration, delegation of authority and power, information sharing, and development and mentorship^[47]. Since these practices are discussed under the context of organizational success, five critical organizational aspects supporting employee empowerment were also selected.

TABLE 1 LIST OF SEARCH KEYWORDS

Element	Search Keywords
Empowerment	Empowerment, Employee Empowerment
Strategic HR Management	Strategic human resource management
Recognition and Reward (RR)	Recognition and reward
Motivation and Inspiration (MI)	Motivation
Delegation of authority and power (DA)	Delegation
Information sharing (IS)	Information sharing
Development and Mentorship (DM)	Employee development
Organizational Success	Organizational success
Leadership	Leadership
Management Support	Management support
Employee Involvement and Participation	Involvement
Discretion and Autonomy	Autonomy

While these elements do not represent an exhaustive list of factors associated with employee empowerment practices, they were chosen from literatures as examples of the factors that are expected to support employee empowerment practices.

2) Conducting

This stage involved the actual review process. Firstly, the quantity and trends of empowerment research were examined within the time under review (1987-2013) with the search criteria stated earlier. The number of articles published every year within this review period was calculated and trend analyses performed. The choice of start year under review was made to reflect the start period the discourse on employee empowerment was put in perspective with the official launch of quality awards such as the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA). Further review of research papers on strategic human resource management, empowerment tools and techniques, and organizational success were all done using basically the same process.

3) Reporting

This final step involved systematic classification and analysis of the search results followed by discussions and trend analysis.

B. Research on Employee Empowerment (EE) and Strategic Human Resources Management (SHRM)

The total number of published scholarly articles on employee empowerment in the years under review is 4,244, as represented in Table 2, while published articles on strategic human resources in the same period totalled 3,077, as shown in Table 3. A closer look at published employee empowerment articles showed that there was an increase in publications from 1987 to the late 1990s, where it peaked at 277 articles in 1997. There was an epileptic growth afterwards, increasing and decreasing at different points, but a significant increase was seen in 2010 and continuing for 2 years. The same trend was observed in articles relating to strategic human resources, with a significant rise in 2010 (204) increasing to 295 articles in each 2012 and 2013, the highest since 1987.

TABLE 2 PUBLISHED ARTICLES ON EMPLOYEE EMPOWERMENT (EE) (1987-2013)

Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles
1987	1	1993	144	1999	183	2005	177	2011	240
1988	1	1994	206	2000	164	2006	188	2012	266
1989	3	1995	266	2001	152	2007	165	2013	242
1990	6	1996	267	2002	160	2008	167		
1991	21	1997	277	2003	122	2009	165		
1992	71	1998	250	2004	123	2010	217		

TABLE 3 PUBLISHED ARTICLES ON STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, SHRM (1987-2013)

Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles
1987	1	1993	36	1999	116	2005	155	2011	275
1988	4	1994	55	2000	114	2006	165	2012	295
1989	4	1995	65	2001	113	2007	139	2013	295
1990	5	1996	84	2002	120	2008	175		
1991	14	1997	84	2003	130	2009	161		
1992	33	1998	89	2004	146	2010	204		

The above-discussed trend is further depicted in the frequency chart for both topics in Fig. 1 below. The significant increase in employee empowerment articles published from 1987 to 1997 gives credence to the earlier discussion on the development of discourse on empowerment made popular by the introduction of quality awards. The need for global competition, desire to continuously improve quality, and the pressure exerted by competition necessitated the adoption of employee empowerment initiatives by many firms. Traditionally, quality management programs have highlighted practices such as training, competence assurance programs, certifications, and rewards etc. as empowerment tools. Worth noting is the fact that research on SHRM did not show a significant decrease when research on employee empowerment began to decline sharply in the late 1990s. This suggests a continued focus on practical ways to operationalize empowerment.

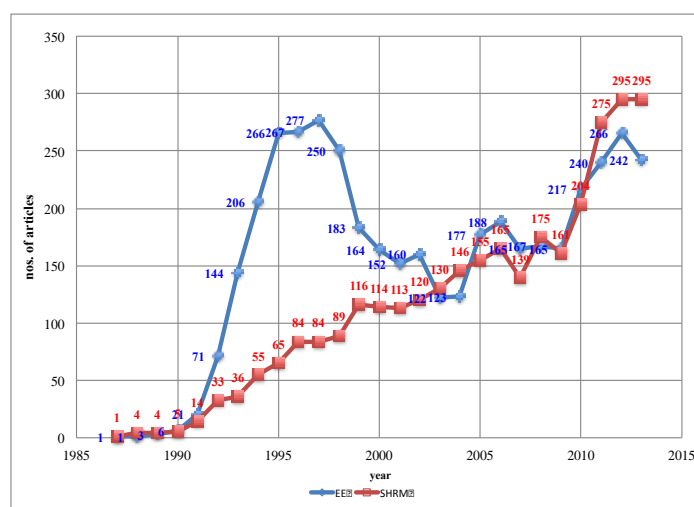


Fig. 1 Frequency chart for published articles on employee empowerment (EE) and strategic human resource management (SHRM) in 1987-2013

C. Research on Employee Empowerment Practices

The number of published articles on each of the selected employee empowerment practices is shown in Table 4. For each of the five practices, the amount of published studies reached their peak in the recent decade (2000–2013) when compared to the first decade (1987–1999). It is interesting to note that studies on delegation of authority continued to rank very high in terms of quantity, supporting the argument that organizations continue to struggle with the idea of relinquishing control.

TABLE 4 PUBLISHED ARTICLES ON EACH SELECTED EMPOWERMENT PRACTICE (1987-2013)

Year	Recognition and reward (RR)	Motivation and inspiration (MI)	Delegation of authority and power (DA)	Information sharing (IS)	Development and mentorship (DM)
1987	2	12	20	2	29
1988	3	10	23	3	44
1989	4	9	23	1	29
1990	1	8	16	1	19
1991	10	16	38	9	37

1992	42	46	155	38	117
1993	35	59	185	46	175
1994	58	55	209	62	147
1995	86	83	208	77	192
1996	63	97	225	107	221
1997	70	89	346	97	231
1998	74	95	375	130	211
1999	72	122	398	121	204
2000	69	113	350	142	187
2001	62	95	376	150	192
2002	64	116	396	194	233
2003	69	114	436	184	196
2004	72	123	436	197	255
2005	56	132	481	259	259
2006	62	154	528	237	227
2007	80	150	504	251	242
2008	72	142	515	258	200
2009	53	127	528	293	163
2010	72	213	622	326	220
2011	104	267	614	386	246
2012	101	315	640	368	222
2013	103	279	536	421	206
Total	1559	3041	9183	4360	4704

The frequency chart for the number of articles published on each of the selected empowerment practice for the 26 years under review is shown in Fig. 2, while Fig. 3 shows the trend analysis. The frequency chart for all the selected empowerment practices showed an increasing trend, but the shapes of the trend curves for each is different. The trend analysis chart depicts the increasing/decreasing pattern of the publications or time lag (if any) based on the shape of the curve. The trend curves related to delegation of authority and motivation are concave, indicating significant increase in the amount of research on these topics. Although the trend curve shown on information sharing is concave, its increasing rate is not as steep as that of delegation of authority and motivation. The trend curve of development and mentoring, and recognition and award is almost linear in nature, indicating an approximately constant increasing rate.

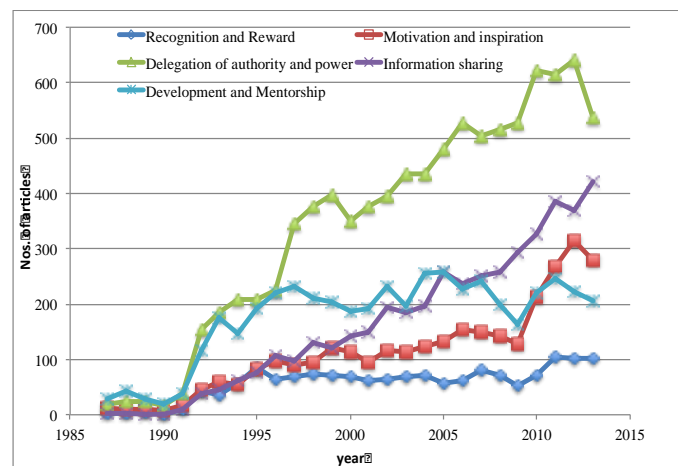


Fig. 2 Frequency chart for published articles on each selected empowerment practice (1987-2013)

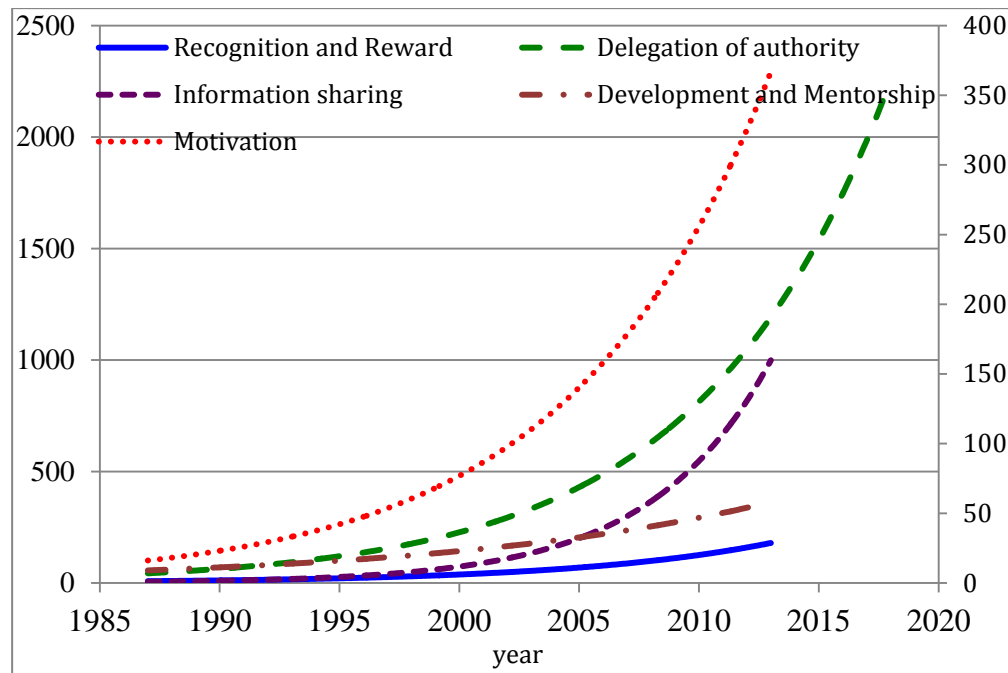


Fig. 3 Trend analysis for published articles on each selected empowerment practice (1987-2013)

The implication of this trend for organizations is a focus on how best to delegate authority to the effect that the employees actually feel empowered. This focus is also highlighted in works done by authors, for example [48-50], wherein aspects of human and organizational causes of disastrous decisions have continued to be evident in the findings from investigation. An important research topic for the future, as implied by the trend and frequency charts, is recognition and reward. Insights from this research topic will enable organizations to deal with the scope and complexity of recognition and reward, which oftentimes force their efforts to go awry. Forecasting the trend over a 5-year period (Fig. 4) shows a similar picture.

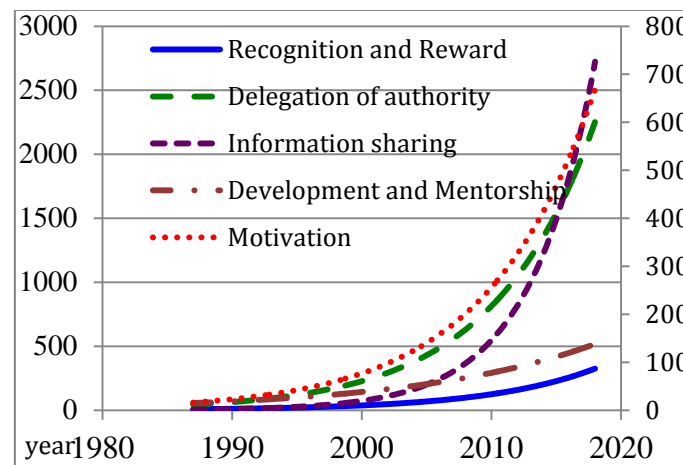


Fig. 4 5-year trend forecast analysis for published articles on each selected empowerment practice (1987-2013)

D. Research on Organizational Success

Employee empowerment means organizational success [55], which [54] maintains is organizational ability to manage growth-related challenges. Employee empowerment simply means that an organization is smart enough to banish antiquated, edict-style management practices to unleash the vital, untapped forces of employee creativity and motivation to solve business problems [55].

The number of published scholarly articles on organizational success during the period under review is 4,103 (Table 5).

TABLE 5 PUBLISHED ARTICLES ON ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS (1987-2013)

Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles
1987	3	1993	82	1999	127	2005	179	2011	353
1988	9	1994	87	2000	143	2006	186	2012	397

1989	6	1995	103	2001	148	2007	203	2013	342
1990	2	1996	118	2002	176	2008	221		
1991	16	1997	131	2003	167	2009	223		
1992	45	1998	136	2004	196	2010	304		

Furthermore, Table 5 shows a continued increase in publications since 2007 on organizational success. However, this growth took a downturn in 2013. Perhaps the 2008 global recession contributed to this increase, as most companies were compelled to find ways to stay ahead. The number of published articles rose to 221 from 203 in 2007, and the increase continued through 2012.

The published articles on leadership have also seen increasing numbers during the years under review. According to [45], 7,083 articles were published on leadership from 1987 to 2011 (Table 6), increasing by a factor of about 11.5 in 2011 (673 articles) compared to 59 articles in 1987.

TABLE 6 PUBLISHED ARTICLES ON LEADERSHIP (1987-2013) – UPDATED FROM DAHLGAARD-PARK, ET AL., 2013

Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles	Year	Number of articles
1987	59	1993	197	1999	294	2005	530	2011	673
1988	70	1994	188	2000	269	2006	457	2012	758
1989	97	1995	186	2001	295	2007	529	2013	682
1990	130	1996	206	2002	356	2008	538		
1991	123	1997	201	2003	402	2009	559		
1992	155	1998	254	2004	463	2010	674		

Further investigation for the years 2012 and 2013 with respect to data on the number of published articles on the subject of leadership showed a total of 758 and 682, respectively. This supports the view of [45] that the subject of leadership has become increasingly important over the last decade. In the context of organizational success, the number of published articles on employee involvement and participation (Table 7) within the period under review totalled 366, while management support had 191 articles. Discretion and autonomy totalled 847.

TABLE 7 PUBLISHED ARTICLES ON THREE MAIN AREAS OF ORGANIZATIONAL SUCCESS (1987-2013)

Year	Employee involvement and participation	Management support	Discretion and autonomy
1987	0	0	0
1988	0	1	1
1989	0	0	0
1990	0	0	1
1991	3	0	2
1992	3	1	11
1993	7	4	15
1994	12	4	23
1995	9	5	14
1996	13	6	19
1997	10	5	28
1998	10	4	30
1999	13	5	25
2000	15	9	36
2001	16	5	26
2002	12	9	40
2003	16	9	36
2004	17	10	44
2005	17	7	35
2006	16	7	39
2007	21	13	39
2008	19	15	48
2009	19	14	45
2010	21	13	64
2011	32	15	67
2012	39	17	96
2013	26	13	63
Total	366	191	847

Based on the information shown in the table above, it is apparent that there is a need to explore how management can best support employees in order to achieve organizational success. Although the three main areas of organizational success showed some level of research interest according to the number of the published articles, the pattern of increase is not steep. It is interesting to note that the number of articles published on the subject of empowerment practices are significantly higher than those for organizational success during the same period, suggesting employee empowerment is more popular and its practices more often adopted in organizations.

Fig. 5 is a frequency chart for published articles on three main areas of organizational success (1987-2013), while Fig. 6 shows the trend analysis.

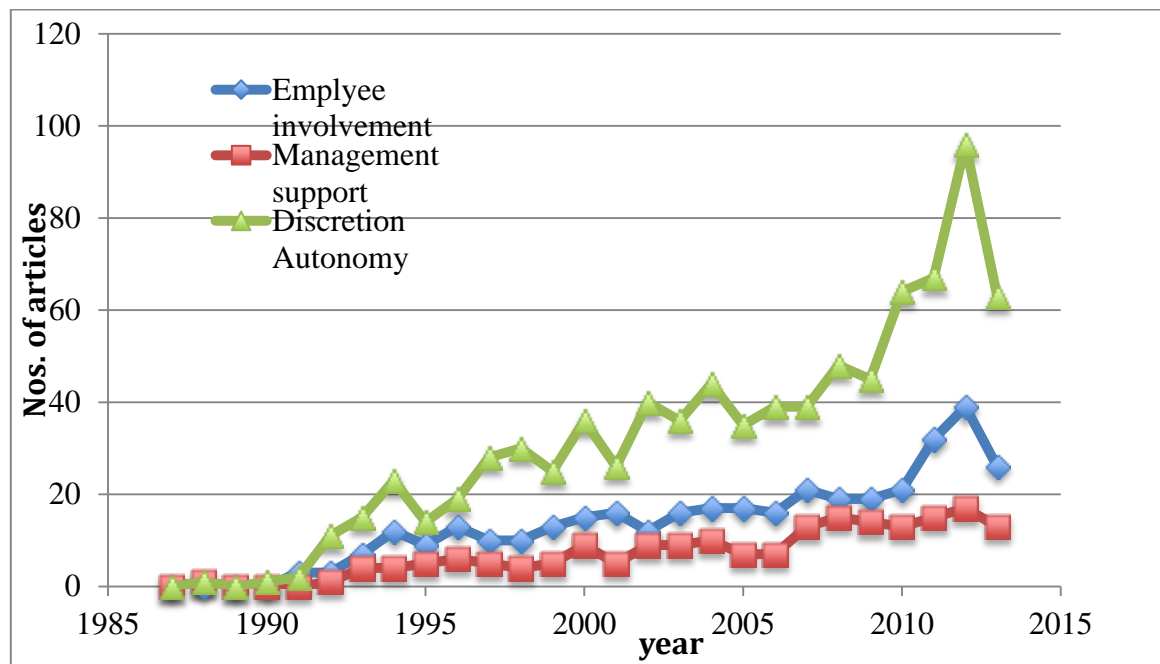


Fig. 5 Frequency chart for published articles on three main areas of organizational success (1987-2013)

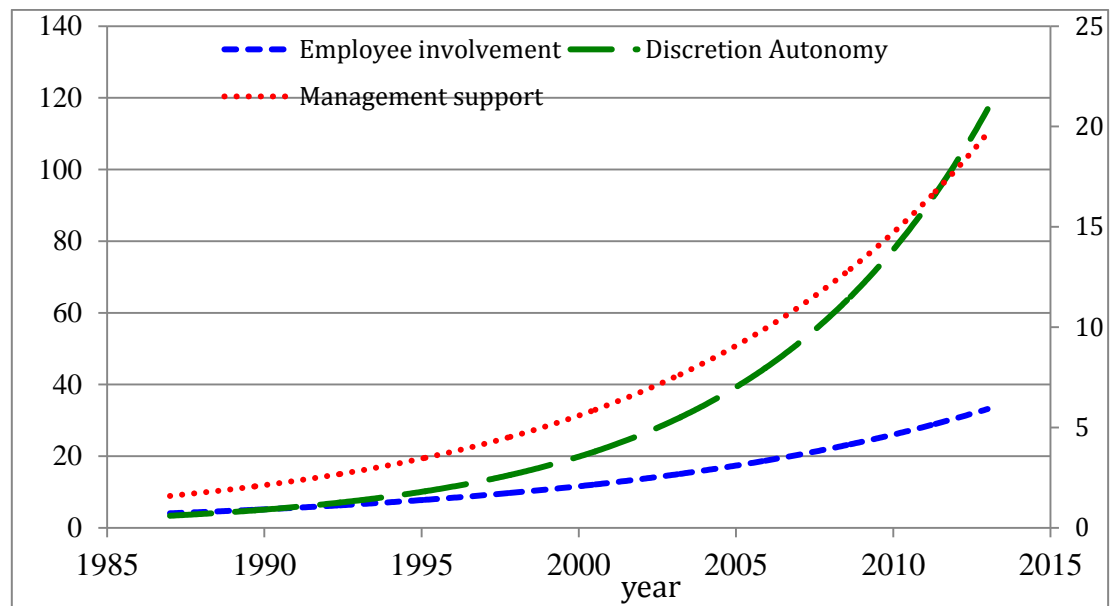


Fig. 6 Trend analysis for published articles on three main areas of organizational success (1987-2013)

The trend analysis for the three main areas of organizational success shows that research on employee involvement requires a concentrated effort for it to show a significant increase in relation to management support and discretion and autonomy. Forecasting this trend over a 5-year period (Fig. 7) shows a similar trend.

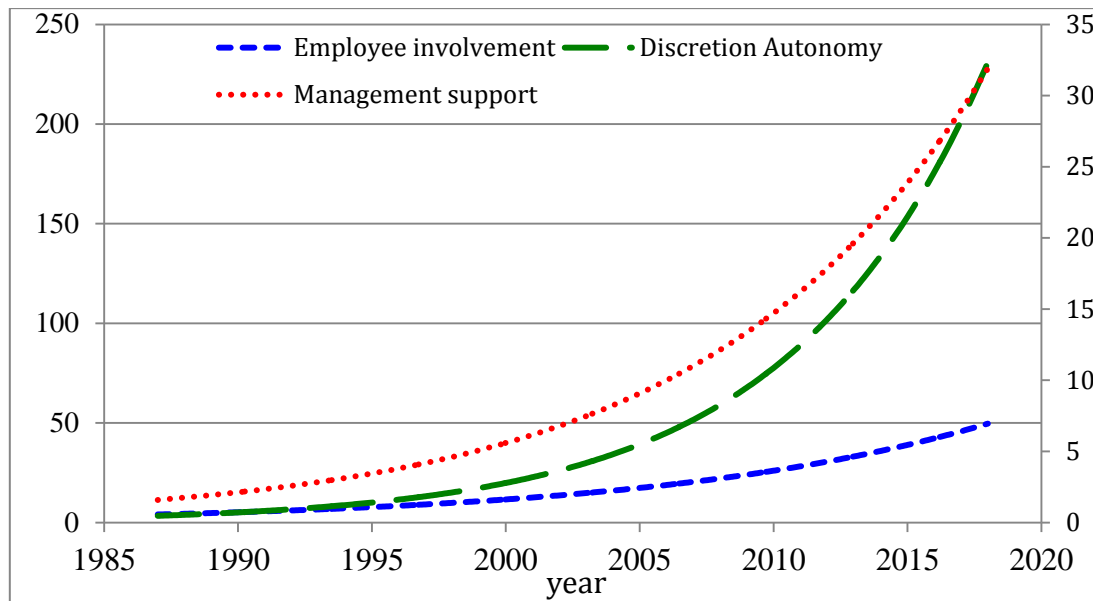


Fig. 7 5-year trend forecast analysis for published articles on three main areas of organizational success (1987-2013)

IV. DISCUSSION

A quick look at the result shown in Fig. 1 in which the number of empowerment studies is depicted as declining, seems to support the perception that empowerment is regarded as a fad. However, this perception is countered by the increase in studies that focus on practical ways to operationalize empowerment (Fig. 2). According to [51], the term “empowerment” has retained its basic meaning across every level of analysis. Thus, despite its varied definitions, employee empowerment continues to be cogent and requiring of due attention with the ever-changing global business scape.

It is also noteworthy from the findings that although empowerment studies may seem to have dipped significantly, a look at certain aspects, especially between 1997 and 2009, strategic human resource management studies have continued on a fairly steady upward trend. Nevertheless, combinations of both studies from the 2000s have shown a continued growth. For instance, the number of journal publications in 2001 for both topics, in a five-year interval, increased from 265 to 353 in 2006 and 525 in 2011. This indicates that empowerment focus has become more strategic and its study may very well be done under varying terms that are targeted at achieving desired strategic results. Another finding of this study was that the research on discretion and autonomy as compared to employee involvement and participation is much higher. Perhaps this could be seen as an indication that practical ways of involving employees needs to be further researched to match their argued importance in organizational success. In relation to the findings on the subject of management support, research attention should be focused on areas that will translate to organization success that is measurable. These areas of management support, while being individual-centric and targeted at employee problems, needs, and expectations, should also take into consideration the realities of the business world where many stakeholders exist. As this study utilized only one search instrument, the ABI/INFORM database, for its results and analysis, further research exploring other business and management databases may add incremental validity to this review and enable further comparison on the popularity of empowerment literature.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Employee empowerment has been the concern of organizations around the globe, with over 70% adopting some form of empowerment practice [47]. The findings suggest that studies on employee empowerment have changed from organizational performances to individuals in recognition of the criticality of individual contributions. It was concluded therefore, that employee empowerment is critical to organizational success and survival [52].

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