



Original Article (Qualitative)

A model for managing knowledge workers' narcissism with a content analysis approach

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Abstract

The aim of the present study is to study the knowledge staff narcissism management model with a content analysis approach. The research method is qualitative in terms of implementation method, and is of the content analysis type. The statistical population of this study includes 15 university professors and managers and experts in public administration. The sampling method in this study was purposive. This sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The research collection tool is semi-structured interview. Data analysis was carried out using the content analysis method and MAXQDA software. The results of the study showed that the data were systematically coded and in the first stage, 254 initial codes were extracted and classified in the form of 62 basic themes and 20 basic organizing themes. Finally, five overarching themes were identified as the main dimensions of the research conceptual model, which are: moral guidance, managerial intervention, individual training, professionalism, and moral self-management. In general, managing narcissistic behavior in knowledge workers in organizations requires simultaneous attention to ethical guidance, management intervention, individual training, professionalism, and ethical self-management. These five dimensions provide a coherent framework for promoting ethical actions at the individual and organizational levels.

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Extended abstract

Introduction

Today, narcissism has become one of the most important topics in the field of organizational behavior (Ren et al., 2024). This behavior is observed more often among knowledge workers than in other occupational groups (Mohd et al., 2023). Narcissism, as a personality trait, refers to an individual's desire to receive praise and exaggeration about themselves (Sarfarazi et al., 2021).

Maccoby (2021) defines narcissism in employees as personality traits in which an individual tends to see themselves as superior to others and needs approval and admiration from others. Narcissists tend to seek attention and approval and may be insensitive to the needs of others in their social and professional interactions. This trait can manifest itself in both positive and negative ways in the workplace. While some aspects of narcissism, such as self-confidence and leadership ability, can be beneficial, its negative aspects include a lack of empathy and difficulty in teamworking. Accordingly, narcissists tend to have undesirable traits such as exploitativeness, lack of empathy, aggression towards critics, and disregard for expert advice. Interestingly, narcissistic knowledge workers may initially be positively evaluated and noted for both their popularity and leadership abilities. However, these positive perceptions of these individuals diminish over time as others gradually become aware of their undesirable traits. According to social influence theory, people who are more skilled in influence management tactics will be more successful in conveying a certain self-image to others. For example, an employee with high knowledge skills can convey an image of competence and likability to others through self-promotion. In contrast, an employee with low knowledge skills may present a neutral and passive self-image to his or her supervisors and colleagues (Chen et al., 2024).

Narcissism can become a very important indicator of positive and negative organizational behavior. Isfahan Petrochemical Company (Isfahan Petrorefining Holding) is a public company that was established with the aim of producing aromatic products including benzene, toluene, orthoxylene, paraxylene, and mixed xylene (Hosseini, 2023). One of the most important reasons for choosing the Isfahan petrochemical industry as the context for the study is that this company needs to maximize the potential of its workforce due to the complex and competitive nature of the industry. The number of knowledge workers in this company is 700 people with diverse organizational abilities. Knowledge workers in this industry usually face numerous technical and managerial challenges that require effective cooperation and interaction between team members. Since narcissism can prevent healthy and effective communication between individuals, effective management of narcissism of knowledge workers in the petrochemical industry should be considered as a vital element for maintaining competitiveness and success in the market. According to the contents, the main question of the present research is: What is the management model of employee narcissism in the petrochemical industry?

Theoretical framework

Employee narcissism

Narcissism is a phenomenon that has existed in human societies for a long time; narcissism is an innate and fundamental human personality trait that may be intensified in a way that dominates other personality traits depending on the type of genetic background of individuals, family upbringing, growth conditions, and social and environmental conditions (Tang et al., 2018).

Zheng et al. (2025) examined the relationship between grandiose narcissism and creativity: A study of Chinese high-tech companies. The results showed that participants with grandiose



narcissism reported significantly higher levels of creativity and psychological well-being in creative performance than those with vulnerable narcissism.

Bali et al. (2024) examined the design of a narcissism model for sports managers with a qualitative approach. They showed that the narcissism model of sports managers includes positive dimensions (leadership and inspiration ability, high self-confidence, motivation and ambition, creativity and innovation), and negative dimensions (grandiose and excessive pride, self-centeredness and disregard for others, intolerance of criticism and criticism, dominance and control, lack of empathy and understanding of others, refusal to accept failure and mistakes).

Research Methodology

The research method is qualitative in terms of implementation, of the type of content analysis. The statistical population of this study includes 15 university professors, managers and experts in public administration. The sampling method in this study was purposive. This sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached. The research collection tool is a semi-structured interview.

Research findings

Data analysis was carried out using the content analysis method and MAXQDA software. The research results showed that the data were systematically coded and in the first stage, 254 initial codes were extracted and classified in the form of 62 basic themes and 20 basic organizing themes. Finally, five overarching themes were identified as the main dimensions of the conceptual model of the research, which are: moral guidance, managerial intervention, individual training, professionalism and ethical self-management. In general, managing narcissistic behavior in knowledge workers in organizations requires simultaneous attention to ethical guidance, management intervention, individual training, professionalism, and ethical self-management. These five dimensions provide a coherent framework for promoting ethical actions at the individual and organizational levels.

Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of developing a model of managing narcissistic behavior in knowledge workers using a content analysis approach. The results of this study are consistent with the results of Zheng et al. (2025), Bali et al. (2024), Hassanzadeh & mehdinia (2022), Sayidi (2022), Al Behbahani (2022), Pashazadeh Kahaq et al. (2022), Shariatinejad et al. (2022), Fahim Talebi et al. (2021), and Klimchak et al. (2016). Zheng et al. (2025) showed that participants with high narcissism reported significantly levels of creativity and psychological well-being in creative performance compared to those with low narcissism.

According to the results of the study, the following suggestions were made:

Ethical guidance increases employee trust, reduces conflicts, and promotes empathy and cooperation in the workplace, and plays an important role in preventing narcissistic and harmful behaviors.

Management intervention includes providing feedback, continuous monitoring, and timely intervention in the event of behavioral deviations or decreased performance. It is suggested that unproductive and self-centered employee behaviors are identified and corrected and organizational processes are directed towards common goals.