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Skill performance in informal economy workers: Multilevel perceptual assessment

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ABSTRACT

Workers in the informal economy are generally considered to be low-skilled, which affects their productivity, income, and wellbeing. However, studies have not really explored the perceptions of these workers and their customers with regard to these workers' skill performance levels and how practice and training affect performance. We explored the skill performance of informal economy workers as perceived by 120 workers and 120 customers in 71 service operations in Hat Yai, Thailand using a mixed methods and multilevel survey. A model was developed for multilevel perceptual assessments using the Dreyfus adult skill performance rating scale. Workers perceived themselves much lower than the customers, but overall perceptions indicated that workers were primarily at the novice performance level for most skills, which agrees with the global assumptions that informal workers are plagued with low skills. The conclusions were that improving the quality and access to higher-level skills training could greatly improve the workers' performance. This study is vital for policymakers and training-providers to understand and plan vocational skills training for these workers.

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Introduction

As important as skills are to the work and social life of informal economy workers (IEWs) (Adams, de Silva Johansson, & Setarah, 2013; dv International, 2013; International Labor Organization [ILO], 2013; Pina, Kotin, Hausman, & Macharia, 2012), it is surprising that so little is known about how skills performance is perceived by workers and their customers. Studies reveal that informal workers (IW) are plagued with low skills, low income, low productivity, and other vulnerabilities (Adams et al., 2013; Pina et al., 2012). This has led to conclusions that the skill

performance of these workers should be improved in order to enhance their productive capacity as well as their livelihood (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2011; Cano-Urbina, 2012; Peter-Cookey & Janyam, 2017).

In spite of over three decades of focus on the skills development of IEWs, their skills performance quality and the way it is perceived are understudied. Most studies focused more on pre-employment preparation for work in the formal/industrialized sector, formalization, property rights, and poverty alleviation, which were often commissioned by multilateral or regional organizations toward individual organizations objectives (King & Palmer, 2013; La Porta & Shleifer, 2009). Perceptual assessments of the skill performance levels of IEWs have not been studied even though understanding the way key stakeholders view the skill performance of workers could be crucial to creating programs and designing policies (Rigby & Sanchis, 2006) that could help them grow and sustain self-reliance

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and livelihood (dvv International, 2013; UNHCR, 2012). This paper assesses the skill performance of IEWs in the informal hair and beauty services of Hat Yai, Thailand to determine the gross skill performance level of this occupational domain in the study area.

Skill performance is dependent on the quality of training, duration of practice, standards of excellence and the content, context and conditions of the task required (Cornford, 1996); thus, investigating the conditions of the skill performance and the levels of proficiency of these workers becomes expedient for policymaking and intervention. For developing countries to fully grasp the potential of the IE and benefit from its workforce, requires filling up the knowledge gaps in employment and skill development (King & Palmer, 2013; Leach, 1995). One way to do this is to explore the perceptions of those employed (waged/self-employed) directly in the IE concerning SD strategies, opportunities, and importance. On the other hand, the perception of the workers and those they serve will give insight into their actions, commitment, acceptance, and involvement (Bagheri, Shabanali-Fami, Rezvanfar, Asadi, & Yazdani, 2008; Cookey, Rotchanatch, & Ratanachai, 2016) and this could support policy development with far-reaching effects (Bjornavold, 1997; ILO, 2011). However, since the peculiarities of localities differ, it would be more practical for perceptions of local IEWs to be considered to capture what is relevant to them. Therefore, the purpose of this work was to explore the perceptions of IEWs and the users of their services on the workers' skill performance levels and to make recommendations for effective and practical policymaking and interventions.

In this study, performance is viewed as the ability to carry out a task up to a standard (Schechner, 2013) using skills and knowledge acquired toward a journey (and not a destination) with steps along the way called 'performance levels', where each level represents the efficiency and quality of performance (Elger, 2007). Skill performance is considered as behaviors, actions, and outcomes within and outside the control of workers toward the fulfillment of customers' expectations and product/service requirements (Beilock & Carr, 2001; Harris, 2008). If IEWs work with low skills, then it follows that their performance and productive capacity will be low, negatively impact their livelihood, and worsen their vulnerabilities; therefore, improving their productivity, income, and wellbeing will require an upgrade in the skill performance quality (Gupta & Upadhyay, 2012; Phusavat, 2013). These workers and those that buy their skills have their own understandings and perceptions of expected performance quality (Mone & London, 2010; Rigby & Sanchis, 2006), and so skill performance assessment from their perceptions will assist policymakers and training-providers with the planning and implementation of intervention and training programs.

This study, therefore, attempted to capture some feedback on the skill performance of IEWs in the informal hair and beauty services through the eyes and minds of the local workers and their customers as well. The main research questions were: 'How do they perceive the skill performance levels of the workers?' and 'How do they perceive the impact of practice and training on skill performance?'

Conceptual Background

Social perception could be described as the lens through which a group of people or community view, organize, and interpret behaviors, actions, experiences, and outcomes such as the skill performance of workers and this could affect their responses (Beyerl, Putz, & Breckwoldt, 2016; Gallagher & Zahavi, 2012; Severin & Tankard, 2001). In that case, it makes sense to assess the perceptions of more than one group of people in order to arrive at a close consensus conclusion. Therefore, understanding the perceptions of the workers and their customers will give insights into the needs, interests, expectations, behaviors, and actions that could provide feedback for policy and intervention design and planning (Bagheri et al., 2008; Beyerl et al., 2016).

This study used the concepts of job performance (Koopmans et al., 2011; Murphy, 1989; Sonnentag & Frese, 2002; Sonnentag, Volmer, & Spychala, 2010), the Dreyfus levels of skill performance (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980; Dreyfus, 2004), and multisource performance rating (Bracken, Timmreck, & Church, 2001; Rotundo & Sackett, 2002; Sonnentag et al., 2010) to assess the skill performance levels of IEWs from two separate groups' perceptions. This is significant to the study because it allows for assessing skills performance per task and context rather than prescribed duties and responsibilities based on levels of proficiency (novice-to-master) as well as adaptiveness and creativity from a multilevel platform.

For this study, skill performance was viewed through the multidimensional and dynamic lens of job performance in that it changes over time as a result of learning (Koopmans et al., 2011; Koopmans, Bernardis, Hildebrandt, de Vet, & van de Beek, 2014; Sonnentag et al., 2010; Sonnentag & Frese, 2002) working from the dimensions of task, contextual, adaptive, and creative performance. The survey and interview instruments were designed based on what is required for the tasks involved in the selected skill sets in the occupational domain under study as well as the local context and expectations of customers, while assessments relate to the way a skill is performed (task), fulfillment of individual expectations (contextual), and the ability to adapt to fast-changing trends and create styles (adaptive and creative).

In addition, the Dreyfus levels of skill performance toward mastery, (novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient, expert, and master) as shown in Table 1 were used in this study to develop a performance rating scale (PRS) for the survey instrument as well as to describe the perceived performance levels of the workers and the development of the analytical model used for the study (Benner, 2004; Dreyfus, 2004). According to Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1980), the journey of skills performance is traced from the novice to the master stage onto the expert facing unfamiliar situations (Dreyfus, 2004); and is essential for "designing training programs and materials to facilitate the acquisition of high order skills" (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980). This concept has been used in education, engineering, medicine, nursing, sports, language training, science, psychology and libraries (Benner, 1984, 2004; Benner, Tanner, Chesla, Dreyfus, & Rubin, 1996; Bridges & Lau, 2006; Carraccio, Benson, Nixon, & Derstine, 2008; Rushbrook,

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