

A Study on The Path of Improving Decent Work for Front-Line Employees

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Abstract: The front-line employees of an enterprise are the main force in the direct value creation of the enterprise. Decent work is related to the development and external image of the enterprise, as well as the construction of harmonious labor relations in China. This paper starts with the definition of front-line employees, and finds out the statusquo of decent work for front-line employees through secondary data. The study found that the decent work of front-line employees in China needs to be improved. Therefore, this paper analyzes the promotion path of decent work from the enterprise aspect and individual aspect respectively. From the enterprise aspect, we should pay more attention to the awareness of human resources, the management level of human nature and the construction of employer brand; from the individual aspect, we should cultivate employees' awareness of decent work and improve their engagement and skill training level.

Keywords: Front-Line Employees, Decent Work, Skills Training, Employment, Rights

1. Research Background

Since the concept of Decent Work was first proposed by the International Labour Organization in 1999, it has been recognized and valued by all countries in the world. Decent work refers to ensuring that the majority of workers work under free, fair, safe and dignified conditions by promoting employment, strengthening social security, safeguarding the basic rights and interests of workers, and conducting consultations and dialogues among the government, enterprise organizations and trade unions. Its core is rights at work, employment, social security and social dialogue. With the development of society and the change of workers' demands, the International Labour Organization redefined decent work in 2015. From the perspective of fairness, the definition emphasizes that the dignity and equal rights of workers at work should be guaranteed at the enterprise level (Yan Yan et al., 2019).

The front-line employees are the main force for the smooth development of the enterprise's production and operation activities. In the service industry, they directly contact with customers, which is the embodiment of the external image and service quality of the enterprise. In the manufacturing industry, they directly participate in production activities, which is the guarantee of product quality. In other industries, front-line employees neither contact customers nor conduct direct production, but they directly serve other employees in the enterprise, which is the guarantee for the smooth operation of the enterprise. Therefore, the front-line employees of the enterprise are of great significance to the production and operation activities of the enterprise. However, in reality, front-line employees are currently faced with the "three low" problems, which are low labor contract signing rate, low social insurance participation rate, low wage income security level. At the same time, they are confronted with "three more" problems, which are more work-related injuries and occupational diseases, more overtime, and more labor disputes (Wang Ting, 2014). In October 2016, the 2030 Plan Outline for a Healthy China proposed that "promoting the construction of a healthy China is an important foundation for building a moderately prosperous society in an all-round way and basically realizing socialist modernization, and is a national strategy for comprehensively improving the health quality of the Chinese nation and achieving the coordinated development

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of people's health and economic society". Therefore, improving the decent work of workers has an important impact on the healthy development of enterprises, and has important practical significance for building a harmonious labor relationship.

2. Definition of Front-Line Employees and Status Quo of Decent Work for Them

The front-line employees of enterprises mainly refer to the blue collar workers temporarily employed in the manufacturing industry, the service personnel, and sales personnel employed near the sales terminals in the service industry. They exist in the front line of enterprise production and business activities, directly create value and wealth for the enterprise, and engage in repetitive and simple production and business activities and labor. For example, workers engaged in front-line production in the manufacturing industry; Service personnel and sales personnel who directly contact with customers in the service industry; Also serve other employees in other industries; Grass roots employees who create direct value for the enterprise and directly implement the management's instructions. Through secondary data, we found that the current decent work of such employees mainly reflected in the following aspects:

2.1 Low Skill Level and High Job Burnout

Front line employees have low educational background and low skill level. The majority of front-line employees have high school or technical secondary school education or below, and the number of employees with college degree or above is very small. In particular, the front-line employees working on the assembly line are engaged in simple and repetitive work, have no creativity and innovation, and have low requirements on skill level. According to the "Survey Report on Blue Collar Employment and Salary Management in 2021", from the perspective of the staffing of skilled blue collar workers and ordinary blue collar workers, the average proportion of skilled workers is 32.7%, and the proportion of general workers is 67.3% in the service industry. Although the work content of front-line employees is relatively flexible and diverse compared with that of front-line employees in manufacturing industry, the requirements for skills are still low. In other industries, front-line employees directly serve the internal employees of the enterprise. They only need to complete routine work according to the instructions of their superiors, with single work content, simple work procedures and strong repeatability. It can be seen that the work content of front-line employees is monotonous and their skill requirements are low. Therefore, front-line employees are prone to job burnout and lack of enthusiasm.

2.2 High Turnover Rate and Low Sense of Belonging

The first-line employees of the enterprise have a high mobility rate in the labor market and a low sense of belonging. The number of front-line employees in the labor market is huge with low market value. Thus, the front-line employees are at an unfair disadvantage in negotiating with the employer.

The labor security they enjoy is low, resulting in their lack of security at work and low sense of loyalty to the enterprise. Therefore, the job hopping rate and turnover rate are high. According to the survey of 48 enterprises in the central, eastern and western regions, Qing Tao and others researchers found that 59.1% of front-line employees can keep working for more than three years in enterprises, and 63.2% of them change jobs less than three times (Qing Tao and others, 2014). according to "Survey Report on Blue Collar Employment and Salary Management in 2021", the average voluntary turnover of blue collar employees was 29.3% in 2020, and the top three reasons for turnover were salary, personal family reasons and personal career development. Although the reasonable flow of personnel in the enterprise plays a positive role in the renewal of the enterprise's blood, the frequent flow of front-line employees still reflects the low sense of belonging of such employees.

2.3 High Labor Intensity and Low Income

Front line employees have high labor intensity and low income. According to the Survey Report on Blue Collar Employment and Salary Management in 2021, 57% of enterprises will have salary adjustment plans for blue collar workers in 2021, with an average salary adjustment of 5.5%. According to the total annual income of blue-collar employees in 2020, the annual salary of ordinary blue collar employees is nearly 70000 RMB. Although the income level of front-line employees has improved to a certain extent in recent years, compared with the high intensity work, it is still difficult to satisfy front-line employees. The survey data shows that in enterprises regardless of the

peak season, the average weekly overtime hours of front-line blue-collar employees are 5-10 hours; The average weekly overtime of enterprises in lean and peak seasons is more than 20 hours. Although the enterprise pays overtime wages according to the relevant provisions of the Labor Law, to a certain extent, it has stimulated the enthusiasm of front-line employees and encouraged those who can do more to work, but this has also led to the high intensity work of front-line employees to some extent. This is mainly reflected in the large amount of overtime, some even accounting for more than half of the whole normal working time (Hu Qiangbing, 2014).

2.4 High Coverage of Social Insurance and Low Satisfaction Level of Humanistic Needs

Social protection refers to the social security enjoyed by employees, which can provide basic labor security and system security for employees. Research shows that front-line employees of enterprises are concerned about their rights and interests in work (Ding Yuelan et al., 2013). The survey data shows that more than 80% of enterprises provide social insurance, housing fund, etc. for blue collar employees; 46.2% of enterprises provide supplementary commercial insurance for employees. However, according to the survey results of Qing Tao and others researchers in 2014, 68.9% of front-line employees have pension, work-related injury, medical and unemployment insurance, while 40.3% of front-line employees have housing fund. In contrast, in recent years, the social insurance coverage of front-line employees has increased significantly, effectively protecting the basic rights of front-line employees. According to Herzberg's two factor theory, humanistic care for employees is an effective incentive factor, which can effectively stimulate employees' sense of identity and loyalty to the organization. However, the survey data shows that the humanistic needs of employees have not been effectively met. 38.5% of enterprises provide housing benefits for employees, 16.5% of enterprises provide home leave for employees, and only 5.5% of enterprises provide children's education benefits.

3. Analysis of Promotion Path from Enterprise Aspect

On the whole, there are some problems in the decent work level of front-line employees, which need to be improved. For enterprises, there are three aspects that can effectively improve the decent work level of front-line employees. They are management concept, employee incentive and employer brand building.

3.1 Management Concept Improvement

The traditional concept holds that the front-line employees of an enterprise are the cost of the enterprise rather than the capital. Therefore, many enterprises adopt strict militarization management to treat front-line employees in human resource management. In particular, enterprises treat front-line employees by reducing labor costs. Some enterprises even reduce labor costs at the expense of labor safety and labor rights of front-line employees. This has caused many front-line employees in enterprises to engage in the work with the highest labor intensity, but with the lowest wages in the enterprise. In fact, front-line employees create direct value for the enterprise and have direct contact with customers and internal employees. The attitude of the enterprise towards them directly affects their work mood, which will be brought into production and service activities.

Therefore, enterprises need to change their ideas, regard front-line employees as valuable human resources, invest in them, respect them, protect their interests, make them feel the importance of the enterprise, thus generating higher job satisfaction and laying the foundation for better production and customer service. In terms of human capital investment, enterprises can implement layered training for front-line employees, create a training system that matches the growth of enterprise value, and encourage employees to actively participate in training. Enterprises can also set up open communication channels, so that the demands of front-line employees can be communicated to their superiors. Front-line employees can feel that they are respected in the organization, and their demands can be heard and met. Enterprises can also provide community services for employees, encourage communication and exchange between front-line employees, and enrich their spare time life. These investment methods can improve the sense of belonging of front-line employees to the organization, make them feel that they are part of the enterprise, and improve their enthusiasm and initiative.

3.2 Strengthen Humanized Management in Employee Motivation

Due to the high labor intensity of the front-line work of the enterprise and the influx of young labor in the labor market, most of the employees engaged in the front-line work of the enterprise are new generation employees.

They are young, energetic and active, but they are hard-working and have a low sense of belonging, which forms a sharp contrast with the older generation of employees, and also challenges the traditional human resource management policies of the enterprise. How to retain front-line employees through humanized management methods and improve their sense of belonging has become a realistic problem that enterprises need to face at present.

In terms of reducing the turnover rate of employees, enterprises can give year-end rewards to employees according to their working years in the enterprise. For example, one more month of basic salary can be obtained as the year-end bonus after serving the enterprise for one year. The longer the service life, the higher the amount of year-end bonus. In addition, enterprises can also make reasonable career plans for front-line employees. For example, according to the interests and skills of front-line employees, and taking into account the needs of enterprise development, a career development plan is formulated for them, and a regular job rotation system is implemented to improve employees' work participation. Strengthen employees' job embeddedness, improve their sense of satisfaction and achievement in work, strengthen the depth of work-related skills and the breadth of non work-related skills, and improve the employability of front-line employees in the labor market. In addition, enterprises can also implement flexible working system for front-line employees according to the actual situation, reasonably arrange their work and leisure time, and reduce labor intensity.

3.3 Establish Employer Brand in The Labor Market

In terms of employment system, enterprises should strictly abide by national laws and regulations to protect the rights and interests of workers. Sign labor contracts with workers and pay social insurance for them. At the same time, enterprises should also set up a reasonable wage structure, combining internal incentives with external incentives. Wage income should not only reflect the security, but also reflect the close relationship between front-line employees and the enterprise. For example, in some small and medium-sized enterprises, the efficiency of the enterprise is combined with part of the employees' income. The performance of front-line employees is directly related to the personal income level and the economic efficiency of the enterprise. In some large enterprises, enterprises can provide equity incentives to front-line employees, and the hard work of employees can play a role in the development of enterprises. These means let employees feel that they are closely related to the enterprise. The new generations of employees pay more attention to the dignity and value that work can bring to them and a good employer brand can just meet their needs. The establishment of employer brand can enable enterprises to obtain more high-quality human resources in the labor market, and enable existing front-line employees to realize that they are respected in their work, enhance their sense of mission and belonging, and improve their loyalty to the enterprise.

4. Analysis of Promotion Path from individual Aspect

Improving the decent work level of front-line employees requires the joint efforts of enterprises and individuals. For front-line employees, the decent work level can also be improved from three aspects: awareness, work and labor market.

4.1 Improve Employees' Awareness of Decent Work

Decent work awareness refers to a perception of the work of front-line employees through the mechanism of their own needs and through the influence of historical, cultural and other factors such as reference selection and socialization (Wang Ting, 2014). For front-line employees, they need to feel that their work can not only guarantee their material life but also meet their spiritual needs. For example, income can maintain personal and family expenses, meet their material needs, and reflect the value of their labor; The right to freedom in the choice of work; In the work can reflect the self-worth, can experience happiness and satisfaction from the work; The work they are engaged in can guarantee their personal safety, respect their personality and protect their rights. The awareness of decent work is the premise to achieve decent work for front-line employees. Only when front-line employees have the awareness of decent work can they realize the level of decent work at work. Therefore, cultivating the awareness of decent work of front-line employees is the basis for building a harmonious labor relationship.

4.2 Improve Engagement in Work

Front-line employees are at the bottom of the enterprise due to monotonous and repetitive work content in working environment, which is easy to produce emotional labor, thus affecting the degree of engagement. From the individual level, employees should realize that although their position in the enterprise is the most grass-roots and their work is the least innovative, the content of their work is directly related to the enterprise value, and every effort will affect the business efficiency and image of the enterprise. Emotional labor will not only bring losses to enterprises, but also damage their reputation, which is not conducive to their promotion and better employment, thus reducing their competitiveness in the labor market.

In manufacturing enterprises, front-line employees can apply to their superiors for regular job rotation to reduce the monotony of work and thus improve the richness of work. In service-oriented enterprises, front-line employees can implement personalized management of customers to meet the multiple needs of customers, so as to find their own value and satisfaction in work. In other industries, front-line employees can also change their working attitude and working methods, improve their communication ability, and better serve the internal employees of the enterprise. Therefore, reducing emotional labor, striving to improve engagement, strengthening their own spirit of ownership, and cultivating their sense of responsibility will improve employability and obtain more self-worth.

4.3 Strengthen Personal Skills Training

At present, front-line employees have low skill level in the labor market and are highly replaceable. Therefore, improving their skill level can improve their competitiveness in the labor market. The survey data shows that 50% of employees' knowledge and skills will become obsolete in 3-5 years, which puts forward higher requirements for updating employees' knowledge and skills.

The knowledge level of different employees is uneven, and the demand for skill training is also different. For front-line employees who have worked for many years, they pay more attention to the updating of skills, so that they can always remain competitive in the labor market. Therefore, they can update their knowledge and skills by taking part in short-term skills training and education enhancement classes. However, for first-line employees, what they need more is to know how to work and how to communicate with colleagues and superiors. Such front-line employees can find mentors within the enterprise, integrate into the working environment as soon as possible, understand the internal operation mode of the enterprise, and constantly learn and improve their personal knowledge and skills. The upgrading and learning of skills can help front-line employees win a more favorable position in the labor market, improve their employability, and more conducive to the realization of personal value.

5. Conclusion

The secondary data shows that the decent work of front-line employees in China still needs to be improved. Front-line employees have low skill levels, lack a sense of belonging to the enterprise, labor intensity and income do not match, and social security skills are difficult to protect their rights. Therefore, this paper proposes that we should work together at the enterprise aspects and individual aspects to achieve decent work for front-line employees. From the perspective of enterprises, we should pay attention to the cultivation of human resource awareness of enterprises and the investment in human resources for front-line employees, strengthen humanized management and improve the sense of belonging of front-line employees, establish a good employer brand and improve the loyalty of front-line employees to the enterprise. From the individual aspects of front-line employees, we should cultivate the awareness of decent work, which is the premise of achieving decent work, improve the degree of engagement and strengthen the relationship between individuals and enterprises, strengthen personal skill training and improve employability.

The decent work level of front-line employees has an important impact on the development and corporate image of the enterprise, and is of great significance in building a harmonious labor relationship. Although it will take a long time to achieve decent work for front-line employees, through the joint efforts of the government, enterprises and individuals, decent work for front-line employees will eventually be achieved.

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