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# THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL SPECIALISATION IN BUILDING HIGH- TRUST ORGANISATIONS

Case  
Study

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## Keywords

*Business students,  
Concern for employees,  
Job satisfaction,  
Practical competence and skills,  
Theoretical knowledge,  
Transylvania (Romania)*

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## JEL Classification

M14, O15

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## Abstract

*The paper presents a model of organisational trust based on a sociological survey. The survey respondents were 395 business administration students; during their course of study, these students also work for around 300 companies. For the survey, the students provided their opinions about the level of organisational trust within these companies and what this means for the firms and their personnel. The students also answered about their theoretical and practical training in the university. The paper analyses the business students' opinions' and level of trust in their companies and the paper also focuses on ways to improve students' university training in order to increase levels of organisational trust.*

## INTRODUCTION

During the last few decades, literature in the fields of psychology, sociology, economics and politics has underlined the specific role of organisational trust, which assesses the effectiveness and efficiency of business activities and motivates employees by giving them satisfaction in their work. If the company's culture lies at the heart of personality of human resources, trust generates specific routes of action, helps establish relationships within and outside the company and helps companies capitalize on other resources.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The notion of trust first appeared in the psychological context. Trust has been linked with "optimistic expectations in decision making under conditions of vulnerability and dependence" (Hosmer, 1995) and "willingness" versus the "ability to monitor and control" (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman, 1995). Trust has also been linked with cognitive (competence, reliability, professionalism) and affective elements (Kanavattanachai & Yoo, 2002), which help to create emotional connections in working relationships.

According to Hardin (2002) and Kramer (2009), trust is a psychological state. But trust can be also defined in political terms, in sociological and economics terms (Avram & Shockley – Zalabak, 2008). In terms of psychology, Schein (1969, apud Harrison, 1987, p. 21) notes that, "trust is the ability to rely on someone, to believe in colleagues and in managers". Furthermore, as the following quotations demonstrate, trust can be defined as faith and expectation: trust is "mutual belief in others' intentions and behaviour" (Kinicki & Kreitner, 2003); "the belief and the desire to act based on the words, actions and decisions of another person" (McAllister, 1995); and "the expectancy from others regarding ethical, fair, non-threatening behaviour, which cares for the rights of others" (Carnevale & Weschler, 1992).

Sociologists use the theory of social exchange to study trust in organisational networks (Burt & Knez, 1996; Jablin & Putnam, 2000). From an economic point of view, trust implies that an individual supports another individual, providing that there is understanding and risk (Harrison, 1987).

The concept of trust can be understood as a choice in two different ways: (1) a choice from a rational point of view, from a sociological perspective (Coleman, 1990), an economic perspective (Williamson, 1993) and a political perspective (Hardin, 1992, 2002) and (2) the decision-making process, which involves risk, i.e., when it comes to

choices that increase benefits and lower damages (Schelling, 1960).

Economic and managerial issues are related to the concept of "encapsulated trust", which means correlating the interests of those who take part in a certain process to a business, etc. For example, "You can trust me, if you know that my interest is to fulfil your expectations. In this case, your trust encapsulates my interest" (Hardin, 1991).

Companies produce high performance levels through the quality of their decision-making processes, through flexible production structures, through cooperation and communication, through the use of a correct risk-taking system and the production of job satisfaction, thus increasing organisational trust (Harrison, 1987).

Regarding the organisational trust dimension, the literature identifies several elements that are included in our model: competence in organisational leadership (Mishra, 1996; Neff & Citrin, 1999); openness, honesty and sincerity in communication (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991); concern for employees (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996); reliability (McGregor, 1967); and identification (Shockley-Zalabak, Ellis & Cesaria, 2000).

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research was grounded in the model of a high-trust organisation (HTO) (Shockley-Zalabak, Morreale & Hackman, 2010), which, according to certain studies, can be reproduced in every organisation as long as there is a serious and constant focus on this matter and appropriate training is provided for the company's management. According to the model that we adopted, there are five "key drivers" that lead to organisational trust (Shockley-Zalabak, Morreale & Hackman, 2010): 1) competence; 2) openness and honesty; 3) concern for employees/stakeholders; 4) reliability; and 5) identification with the company.

A high level of trust leads to effectiveness, high levels of efficiency in business activities and to high levels of employee job satisfaction. We have proposed a new model that builds on the initial one (Shockley-Zalabak, Morreale & Hackman, 2010), as based on previous experience concern for customer and other stakeholders appears as an effect of organisational trust (Sonea, Câmpeanu-Sonea & Popa, 2016). We carried out a prior study in order to test the model in the context of a single company (Sonea, Câmpeanu-Sonea & Popa, 2016). For the current stage of our research, our purpose was to build the same HTO model based on the opinions of an important group of students (395 subjects) who are also employees of around 300 companies. We determined that such an approach

would help us build a larger and more complex picture of organisational trust in companies.

The goal was to establish the specific aspects observed by students from different specialisations in the companies for which they work, as well as ascertain differences in opinion regarding how to improve university training in order to create an HTO model. The research question dealt with the identification of potential differences, both in the opinions regarding organisational trust in the surveyed companies and any issues discussed about university training.

### **Participants**

The questionnaire was given to 395 students from a prestigious university in Transylvania, Romania. All respondents were students of Economics and worked for various companies while attending the university. We decided to focus our attention on three groups of business students considered to be representative of business administration studies: finance (F: 80 people), accounting (A: 130 people) and management (M: 185 people). The sample structure is presented in Table 1.

Most of the companies for which the students worked are service providers, with private capital, foreign or mixed (national and foreign). These companies are located either in Romania (94%) or abroad (4.2%). Most of the finance and accounting students worked in their fields of specialisation, while the management students worked mostly in other fields. The average age for the students in finance and management was 24-years old and the average age for students in accounting was 26-years old. There were no big age differences—only a few exceptions—and the predominant gender was female.

The average grades of the researched students were between nine and 10 for the finance students, between eight and nine for those in accounting and between seven and eight for those in management.

### **Instruments and analysis**

The study used a questionnaire constructed by the authors, following the basic concepts from the related literature (Shockley-Zalabak, Morreale & Hackman, 2010) and from our previous research (Sonea, Bordean & Câmpeanu-Sonea, 2015). The survey consisted of eight sections and each considered a separate scale: Q1) employees' and managers' competence; Q2) openness and honesty; Q3) concern for company employees; Q4) reliability, safety and stability; Q5) identification with the organisation; Q6) efficiency and effectiveness; Q7) concern for customers/stakeholders; and Q8) job satisfaction. The respondents' opinions were measured on a five-point Likert scale. A code average close to five meant that the respondents strongly agreed and displayed a high level of trust, while an average close to one indicated strong disagreement and a

reduced level of trust. The variable organisational trust (To) was computed as an average of the five subscales considered to be the key drive (Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4 and Q5), whereas the variable organisational trust results (Tr) was calculated as an average of the three subscales used within our study (Q6, Q7 and Q8). Table 2 reports the number of items in each scale and the level of reliability ascertained by Cronbach's alpha for each scale and subscale. According to several researchers (Nunnally, 1978), Cronbach's alpha values that exceed 0.70 are suitable, thus providing validity and accuracy to the data analysis. The data were processed using SPSS software (Table 2.)

The building of our HTO model included several steps:

- 1) calculate the values for the five key drivers (Q1-Q5) as averages of codes on the Likert scale;
- 2) calculate the values for the three categories related to organizational trust result (Q6-Q8) as averages of codes on the Likert scale;
- 3) calculate the level of respondents' trust in the organisations where they work, which is the level of the indicator of To as an average of the five key drivers;
- 4) calculate the level of Tr as an average of the three categories of the results;
- 5) establish the Pearson correlation coefficients between the level of To and Tr; and
- 6) establish the Pearson correlation between the five key drivers and Tr and between To and the three categories of results.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### *Organisational trust model at the level of the three specialisations*

Research has shown that finance students achieve the best grades, obtain the most advantageous jobs (usually in multinational companies) and find work within their field of specialisation. They are also the most contented group of students in the organisations in which they work. This was also confirmed by our study (Tables 3 and 4).

The greatest To value was found in the finance students' answers (3.87) and, except for Q2 (openness and honesty), the codes given by the key drivers were better compared to the other two specialisations that were included in the research (Table 3). The situation was similar for Tr (Table 4), as well as for the three categories of results (Q6, Q7 and Q8).

The results showed that the companies at which the students with the higher grades worked and the companies with the most desirable jobs (finance) have not created for their employees a management that is honest, frank and open. However, this was

only to a small extent compared to the other categories of respondents.

The situation was different for several questions for the accounting and management students. We found that To and Tr had better values for those in management, as well as for Q1 (employees' and managers' competence), Q3 (concern for company employees) and Q6 (concern for the customer and other stakeholders). This meant that "concern for employees and customers" and the issue of "competence" were perceived as more trustworthy by the management students. On the other hand, those in accounting were more confident in aspects related to Q2 (openness and honesty) – the best values for the whole sample – Q4 (reliability, safety and stability), Q5 (identification with the company) and Q8 (employee job satisfaction): Figure 1.

In our research, the HTO model, inspired by Shockley-Zalabak et al. (2010) and modified according to our research, has shown the extent to which the results of our studied organisations' activity are determined by the level of organisational trust (To), as based on the respondents' opinions. With this aim in mind, we used the Pearson correlations between the values from Tables 3 and 4. The indicator of To, computed as an average of the values Q1-Q5, was correlated with Q6-Q8 (efficiency and effectiveness, concern for customers/stakeholders, job satisfaction) (Table 5), as well as with the global result for Tr.

On the other hand, we established the Pearson correlation coefficients between Tr (computed as an average of the level of indicators Q6-Q8) and the five key drivers (Q1-Q5) of organisational trust (To) (Table 6).

We conceived similar models for the three specialisations we selected (finance, accounting and management). Given that correlations are significant at the .01 level, all of the Pearson correlation coefficients had the maximum degree of significance.

The best correlation coefficient between To and Tr appeared in the model based on the opinions of the finance students (0.735, Figure 1). Also, correlations more strong, expressed by the greatest coefficients, in this model (Figure 1) there are between To and the three categories of results, as well as between Tr and the five key drivers, in comparison with the models of the accounting and management students (Figures 2 and 3).

The use of education in building and improving an HTO: theory and practice

Besides the opinions regarding the content and level of trust in their own organisations, the researched subjects were asked to note what theoretical knowledge (Q9) and what practical skills (Q10) they believed an education system should provide to help contribute to students'

improved trust in companies following graduation. The two questions are detailed below.

Q9. Theoretical information/knowledge:

Q9.1 Related to labour organisation;

Q9.2 Related to production organisation;

Q9.3 Related to the use of resources and work efficiency;

Q9.4 In relationships/communication with colleagues and employees;

Q9.5 In relationships/communication with customers;

Q9.6 Related to negotiations and social dialogue;

Q9.7 Related to modern computer technologies; and

Q9.8 Related to the study and use of foreign languages.

Q10. Practical skills and abilities:

Q10.1 Related to labour organisation;

Q10.2 Related to production organisation;

Q10.3 Related to the use of resources and work efficiency;

Q10.4 In relationships/communication with colleagues and employees;

Q10.5 In relationships/communication with customers;

Q10.6 Related to negotiations and social dialogue;

Q10.7 Related to modern computer technologies; and

Q10.8 Related to the study and use of foreign languages.

Regarding theoretical knowledge, the finance students were above the general average for Q9.1, Q9.2, Q9.3 and Q9.8, where they estimated that there are shortcomings (Table 7).

The answers provided by the accounting students were all above average, except for question Q9.3 where, because it is their field of specialisation, they considered themselves to be well prepared. Management students were the most critical, as they noted that they needed more training in all the aspects mentioned in the questionnaire, to an equal or considerably greater extent than the average per faculty.

Regarding practical competence and skills, the finance students were slightly above the general average for Q10.3, a field that pertains to their specialisation (Table 8). They were also slightly above the general average for Q10.6 and Q10.8. It was evident that the students with the higher grades work for companies that force them to encounter issues of globalisation and forge relationships with foreign business partners. The accounting students felt that they needed to improve in all aspects, more so than the average level of the sample, except in terms of "organisation of work" (Q10.1), which is part of their specialist training. Finally, the future managers considered themselves to be more prepared than average only for "negotiation and social dialogue" (Q10.6) and they noted their need for better training in all other aspects.

## CONCLUSION

The two hypotheses that we put forward in the study were confirmed by the answers provided by the study's subjects. The differences that we anticipated were noticeable, considering there was a general homogeneity. The companies where the students work enjoy a good level of trust. Thus, on a scale from zero to five, To nearly reached code four (it was 3.85 in general) and the differences for the three specialisations ranged from 3.84 to 3.87 (Tables 3). The global results for To were slightly different: the (Tr) indicator was 3.59, with values ranging from 3.55 to 3.69 for the three specialisations (Table 4). It was clear that the management in private companies with foreign or mixed capital do not provide much information to employees regarding the companies' performance and how to conduct relationships with customers in the business environment (Q6 and Q7). The most demanding students (those in finance) highlighted problems with their companies' managers regarding their openness and honesty (Q2). The model of organisational trust (Figures 1-3) underlines the existence of a good intensity correlation (0.413-0.688) and a very good intensity correlation (0.713-0.762), which implies that all the respondents of the whole sample were serious and reliable when completing the questionnaires. These correlations prove the receptiveness of the researched subjects and a good understanding of the object of the research. From this point of view, the answers given by the finance students proved the best situation: starting with the correlations between To and Tr (0.735 coefficient for finance compared to 0.569 and 0.568 for the other two specialisations), and continuing with the other values from Figures 1-3, Q4 (reliability) and Q8 (employee job satisfaction) stand out. The researched companies (mostly foreign companies) give their employees the feeling of protection and safety (Q4), as well as a feeling of satisfaction concerning the work they perform (Q8).

### Extensions of the research

For the purpose of further developing this research, the authors wish to highlight the possibilities of improving the education system to develop the training of managers and other categories of employees with a view to creating an organisational culture based on a high level of trust.

### Limits of the research

The size of the analysed sample was not established based on an established mathematical relationship, as there was no clear evidence about the number of students who are employed or who own their own business. The questionnaires were processed with the consent of the students and the researchers accepted the participants' statements that they were

employees or owners and they wished to answer the questionnaire.

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**TABLES**

Table 1.  
*Sample characteristics*

Demographic characteristics (N = 395)	n	Percentage	
<b>Respondents distribution according to areas of specialization</b>	Finance	80	20.25
	Accounting	130	32.91
	Management	185	46.84
<b>Gender</b>	Female	268	67.84
	Male	113	28.60
<b>Respondents distribution according to age</b>	19-22	74	18.73
	23-26	251	63.54
	> 26	70	17.72
<b>Respondents distribution according to their grades</b>	Between 5 and 6	3	0.75
	Between 6.01 and 7	60	15.19
	Between 7.01 and 8	121	30.63
	Between 8.01 and 9	117	29.62
	Between 9.01 and 10	85	21.52

Table 2.  
*Reliability coefficients for all scales and subscales*

Scale or subscale (N = 395)	No of items	Cronbach's alpha
<b>Organizational Trust (To)</b>	41	.94
Q1. Identification	9	.79
Q2. Concern for employees	12	.86
Q3. Reliability	6	.83
Q4. Openness and honesty	9	.82
Q5. Competence	5	.77
<b>Organizational Trust Results (Tr)</b>	20	.90
Q6. Efficiency and effectiveness	9	.82
Q7. Concern for customers/stakeholders	5	.72
Q8. Job satisfaction	6	.79

Table 3.  
*Sample structure according to answer Q1 – Q5 by groups of specialization (codes average)*

Groups of specialization	Number of answers	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	To
<b>Finance</b>	80	4.13	3.82	3.68	3.90	3.71	<b>3.87</b>
<b>Accounting</b>	130	4.08	3.85	3.49	3.90	3.73	<b>3.84</b>
<b>Management</b>	185	4.12	3.84	3.62	3.88	3.64	<b>3.85</b>
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	<b>395</b>	<b>4.11</b>	<b>3.84</b>	<b>3.59</b>	<b>3.89</b>	<b>3.68</b>	<b>3.85</b>

Table 4.  
*Sample structure according to answer Q6 – Q8 by groups of specialization (codes average)*

Groups of specialization	Number of answers	Q6	Q7	Q8	Tr
<b>Finance</b>	80	3.70	3.72	3.67	<b>3.69</b>
<b>Accounting</b>	130	3.52	3.60	3.55	<b>3.55</b>
<b>Management</b>	185	3.61	3.60	3.51	<b>3.58</b>
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	<b>395</b>	<b>3.60</b>	<b>3.62</b>	<b>3.55</b>	<b>3.59</b>

Table 5.  
 Correlations between „key drivers” and the global result of organizational trust (Tr) by groups of specialization

Tr. Average of Q6-Q8	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
<b>Finance</b>	0.676	0.670	0.520	0.719	<b>0.597</b>
<b>Accounting</b>	0.458	0.485	0.441	0.511	<b>0.512</b>
<b>Management</b>	0.519	0.490	0.480	0.561	<b>0.572</b>
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	0.532	0.524	0.475	0.579	<b>0.556</b>
<b>N = 395</b>					

Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.00 level (2-tailed)

Table 6.  
 Correlations between the level of organizational trust (To) and the results by groups of specialization

To. Average of Q1-Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Tr
<b>Finance</b>	0.645	0.582	0.762	<b>0.735</b>
<b>Accounting</b>	0.433	0.413	0.713	<b>0.569</b>
<b>Management</b>	0.507	0.531	0.657	<b>0.568</b>
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	0.509	0.506	0.695	<b>0.602</b>
<b>N = 395</b>				

Note. Correlation is significant at the 0.00 level (2-tailed)

Table 7.  
 Sample structure according to answer Q9 by groups of specialization (answers' frequency - %)

Groups	Q 9.1	Q 9.2	Q 9.3	Q 9.4	Q 9.5	Q 9.6	Q 9.7	Q 9.8
Finance	37.5	21.3	33.8	26.3	27.5	35.0	22.5	27.5
Accounting	38.3	21.1	27.3	32.8	39.1	39.8	25.0	25.0
Management	36.2	21.1	29.2	31.9	38.9	42.2	23.2	23.8
TOTAL	37.2	21.1	29.5	31.0	36.7	40.0	23.7	25.0

Table 8.  
 Sample structure according to answer Q10 by groups of specialization (answers' frequency - %)

Groups	Q 10.1	Q 10.2	Q 10.3	Q 10.4	Q 10.5	Q 10.6	Q 10.7	Q 10.8
<b>Finance</b>	27.5	22.5	31.3	22.5	25.0	40.0	17.5	<b>20.0</b>
<b>Accounting</b>	29.7	24.2	32.0	35.2	35.2	34.4	28.1	<b>20.3</b>
<b>Management</b>	31.4	24.9	29.7	32.4	31.9	31.9	25.9	<b>18.9</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>24.2</b>	<b>30.8</b>	<b>31.3</b>	<b>31.6</b>	<b>34.4</b>	<b>25.0</b>	<b>19.6</b>

FIGURES

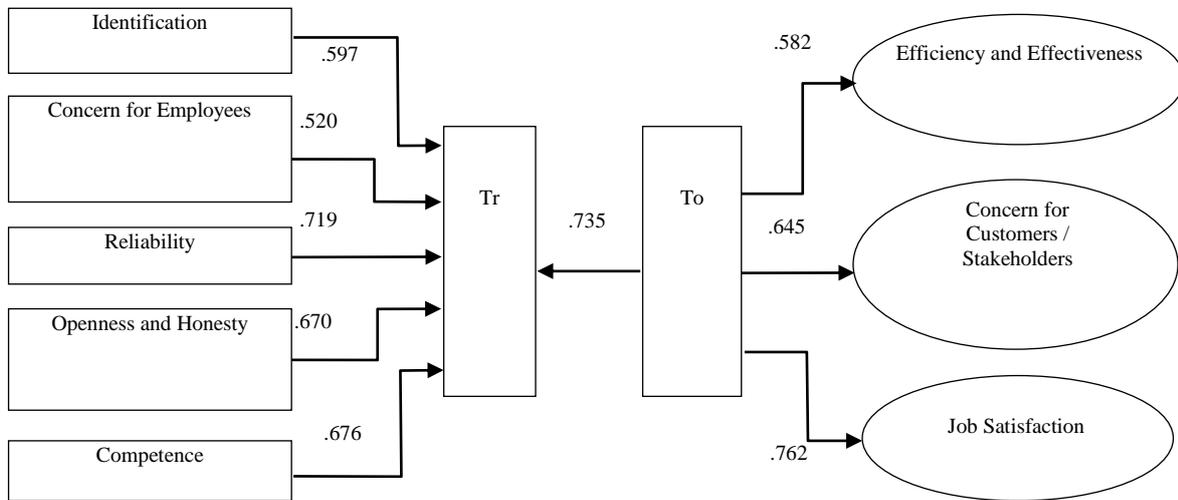


Figure 1. Model of Organizational Trust (To) and the organizational trust result (Tr) based on the opinions of Finance students (p < 0.01, N = 80)

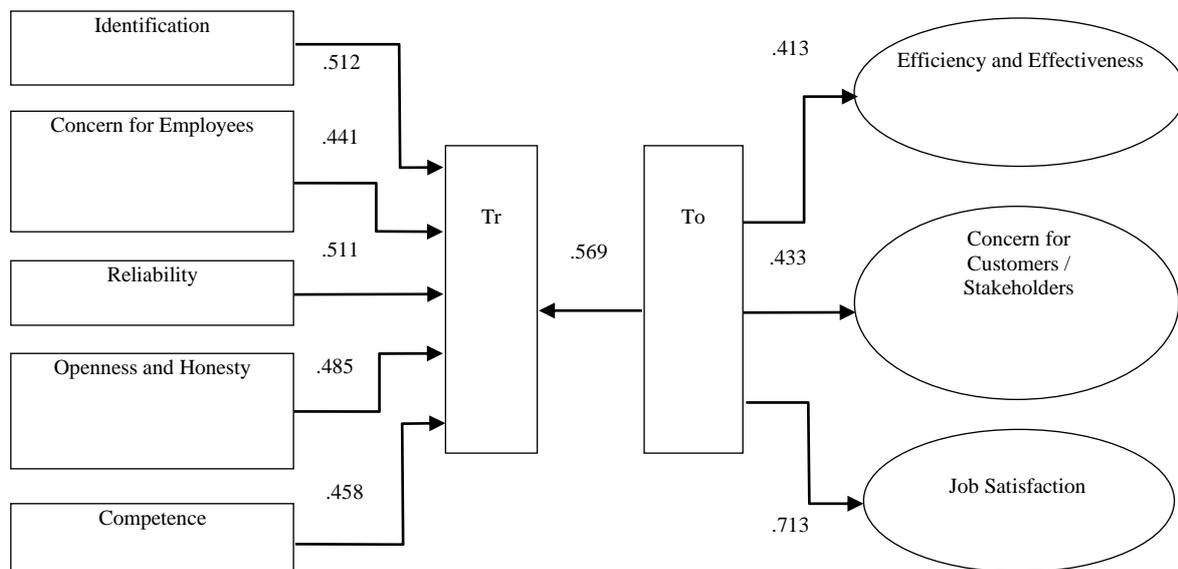


Figure 2. Model of Organizational Trust (To) and the organizational trust result (Tr) based on the opinions of Accounting students (p < 0.01, N = 130)

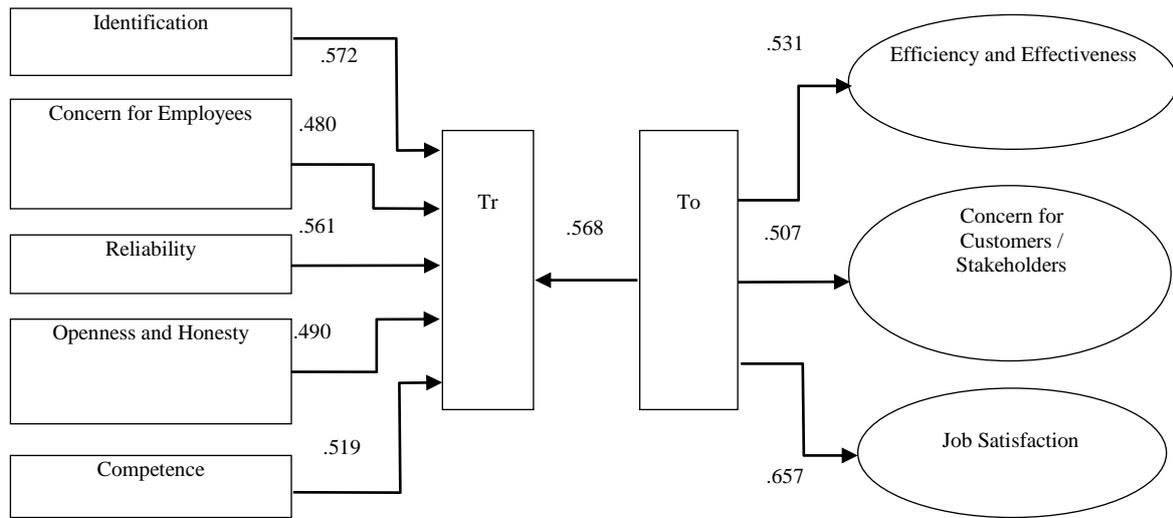


Figure 3. Model of Organizational Trust (To) and the organizational trust result (Tr) based on the opinions of Management students ( $p < 0.01$ ,  $N = 185$ )