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Factors Affecting Employee Engagement in the Malaysian Private Sector during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

Employee engagement is pivotal to the success of an organization. The literature has indicated that employee engagement is enhanced via strong leadership, improved work-life balance, increased training and development as well as employee recognition. As such, this study aimed to examine the effects of these factors on employee engagement, especially among the Malaysian private sector, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of this study would provide an impetus to the Malaysian private sector to enhance employee engagement with policies that focus on making employees at the workplace passionate and highly involved. The results of this study will also add value to the existing literature on employee engagement. A quantitative survey was conducted, with questionnaires distributed online. This study targeted both male and female employees aged between 20 years old and 60 years old working in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia. A total of 154 respondents answered the online questionnaire. The data collected were analyzed using SPSS Software to identify the reliability and linearity of these variables as well as the testing of the correlation, and multiple regression analysis. The findings of the study indicated that both leadership and training and development had significant positive relationships with employee engagement. The scientific novelty of the study can be found from the findings of this research whereby employees desire a leader during the difficult times who can help them be more engaged in their work, and employees require more training and development, which are job-related, especially as the private sector embraces the endemic stage of COVID-19. Implications of the research findings are presented in this study.

Keywords: employee engagement, leadership, work-life balance, training and development, recognition.

在新冠肺炎大流行期间影响马来西亚私营部门员工敬业度的因素

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摘要:

员工敬业度是组织成功的关键。文献表明,通过强有力的领导、改善工作与生活的平衡、增加培训和发展以及员工认可,可以提高员工敬业度。因此,本研究旨在检查这些因素在新冠肺炎大流行期间对员工敬业度的影响,尤其是在马来西亚私营部门中。这项研究的结果将推动马来西亚私营部门通过专注于使工作场所的员工充满热情和高度参与的政策来提高员工参与度。这项研究的结果还将为现有的有关员工敬业度的文献增加价值。进行了定量调查,问卷在网上分发。这项研究针对在马来西亚吉隆坡和雪兰莪工作的 20 至 60 岁的男性和女性员工。共有 154 名受访者回答了在线问卷。收集的数据使用 SPSS 软件进行分析,以确定这些变量的可靠性和线性,以及相关性检验和多元回归分析。研究结果表明,领导力和培训与发展与员工敬业度有显著的正相关关系。该研究的科学新颖性可以从这项研究的结果中发现,即员工在困难时期希望有一个领导者可以帮助他们更加投入工作,而员工需要更多的培训和发展,这与工作相关,尤其是由于私营部门正处于新冠肺炎的流行阶段。本研究介绍了研究结果的含义。

关键词: 员工敬业度、领导力、工作与生活的平衡、培训和发展、认可。

1. Introduction

Employee engagement refers to the intellectual and emotional connection, passion, and experiences of an employee in their organization (Ryba, 2020). Employee engagement can drive innovation, bottom-line performance, and can reduce turnover among employees. Employee engagement may be crucial to the success of a firm due to its ties to work satisfaction and staff morale, particularly during a pandemic (Smith, 2020). Furthermore, literature has stated that an organization with high employee engagement will achieve higher productivity, sales, profit, earnings per share (EPS) and has a quicker recovery speed after financial outbreaks (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020).

In Malaysia, one in every four working Malaysians felt unengaged at their workplace (Mercer, 2022). Although the Qualtrics 2020 study found that Malaysia had an average employee engagement score of 54%, which is above the global average of 53%, Malaysia is still behind countries such as India (79%), Thailand (72%) and Hong Kong (63%) (Writer, 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the world economy and as a result, had a negative impact on employee engagement (Betterment, 2020). Performances of businesses fell during the COVID-19 pandemic due to lack of employee engagement as employees found it difficult to stay productive and positive in their job. It was especially alarming in Europe and United States of America (USA) because less than 10% of employees were engaged at their workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gallup, 2022). During the COVID-19 pandemic, financial institutions reported a 20% loss in their revenue due to poor customer service due to poor employee engagement (Ryba, 2020).

Smith (2020) revealed that more than 50% of employees felt emotionally exhausted during the pandemic, as they were forced to spend a longer time at work to finish their work even after working hours, feeling isolated. In Malaysia, a survey carried out by Ojo et al. (2022) showed that employees felt that they need more emotional help and support from both family and friends while also more recognition from superiors

for them to stay creative and productive. To stay competitive, the private sector has to maintain its productivity, sustainability, and efficiency through an engaged workspace. The review of past literature has examined the relationships between internal communication, job satisfaction, rewards and compensation, organizational culture and team work as factors that affect employee engagement (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020; Garg et al., 2017; Moletsane et al., 2019). However, there are still few studies on the impact of leadership, work-life balance, training and development and the recognition of employee engagement (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020).

Without employee engagement, an organization can affect the commitment of employees in providing their ideas and expressing their value (Kokemuller, 2019). Furthermore, in the private sector, particularly during pandemics, the work culture would suffer in terms of keeping employees engaged (Mehmood et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic made many organizations struggle with numerous elements influencing employee engagement, one of which was leadership. Leadership interaction with employees will create better workplace relationships and would result in increased employee engagement (Ismail et al., 2021). Santhiram (2021) stated that in Malaysia, employee engagement would improve if leaders show empathy, compassion, and high emotional intelligence.

Furthermore, in Malaysia, a survey by Ipsos revealed that 63% of Malaysian workers found it difficult to achieve work-life balance with more than half of the Malaysian employees (57%) felt lonely and isolated while working from home, hence affecting their employee engagement (Tan, 2021). According to Jaharuddin and Zainol (2019) in Malaysia, employees' living health, which involves physical activities, was negatively affected by heavy workloads and after-hours connections. Additionally, most employees lose the freedom to choose a job they like, which causes them to feel less passionate and less engaged. These disengaged employees will separate themselves from their positions and avoid personal involvement in the physical, mental,

and emotional components of their jobs.

Training and development has become one of the main investment instruments for firms since it improves employees' expertise, ability, attitude, and behavior with the specific advantage of creating valuable resources, and devoted employees (Alharthy & Marni, 2020). Choi and Na (2019) found that training could improve the loyalty of an employee toward the company and increase employee participation. Malaysia is expected to reach 45% skilled employees by 2030, however, there are companies cutting down training and development programs for employees due to tight budgets and as a result, this may affect employee engagement (Ho et al., 2021).

According to Gallup (2022), only one out of every three employees in the United States strongly agrees that they have earned acknowledgment or praise for doing a great job in the previous week. In Malaysia, more than 62% of employees agree that recognition for their good work from their managers is important to achieve employee engagement (Writer, 2020). Besides, Gallup (2022) found that acknowledgment should be delivered regularly to those who merit it and on a timely basis, so that the employee understands the importance of their recent performance and business values are reinforced. Hence, this research aimed to analyze the possible relationships that may exist between leadership, work-life balance, training and development, recognition with employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector. The results of this research would not only enrich current literature but would also establish awareness and advocate the appropriate policies and skills needed to enhance employee engagement in Malaysia (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Leadership

The art of encouraging a group of individuals to work together toward a single goal is known as leadership (Ward, 2020). Through positive leadership, employees are prompted to do their work once they believe in a better purpose and their beliefs are aligned with the enterprise's project. Balwant et al.'s (2019) study involving 187 employees from 10 shopping malls in Trinidad and Tobago found that transformational leadership had a significant positive relationship with employee engagement. According to Setyawan and Sutawijaya (2021), a supervisor can persuade employees to help the organization reach its business goals. The behavior of leaders in managing relationships with a subordinate by instilling trust, providing a positive and meaningful working environment can greatly improve employee engagement within the organization. In China, Liu et al.'s (2021) study on 723 employees of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSME) found that health-promoting leadership had a positive impact on employee health and employee engagement during the COVID-9

pandemic. Based on this literature review, we proposed the following hypotheses:

H1: There is a significant positive relationship between leadership and employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector.

2.2. Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance (WLB) is the ability to balance work and personal life as well as family demands (Larasati & Hasanati, 2019). Katili et al.'s (2021) study on 204 employees working in the steel industry, which is located in Banten Province of Indonesia, found that WLB had a significant positive relationship with employee engagement. The authors found that, when an organization places importance on an employee's work and personal or family life, an employee will put in more effort into the job, subsequently contributing to the overall organizational performance. Furthermore, Felicilda and Schneider's (2021) study in the Philippines involving hotel employees' front liners during the COVID-19 pandemic found that WLB and employee engagement had a significant positive correlation. Laturlean et al.'s (2020) study involving 200 private hospital employees also found that when employees perceived balance in their work and personal life, the level of engagement would become higher.

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between the work-life balance and employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector.

2.3. Training and Development

Training and development is defined as the "organizational practice of providing training, workshops, coaching, mentoring, or other learning opportunities to inspire, challenge, and motivate employees to perform the functions of their position to the best of their ability and within standards set by local, state, federal and private organization" (Vincent, 2020, p. 265). Siddiqui and Sahar (2019) studied the impact of training and development on employee engagement of 100 employees in the banking sector in Karachi, Pakistan, and found that employees' engagement level increased when they fulfilled training needs in their current job setting. Nasidi et al. (2020) found that training and career development was important in engaging non-academic employees at Nigeria University. The study involving 150 employees revealed that non-academic employees would have increased confidence in their work when there is more training and development provided by the university. In India, a study by Tharanya et al. (2020) on 379 bank employees also found that training and development enhanced employee engagement.

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between training and development and employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector.

2.4. Recognition

Employee recognition is the timely, informal or formal acknowledgment of a person or team's behavior,

effort or business result that supports the organization’s goals and values (Harrison, 2020). The act of giving compensation in response to a performance, such as the completion of a project or activity, or the attainment of a mission, is known as recognition. It might be monetary, just like in cash prizes, or non-monetary, as it is in verbal or written compliments or admiration. Various studies have assessed the efficacy of using non-monetary initiatives to boost employee motivation and improve productivity and happiness at the managerial level (Montani et al., 2020). A study by Tate et al. (2021) in the USA on 121 employees working in SMEs found that recognition given by their superiors enhanced employee engagement. The authors also found that the variable recognition had the largest correlation with employee engagement. According to Chanana and Sangeeta (2020), recognition was important during the COVID-19 pandemic to help enhance employee engagement and job performance. Rai et al. (2018) conducted their study in 35 retail stores in five cities in Northern India on 247 sales associates and found that recognition not only increased engagement but also improved their performance.

H4: There is a significant positive relationship between recognition and employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector.

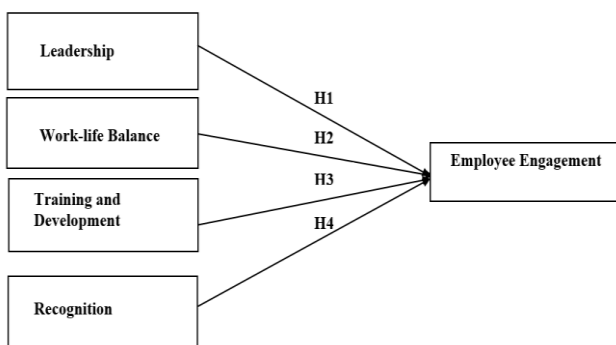


Figure 1. The conceptual framework

3. Research Method

3.1. Sample

154 employees in private sector in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia, participated in the survey. Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, Malaysia was preferred as it has the highest gross domestic product (GDP), foreign and direct investment in Malaysia. Non-probability sampling method was used in collecting the sample.

3.2. Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire had two sections. The first section of the questionnaire was the demographic profile consisting of gender, race, age, highest education level and monthly income level. The second section of the questionnaire was questions related to the independent variables and the dependent variable of the study. A four-item scale to measure employee engagement adapted from Stranzl et al. (2021) was applied in the

questionnaire. Next, a five-item scale for leadership was adapted from Breevaart and Bakker (2018), and a four-item scale for work-life balance was adapted from Jaharuddin and Zainol (2019). Finally, a six-item scale for training and development was adapted from Chambel and Sobral (2011), and a four-item scale for recognition was adapted from Baqir et al. (2020). Each of the variable in this study was measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree.”

3.3. Data Analysis

Firstly, the reliability of the data was analyzed using SPSS software and all variables had reliability of above 0.700. The overall reliability test of the study was 0.886, while the reliability test for each variable was 0.835 for leadership, 0.885 for WLB, 0.856 for training and development and finally 0.901 for recognition. The Z-score calculation for normality was -2.229, which is within $-3.29 < Z < 3.29$. Furthermore, the linearity test assumption was met on the basis of the randomized pattern of the scatter plot.

3.4. Demographics of the Respondents

The respondents comprised 69.5 percent females, while males only took up 30.5 percent of the total percentage. In terms of race, about 56.5% of the respondents were Chinese, 29.9 percent were Chinese and 29.9 percent were Malaysians. Agewise, majority of respondents were aged between 21 and 30, which was 69.5 percent. In contrast, the respondents within the age range of 51-60 were only 5.2 percent. 47.4 percent of the respondents had a diploma, while 44.2% had a bachelor’s degree as their highest qualification. Incomewise, 41.6% earned a monthly income of less than RM2,000, while 28.6% earned a monthly income between RM2,001 and RM3,000. Table 1 shows the respondents’ demographic profile.

Table 1. The respondents’ demographic profile

Demographic features	Frequency	Percentage	
Gender	Male	47	30.5
	Female	107	69.5
Race	Malay	46	29.9
	Chinese	87	56.5
	Indian	17	11.0
	Others	4	2.6
Age	21-30 years old	107	69.5
	31-40 years old	24	15.6
	41-50 years old	15	9.7
	51-60 years old	8	5.2
Highest Education level	Diploma	73	47.4
	Bachelor’s Degree	68	44.2
	Masters	12	7.8
	Others	1	0.6
Monthly Income level	< RM2,000	64	41.6
	RM2,001–RM3,000	44	28.6
	RM3,001–RM4,000	18	11.7
	RM4,001–RM5,000	12	7.8
	> RM5,000	16	10.4

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. The Pearson Correlation

The Pearson correlation test results indicate that leadership was 0.281, work-life balance was 0.198,

training and development was 0.573, and recognition was 0.506, all having significant correlations with employee engagement. Table 2 shows the results of the Pearson correlation test.

Table 2. Results of the Pearson correlation test

		Employee Engagement	Leadership	Work-Life Balance	Training and Development	Recognition
Employee Performance	Pearson Correlation	1	.281	.198	.573	.506
	Sig. (2 tailed)	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001	< 0.001
	N	154	154	154	154	

4.2. Multiple Regression Analysis

In the multiple regression analysis, the Durbin-Watson value was used in this study to determine the homoscedasticity. The ideal range of the Durbin-Watson value is between 1 and 3, to show that there is no autocorrelation problem. Based on Table 3, the Durbin-Watson value is 2.256, which indicates that there is no autocorrelation problem between the

residuals. The data were free from independence error terms. Additionally, the R Square value of 0.389 indicates that only 38.9% of the variation in the DV (employee engagement) can be explained by the factors (leadership, work-life balance, training and development and recognition). Table 3 shows the model summary.

Table 3. Model summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimation	The Durbin-Watson Value
1	.624 ^a	.389	.373	.58153	2.256

According to ANOVA analysis, the p-value is 0.001, hence, the model is statistically significant. As such, the model is considered fit for further analysis. The F value of 23.720 indicates that the conceptual model is

strongly significant and the variation is not totally accounted for by possibility. Table 4 shows the analysis of variance (ANOVA) in this study.

Table 4. Analysis of variance (ANOVA)

Model		Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Significance
1	Regression	32.087	4	8.022	23.720	< .001 ^b
	Residual	50.389	146	.338		
	Total	82.476	153			

The coefficients in Table 5 reveal that H1 and H3 are accepted as the significant values for leadership, training and development were all lower than 0.05. The highest B value obtained in this study belongs to the training and development, which is 0.430, indicating that training and development is the most central factor in this study, affecting employee engagement. Additionally, leadership, work-life balance, and recognition have positive B values, which means that, when these independent variables increase, employee engagement will increase too. Lastly, we analyzed the collinearity statistics. In this study, the VIF values for all independent variables were moderately correlated. Therefore, the result shows no multicollinearity problem. Table 5 represents the results of the coefficients, while Table 6 shows the summary of the hypothesis test results.

Table 5. Results of the coefficients

Model	Coefficients		t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Standardized Coefficients Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	.752	.305	2.467	.015		
Leadership	.165	.065	2.521	.013	.803	1.246
Work-life balance	.057	.057	.995	.321	.808	1.237

Continuation of Table 5							
Training and Development	.430	.101	.417	4.270	.001	.431	2.321
Recognition	.170	.097	.170	1.744	.083	.434	2.305

Table 6. Summary of the hypothesis test results

		Significance	Results	Gradient (Beta, β)
H1	There is a significant positive relationship between leadership and employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector.	.013	Accepted	.165
H2	There is a significant positive relationship between work-life balance and employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector.	.321	Rejected	.057
H3	There is a significant positive relationship between training and development and employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector.	< .001	Accepted	.430
H4	There is a significant positive relationship between recognition and employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector.	.083	Rejected	.170

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study have shown that leadership

has a significant positive association with employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector similar to past studies (Balwant et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2021; Setyawan & Sutawijaya, 2021). Likewise, similar to past research, training and development also has a significant positive association with employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020; Montani et al., 2020; Rai et al., 2018; Tate et al., 2021). Although the findings are similar to past studies nevertheless, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, hence the results will be useful in understanding employee engagement during a time of crisis. As many countries enter the endemic stage of the COVID-19, organizations should make tactical plans for the sustainability of their organization. The implication from this study is that leadership plays an important role in employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector; hence, organizations must first acknowledge the importance of leadership in driving their employees to be engaged in their job. Secondly, start implementing various programs that can help leaders or potential leaders inspire, motivate and drive their employees as per organization goals. According to Parkhill (2021), leaders must (1) have good communication with employees by setting clear goals, plans and milestones, (2) ensuring employees are empowered in making decisions and by allowing them to provide feedback to their leader, (3) encourage innovation and (4) provide challenging opportunities for employees to test their skills, support decisions employees make. Policy makers and the Ministry of Human Resource of Malaysia must take the necessary actions to ensure leaders are better equipped to enhance employee engagement.

Furthermore, training and development was found to be significant toward employee engagement in the Malaysian private sector; hence, training and development that is job-related is important in engaging employees in their job. Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) stated that technology is important, especially when many employees are still working from home (WFH) or may be on flexible time due to COVID-19; hence the implication from this study that organizations should invest in communication tools, such as instant messaging and voice calling, to help stay connected and to continue to provide training and development. Some companies provide TED Talks, webinars with industry experts, e-books, e-learning, and self-developed contents to their employees. Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) further mentions that employee engagement will improve with training and development programs such as virtual learning and development, online team-building activities, webinars with industry experts, online weekly alignment sessions, online courses, or live sessions for new skill training.

Leadership and training and development are important variables affecting employee engagement. Hence, it is recommended that support from the Ministry of Human Resource (MOHR) and the

Malaysian Institute of Human Resource Management (MIHRM) in developing policies and procedures that will facilitate and expedite the adoption of proper leadership and training and development programs necessary to enhance employee engagement is greatly needed. The scientific novelty of this study is the finding that employees in Malaysia prioritize leadership and training and development, especially during a crisis.

6. Limitations and Future Research

There were several limitations in this study. Firstly, the study was conducted in the private sector, so future studies may include the public sector for comparison. Secondly, a longitudinal study should be conducted as Malaysia moves to the endemic stage of COVID-19. Additionally, other states in Malaysia should be included in the study. Variables such as ethical culture should be included to study its effects on employee engagement (Liu et al., 2021). The results of this research will contribute to the existing knowledge on employee engagement in Malaysia. The results of this study will promote the appropriate leadership and training programs needed in organizations for enhancing employee engagement.

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