



## **Ethical Practices: Examining the Level of Islamic Work Ethic among Middle Level Administrators in Malaysian Public Universities**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The ethical issues have drawn great public attention recently. In the meantime, ethical behavior is truly in line with the Malaysian Government policy outlines under the second thrust of the Ninth Malaysia Plan, to promote a community of culture and strong moral values. The Government has taken several proactive approaches such as strengthening the institutions and put in place many programs with the main purpose to uphold integrity in the Malaysian society. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to examine the level of Islamic work ethic among middle level administrators in Malaysian Public Universities. A total of 500 middle level administrators working in 20 Malaysian Public Universities were invited to take part in this survey. A total of 237 usable questionnaires were obtained. The instrument used was adapted from Ali (1988, 1992). The results suggested that the score of Islamic work ethic was at a great level of importance among middle level administrators in Malaysian public universities.*

**Keywords:** Ethical practices, Islamic work ethic, middle level administrator, public university.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Initially, ethical philosophy provides the basis for various contemporary concepts of work beyond conventional business main objectives of profit (Ali, 1992). Ethical behaviour is concerned with doing the right thing or acting fairly with others (Kelly, 1999). No doubt, ethical elements are also an important influence on government and private corporation, whom the traditional cost management and quality service must take into consideration the ethical matter affecting the business world today (Ali, 2005). Besides that, all over the world, the ethical issues have drawn great public attention recently. In the meantime, Wan Norhasniah (2012) mentioned that Western scholar has been extensively debated the issue of work ethic since 1970s. The development was due to an increasing demand for better labor relations from the employees. Meanwhile, work ethic from the Islamic perspective is a multidimensional concept, and close to an

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organization's continuity and prosperity, as well as the society welfare (Ali & Al-Owaihah, 2008).

Although several studies on Islamic work ethic have been done internationally and locally (Ali, 1992; Ali, Falcone, & Azim, 1995; Mohd Fauzwadi, Abu Bakar, & Hishamuddin Fitri, 2008; Naresh & Raduan, 2010; Othman, Abdul Rahman, Alwi, & Munira, 2011), unfortunately very few studies on the issue focused on middle level administrators. Therefore, this article attempts to investigate the level of Islamic work ethic at the workplace among middle level administrators in Malaysian public universities. Then, based on the findings, this article will give some understanding to the management and policy makers of the Malaysian public universities to appreciate the contribution of this supporting group.

## **2. THE NEED FOR ETHICAL PRACTICES IN THE WORKPLACE**

Public universities are highlighted in this study because the institutions are known as one of the critical components of the government transformation programs (Malaysia, 2008). Specifically, middle administrators are selected because this group is the key player to ensure the effectiveness in daily administration of public universities. Meanwhile, Szekeres (2004) suggested that middle administrators are responsible to coordinate various academic activities in the main business of the institutions, meanwhile academicians concentrate on their major task of learning, teaching, assessment, and research. Additionally, middle administrators are responsible to make sure the requirement of the institutions and central agencies such as documenting, reporting, and keeping statistics of student achievement is conformed (Conway, 2000).

Basically, ethical behavior focused in this article is very much in line with the Malaysian Government policy under the second thrust of the Ninth Malaysia Plan, namely to promote a community of culture and strong moral values (Malaysia, 2006 & 2010). This is important because a community with a first class mindset is being knowledgeable, a high performance culture, competitive and should have integrity and good moral values. Besides that, it is also a community of educated citizen who value culture, arts and heritage, as well as the national history, race and religion. This community is known by its strong sense of self-esteem and can stand the influence of globalization. Additionally, this community also is persistent in its belief in God, loyalty to the King, and nation. As stated in Article 3(1), although other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony, but Islam is the official religion of the Federation (Malaysia, 2005). Therefore, it is naive to ignore the Islamic work ethic in this Malay-Islam dominant society.

Essentially, ethical elements are also an important influence on government and private corporation, whom the traditional cost management and quality service must take into consideration the ethical matter affecting the business world today (Ali, 2005). Subsequently, leadership plays an important role to initiate and promote ethical behaviour as well as to prevent unethical practices in the organization (Yulk, 2002) because leader is a person who influences others (Lussier & Achua, 2007).

According to Ali and Al-Kazemi (2007), scholars has given a growing interest in the work ethic and the role of religion in pursuing economic gain and wealth accumulation after the publication of Max Weber works on the role of work ethic in Europe. Indeed, unethical practice in business is not a light issue because it can destroy the economy of a country (Abdullah & Mohamad Zainol, 2011). Initially, Weber's theory of work ethic encompassed several positive elements such as less leisure and long working hours, hardworking, perfection in doing a job, feel pride in the job, recognize achievement, wealth accumulation, thrift, frugality and prudent in investment (Ali et al., 1995).

Fundamentally, the concept of Islamic work ethic derived from the Quran, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) *sunnah*, and the consensus of Muslim scholars (*ijma' Ulama*) (Mohd. Fauzwadi et al., 2008). The Quran advise about justice and honesty in doing business. The Islamic work ethic perceives commitment to work as a virtue. Therefore, it is compulsory, not voluntary, for a person to place satisfactory effort when performing their job. Yousef (2000a) asserted that the Islamic work ethic promotes teamwork in the workplace and encourages consultation to overcome any hurdles and avoid mistakes. Consequently, diligent is always seen as goodness, and those who work hard in life are more likely to succeed. Conversely, there is no room for waste of time and laziness, either by involving in a useless activity or remain idle (Ali, 2005). Supporting the discussion above, Gibbs, Ilkan & Pouloukas, (2007) suggested that religiousness is positively correlated to the ethical behaviour notion.

In the meantime, the Islamic ethic foundation was the Muslim understanding and interpretations of the Quran teachings, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) practices (*Sunnah*), and his immediate successors (especially the *Khulafa Ar-Rashideen*) and passed down to all Muslims more than 1,000 years ago, which always leading to the submission to Allah (Ali & Al-Owaihan, 2008; Tayeb, 1997; Yousef, 2000a). The key objective of the Islamic ethic is the concept that every human being is required to practice the good and forbid the evil in all aspects of life. Hence, we can observe that Islam has offered a distinctive viewpoint on ethic and has created specific conceptualization of work ethic as well. Notably, in advancing the economic wealth, work in Islam embraces moral, psychological and social aspects as well (Ali, 2005).

Initially, the Islamic ethical values are unlike the Western or secular ethical values and moral code. The Western or secular approach assumes moral codes are momentary and very narrow because the system are based on the values of their founders (human) and generally these models suggested a system of ethics separate from religion. Conversely, Beekun (1996) asserted that Islamic ethic focuses on the relationship of man with his God. The similarity of the two ethical values are both ethically put great importance on hard working, dedication and commitment to work, encourage creativity, keep away from the unethical practices of wealth accumulation, promote teamwork and healthy competitiveness at the work place (Yousef, 2000b). Conversely, the difference between Islamic work ethic and Protestant work ethic is Islam places an emphasis more on intention rather than the outcomes (Ali & Al-Kazemi, 2007).

No doubt, the work ethic is very crucial because the work ethic proved to have a positive relationship with organizational outcomes (Ali & Gibbs, 1998; Engel, 1995). Ali and Al-Owaihian (2008), suggested that public sector employees scored higher on Islamic work ethic compared to the private sector employees. Yousef (2001) reported the similar findings that Muslim employees in several organizations in United Arab Emirates demonstrate higher support of the Islamic work ethic. Meanwhile in the Malaysian context, Naresh and Raduan (2010) found that the Islamic work ethic is strongly adopted among the Administrative and Diplomatic Service Officers. Similarly, Othman et al. (2011) suggested that Malaysian civil servants have high orientation in Islamic work ethic. Hence this can be concluded that the civil servants highly hold and adhere to Islamic work ethic.

Meanwhile, other important findings were Islamic work ethic has a high correlation with individualism (Ali, 1992). Subsequently, Ali et al. (1995) found that both Protestant and contemporary work ethic indicated a high correlation with work-related individualism. Besides that, Yousef (2000a) suggested positive relationships between Islamic work ethic, role ambiguity and locus of control. Consequently, Yousef (2001) demonstrated that Islamic work ethic promotes job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Islamic Work ethic has also been linked to commitment towards work (Nik Mu'tasim, Nordin & Abdullah, 2006).

In conclusion, Islamic work ethic originated from the Islamic teaching and emphasizes on several issues such as pursuing legitimate business, wealth must be earned, quality of work, fair wages, reliance on self, avoidance of monopoly and bribery, deeds and intentions, transparency, greed and generosity (Ali, 2005). Consequently, the ethical system reveals that work in Islam not only concern solely on the economic aspect, but has social, psychological and moral dimensions as well. Therefore, all work done must be significant to the individual and society at large (Yousef, 2001). In general, the Islamic work ethic stands on four primary pillars namely effort, competition, transparency and responsible moral manner (Ali & Al-Owaihian, 2008). Apparently, all the factors are able to

intensify the business and economic development in the society (Yousef, 2000b). Although, Islamic work ethic is very important and showed to have a positive relationship with many organizational outcomes (Ali & Gibbs, 1998; Engel, 1995; Naresh & Raduan, 2010; Nik Mu'tasim et al., 2006), unfortunately, very little study conducted especially in Malaysian public universities thus far.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This statistical research was designed to examine the level of Islamic work ethic among middle level administrators in Malaysian public universities. Data were collected using a cross-sectional self-administered questionnaire, developed specifically for the individual level unit of analysis. The instrument used for this study to measure an Islamic work ethic was an adapted short version of the instrument developed by Ali (1988, 1992). The scale consists of a list of 17 items. A 5-Point multi-item Likert-type scale format was employed, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree), 2 (Somewhat disagree), 3 (Neither agree nor disagree), 4 (Somewhat agree), and 5 (strongly agree). The internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha coefficient) for this scale is 0.86. Proportionate stratified random sampling procedure was used in selecting the sample. This procedure ensured each subpopulation that existed in the total population is well represented (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). A total of 500 questionnaires were distributed to the middle level administrators. Subsequently 241 replies were obtained. Of 241 questionnaires received, 4 were incomplete, leaving 237 usable questionnaires yielding a 47.4% response rate. Finally, SPSS Ver. 18 was used to generate descriptive statistics.

### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The frequency for the number of respondents were 15 (6.3%) from IIUM, UiTM 27 (11.4%), UKM 27 (11.4%), UM 11 (4.6%), UMK 2 (0.8%), UMP 7 (3.0%), UMS 13 (5.5%), UMT 10 (4.2%), UNIMAP 14 (5.9%), UNIMAS 10 (4.2%), UNISZA 7 (3.0%), UPM 12 (5.1%), UPNM 4 (1.7%), UPSI 9 (3.8%), USIM 6 (2.5%), USM 16 (6.8%), UTEM 9 (3.8%), UTHM 8 (3.4%), UTM 19 (8.0%), and UUM 11 (4.6%). It was recorded most of the respondents, 171 (72.2%), served for less than 11 years, 21 (8.9%) served between 11 to 15 years, 24 (10.1%) served between 16 to 20 years, 7 (3.0%) served between 21 to 25 years, and 14 (5.9%) served more than 26 years. The respondents mainly comprised of females, 140 respondents (59.1%), and 97 males (40.9%). While 92.4% (219) of the total respondents were Malays, 1.7% (4) were Chinese, and 5.9% (14) were other races. Interestingly, the overall education level of the respondents was high, whereby bachelor degree holders comprised of 188 (79.30%) of the respondents, an overwhelming 43 (18.1%) with master degree, and 6 (2.5%) of respondents with other qualification perhaps professional qualification or PhD holders.

In terms of job classification, 219 respondents (92.4%) were permanent staff, 17 (7.2%) appointed on a temporary basis, and 1 (0.4%) was part time staff. Meanwhile, 54 (22.8%) respondents age were less than 30 years old, 86 (36.3%) were between the ages of 30 to 35 years, 29 (12.2%) between 36 to 40 years, 30 (12.7%) between 41 to 45 years, 18 (7.6%) between 46 to 50 years, and 20 (8.4%) respondents above 51 years. Amazingly, this shows an emerging number of generation Y workforce and they seem to become dominant in years to come. The detail demographic profile of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of the Respondents

Respondent's Profiles		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Institution	IUM	15	6.3
	UiTM	27	11.4
	UKM	27	11.4
	UM	11	4.6
	UMK	2	0.8
	UMP	7	3.0
	UMS	13	5.5
	UMT	10	4.2
	UNIMAP	14	5.9
	UNIMAS	10	4.2
	UNISZA	7	3.0
	UPM	12	5.1
	UPNM	4	1.7
	UPSI	9	3.8
	USIM	6	2.5
	USM	16	6.8
	UTEM	9	3.8
	UTHM	8	3.4
UTM	19	8.0	
UUM	11	4.6	
Tenure of Service	≤ 10 years	171	72.2
	11 – 15 years	21	8.9
	16 – 20 years	24	10.1
	21 – 25 years	7	3.0
	≥ 26 years	14	5.9
Job Classification	Permanent	219	92.4
	Contract	17	7.2
	Temporary	1	0.4
Education Level	Bachelor Degree	188	79.3
	Masters Degree	43	18.1
	Other qualifications	6	2.5
Age	< 30 years	54	22.8
	30 – 35 years	86	36.3
	36 – 40 years	29	12.2

	41 – 45 years	30	12.7
	46 – 50 years	18	7.6
	Above 50 years	20	8.4
Gender	Male	97	40.9
	Female	140	59.1
Race	Malay	219	92.4
	Chinese	4	1.7
	Indian	0	0
	Others	14	5.9

Table 2 demonstrated both the mean and standard deviations of Islamic work ethic scale. Initially, in determining the level of the Islamic work ethic score, the ranking of importance as suggested by Rosli (2005) and Rosli and Ghazali (2007) were used as a reference. The authors suggest the following four categories based on rank of importance: mean value of 2.59 and below is indicating as *less important*, mean value between 2.60 to 3.40 is indicated as *moderate importance*, mean value ranging from 3.41 to 4.20 is indicated as *high importance*, and mean value of 4.21 and above is indicating as *great importance*.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics (Islamic Work Ethic)

	Mean	SD
Laziness is a vice	3.958	1.258
Dedication to work is a virtue	4.456	.703
Good work benefits both one's self and others	4.671	.598
Justice and generosity in the workplace are necessary conditions for society's welfare	4.582	.630
Producing more than enough to meet one's personal needs contributes to the prosperity of society as a whole	4.257	.785
One should carry work out to the best of one's ability	4.376	.669
Life has no meaning without work	3.852	1.053
More leisure time is good for society	3.346	1.020
Human relations in organizations should be emphasized and encouraged	4.464	.614
Work enables a person to control nature	3.865	.730

Creative work is a source of happiness and accomplishment	4.342	.674
Any person who works is more likely to get ahead in life	4.173	.730
Work gives one the chance to be independent	4.241	.729
A successful person is the one who meets deadlines at work	3.835	.945
One should constantly work hard to meet responsibilities	4.190	.782
The value of work is derived from the accompanying intention rather than its results	3.823	.889

Therefore, based on the above criteria, almost all the mean value for items that measure Islamic work ethic indicated greater than the value of 3.41 (except item *more leisure time is good for society* scored the lowest mean value observed in 3.346) on a five-point Likert scale as employed in this study. As such, the level of Islamic work ethic among middle level administrators in Malaysian public universities was suggested in the range of high importance to great importance (Rosli, 2005; Rosli & Ghazali, 2007).

The level of Islamic work ethic among middle level administrators was reported to be between *moderate importance* to *great importance*. The mean score ranged from 3.346 to 4.671 on a five point Likert scale. Meanwhile, the variability of the rating indicated to be relatively high with the standard deviation range of .598 to 1.258, showing some inconsistencies in importance pertaining to the agreement about Islamic work ethic items among the respondents. Out of the numbers, nine items were reported as *high importance*, while seven items were rated as high importance, and only a single item was rated as moderate importance.

Examining from the mean score obtained, the findings revealed a high mean value among middle level administrators in Malaysian public universities. The results indicated that Islamic work ethic has been practiced by middle level administrators in public universities all over Malaysia. Subsequently, all these extraordinary values have been well adopted by the respondents of all institutions, gender, length of service, age groups, and different service schemes across the nation. Hence, the findings were found to be consistent with the previous study (Ali et al., 1995; Ali & Al-Kazemi, 2007; Mohd. Fauzwadi et al., 2008; Naresh & Raduan, 2010; Nik Mu'tasim et al., 2006; Othman et al., 2011; Yousef, 2001).

Probably these good values have been embraced in the mind of public sector employees all races, age group, gender, and different career hierarchy in Malaysia (Naresh & Raduan, 2010). Another plausible reason, with comprehensive on the job development and training programs conducted, middle level administrators are more conscious of their obligations and the present higher education challenges being faced by the public universities. This awareness probably could inspire them to practice good work ethic towards increasing the public universities' competitiveness (Zulkifli, 2006). The third possible reason is that middle level administrators in public universities are educated and therefore not only aware the challenges faced by the higher education sector, but also understand how to behave in discharging their responsibility in the workplace.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results obtained indicates that middle level administrators in public universities are strongly adopted the Islamic work ethic in the workplace. Therefore, the present results of this study strongly supported an earlier study on this subject. Meanwhile, several factors such as absorption, continuous and comprehensive on the job developmental programs, and finally the level of education are some plausible reason that middle level administrators are more conscious of their obligations and encourage them to embrace good work ethic in discharging their duties. Obviously, there are several implications for the higher adherence to the Islamic work ethic: to promote hard work, job is seen not only to promote social relations but as a means for personal growth as well, and finally dedication to work and creativity are perceived as virtuous. Hence, the results are very important especially for the top management of the public universities and policy makers. Since the study used a short version of Islamic work ethic, future study may employ a full version of the scale to investigate the level of Islamic work ethic among respondents. Besides that, the present study only concentrates on the public university's officers, therefore the private university employees are anticipated to be invited in the future.

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