Employee Engagement among Assistant Registrars in Public Institutions of Higher Education in Malaysia: A Descriptive Study

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ABSTRACT

The study attempted to find out the level of employee engagement among assistant registrars of Public Institution of Higher Learning in Malaysia. A survey with a close-ended questionnaire was distributed among assistant registrars of twenty public universities and 400 sets of questionnaire were collected. Results show that assistant registrars of Public Universities are highly engaged in their jobs. Further analysis was conducted on two categories of factors that contribute to employee engagement namely psychological conditions and job resources. Psychological meaningfulness was found to be the most contributing factor of employee engagement. Based on the findings it can be concluded that psychological conditions are more important than job resources with regards to employee engagement.

Keywords: Employee engagement, psychological condition, job resources, organisational commitment

1. INTRODUCTION

The management of private companies and government agencies are aware of the importance of employee engagement to their organisations. Employee engagement is an effort to ensure that the operatives stay with their roles and is divided into three criteria, namely 'whether they like where they work now?', 'whether they will remain with the organisation?' and 'whether they will work in other places?' There is continuity between the factors that influence employee engagement in the organisation (McBain, 2007). Happy employees who are about to leave and unhappy employees who are determined to stay are both common but neither can support high levels of organisational performance (Schmidt & Marson, 2013).

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Coffman (2000) stated that there are three categories of employee groups. The first group is "engaged employee" of high focus on jobs, with a personal commitment to what they do and feel to their company. The "engaged employees" will work more than what is expected by the company. According to Vazirani (2007), "engaged employees" are builders, they perform more than expected for a given task. They perform tasks consistently and of high level achievers, eager to use their talents and strengths at work every day, highly passionate and able to provide new innovations to the company for further upgrading. According to Sanford (2002), only 29 percent of employees were actively engaged in their jobs. The actively engaged employees are the employees that possess high spirit and competitiveness. The high spirited and competitive employees are the people that support the development of the organisation.

The second group of employee according to Coffman (2000) is the "non-engaged employees" who are neither energetic nor enthusiastic at work. According to Vazirani (2007), "non-engaged employees" tend to focus on goals and tasks as compared to the consequences that must be solved. The non-engaged employees are the routine job players that expect the job expectation to be stated and they ensure that the job is completed. The focus is on accomplishing tasks versus achieving an outcome (Wagner & Harter, 2006). Sanford (2002) research supported that fifty-four percent of employees are not engaged. They deliver within deadlines but lack of passion.

The last group is the "actively disengaged employees" who are unhappy and try to influence others. Vazirani (2007) described this group as the "cave dwellers" who "damage everything". They are dissatisfied and unhappy at work; they give and affect negatively the engaged employees. Vazirani (2007) found that as workers increasingly depend on each other to prepare and solve products and services, the problems and tensions that are fostered by actively disengaged workers can cause great damage to an organisation's functioning. Seventeen percent of employees are actively disengaged. They would rather show no such sense of complacency and try to influence other colleagues who want to work (Sanford, 2002). According to Gallup Daily tracking, employee disengagement problems have an impact on the economy in Germany. About 15% of workers in Germany are engaged with their jobs, while 61% are disengaged and 24% are actively disengaged. These actively disengaged employees cost the economy between 112 billion and 138 billion euro per year in lost productivity (Marco, 2013). Against this backdrop, this paper attempted to describe the level of employee engagement among assistant registrars in Public Institutions of Higher Education in Malaysia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the academic community, employee engagement is a new concept that has been discovered and promoted by relevant consultants (Wefald & Downey, 2009). Kahn (1990) and other academics such as Macey & Schneider (2008) in an attempt to resolve the issue with the concept that involves employee engagement suggested that site as an "umbrella term" used to include other concepts such as multitude of conceptualisations, for example behaviour, character and attitude while in contrast to the study by Bakker & Leiter (2011) which attempted to explain employee engagement as a concept only. A research has been carried out and it is believed that organisations with the highest achievements on employee engagement can show a more positive attitude to the organisational performance (Kular, Gatenby, Rees, Soane, & Truss, 2008). Increased profit margins, productivity and positive workplace environment contribute to high employee engagement scores through a communication programme created (Tower Perrins, 2005). In a study conducted by Czarnowsky (2008), a total of 82% of employees surveyed said that the important thing faced by their company is employee engagement. Research shows that organisation working to develop organisational performance will recognise employees who demonstrate high performance and work well with other colleagues (Czarnowsky, 2008) in achieving high level of their organisational success (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Organisations looking for alternatives on how to develop their workforce would say that their organisations need employee engagement (Bakker et al., 2008).

A significant gap related research involving employee engagement from the bottom up has grown and the concept has shown a significant change in the definition in terms of measurement concepts involving all the research from academic community (Macey & Schneider, 2008). There were about 21 different perspectives on the concept of employee engagement between academic community and practitioners and the advanced concepts practiced in community practitioners (Zigarmi, Nimon, Houson, Witt, & Diehl, 2009). As we can see, in purpose and results, the approach used by practitioners and academics differs (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Wefald & Downey, 2009). For example, practitioners need to approach in order to enhance employee commitment in teamwork and responsibility in ensuring high productivity and ways on improving group work (Wefald & Downey, 2009). The practitioner should obtain evidence on the union of the employee engagement and employers associated with the concept of commitment and employee satisfaction in the form of reliability estimation and metrics (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004; Czarnowsky, 2008; Tower Perrins, 2003; Vance, 2006).

3. METHODOLOGY

For this study, a one-time study was used to find out descriptive statistics of employee engagement among the Assistant Registrars in Public Institutions of Higher Education in Malaysia. The method used is the questionnaire method where respondents answer questions administered through questionnaires. The responses gathered are further discussed. Six hundred questionnaires were distributed and 400 were collected from all the respondents through monkey survey link put directly into their e-mail. This study employed stratified sampling method. Based on stratified random sampling procedure, a total of 20 assistant registrars from 20 universities were selected to participate in the study. Roscoe (1975) cited in Sekaran's (2003), proposed a rule of thumb in determining sample size where sample size larger than 30 and less than 500 is appropriate for most research.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The descriptive statistics aim to summarise the data set quantitatively by employing a probabilistic formulation. This paper presented a general descriptive statistics where the mean and standard deviation for all the dimensions in the model were described; Psychological Conditions, Job Resources. The mean values derived were interpreted to obtain an initial insight into the respondents' feedback towards the dimensions and sub dimensions about employee engagement. The sample statistics were tabulated according to the dimensions and sub dimensions presented in the questionnaire. The classification for the rating scale was used to investigate the level of each item in the variables. Refer Table 1 below:

Table 1: The Rating Score

Rating score	Mean Score
Very Low	Less than 1.5
Low	1.5 Less than (< 2.5)
Moderate	$2.5 <$ Mean score < 3.5
High	$3.5 <$ Mean Score < 4.0
Very high	$4.0 <$ Mean Score < 4.5
Excellent	Mean Score ≥ 4.5

Source: (Abd. Majid & McCaffer, 1997)

4.1 The Level of Psychological Conditions

Table 2: Mean Score and Standard Deviation for Psychological Meaningfulness

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
The work I do on this job is very important to me	4.457	0.678	Very High
My job activities are meaningful to me	4.395	0.725	Very High
My job activities are significant to me	4.313	0.736	Very High
The work I do on this job is worthwhile	4.300	0.739	Very High
I feel that the work I do on my job is valuable	4.400	0.697	Very High
Overall	4.437	0.651	Very High

One of the explanations for the overall high level of participant engagement among those taking part in this survey is that the studied organisation provides three key psychological conditions of engagement: meaningfulness, safety and availability to their employees (Kahn, 1990). Here, there are five survey items that address the condition of meaningfulness. According to Kahn (1990), meaningfulness can be described as a feeling that one is receiving a return on one's investment of oneself in one's work. Staff members experience meaningfulness when they feel worthwhile, useful and valuable (Kahn, 1990). Item one of the survey mentions "the work I do on this job is very important to me". The mean answer given by participants is very high at 4.457 thus indicating that assistant registrars in public universities in Malaysia feel that every task given to them is important and it's their responsibility in making sure the task given is completed. Item two mentions about "my job activities are meaningful to me". Most of the respondents give positive answers. It shows that the staffs are alert on any information and knowledge related to employment opportunities in universities. Item three states that "my job activities are significant to me". The mean at 4.313 is very high and positively answered. This implies that the mission of the universities is made clear to the staff and that the employees feel positive about the work the universities do. Item four states that "the work I do on this job is worthwhile". Majority of the respondents feel that they do well and satisfied and enjoy the programmes organised by their organisation. Item five mentions that "I feel that the work I do on my job is valuable". An affirmative to this question indicates that the employee feels valued and as though he or she makes a useful contribution to the agency. In this study, mean of respondents indicates 4.400 which is a very high agreement with the statement. The overall mean score for Psychological Meaningfulness is 4.437 and the standard deviation 0.651 which means that the level of Psychological Meaningfulness of employees is at a very high level.

Table 3: Mean Score and Standard Deviation for Psychological Safety

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
I am not afraid to be myself at work	4.220	0.891	Very High
I am not afraid to express my opinions at work	4.101	0.808	Very High
There is no threatening environment at work	4.128	0.882	Very High
Overall	4.208	0.618	Very High

Kahn (1990) described safety as another dimension of psychological condition for employee engagement and finds that psychological safety is the feeling of a sense of safety in openness and support climates , and connected to others. Safety occurs in environments where individuals are free to express themselves without fear of negative consequences and in settings where the boundaries are clear and organisational norms are known (Kahn, 1990). Refer to item one of the survey "I am not afraid to be myself at work" which the mean level is very high at 4.220. It shows that the respondents' confident level in their job is high. They are also not reluctant to express their opinion at work in item two where we can safely say that the respondents do have many ideas and are creative in performing their work. Feeling safe working in the universities, the respondents concur with the statement for item three in which is mentioned "there is no threatening environment at work".

Table 4: Mean Score and Standard Deviation for Psychological Availability

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
I am confident in my ability to handle competing demands at work	4.277	0.630	Very High
I am confident in my ability to deal with problems that come up at work	4.298	0.624	Very High
I am confident in my ability to think clearly at work	4.283	0.631	Very High
I am confident in my ability to display the appropriate emotions at work	4.155	0.691	Very High
I am confident that I can handle the physical demand at work	4.158	0.666	Very High
Overall	4.234	0.568	Very High

The third and final key psychological factor of the employee engagement framework is availability. Kahn (1990) described the availability as the sense of possessing the physical, emotional and psychological resources necessary to invest oneself in one's role at work. Item one of the survey gauges participants on their ability to handle competing demands at work, item two on their confidence in their ability to deal with problems that come up at work, item three on their confidence in their ability to think clearly at work, item four on their

confidence in their ability to display the appropriate emotions at work and item five on the staffs' confidence that they can handle the physical demand at work. Based on the high level of the mean, it shows that the respondents can commit to any jobs assigned by their superior or stakeholders. Besides, they are also confident in their ability to deal with problems that come up at work. As mentioned by Hazlan Abdul Hamid (2002), assistant registrars as the pillar of university's administration are the individuals who form the backbone of the university's mission to ensure that subordinates and other staff are guided accordingly. It means that assistant registrars appointed to work in public universities are confident, able to multitask, creative and also are critical thinkers in carrying out their duties and that qualifications would lead subordinate and other staffs to help achieve the university's objective.

4.2 The Level of Job Resources

Table 5: Mean Score and Standard Deviation for Rewards and Recognition

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
My successes are recognized by my manager and co-workers	3.810	0.866	High
An outstanding performer is recognized and rewarded by the organization	3.583	0.919	High
The pay and benefits in my organization are competitive compared to similar organizations	3.403	0.947	High
I always receive recognition or praise for doing good work	3.405	0.915	High
Job promotion in this organization is fair and just	2.978	1.053	Moderate
I am satisfied with the rewards and recognition that I received	3.348	0.977	High
Overall	3.421	0.754	High

According to the first, second and third items, "my successes are recognised by my manager and co-workers", "an outstanding performer is recognised and rewarded by the organisation" and "the pay and benefit in my organisation are competitive compared to similar organisations" show high level of means which are above 3.5. It means that the staffs feel that their contribution all this while to the organisation is appreciated by the top management. The feeling of being valued is showed by item four "I always receive recognition or praise for doing good work" where they agree and grateful that they are working with that organisation. However, the mean for item five "job promotion in this organisation is fair and just' comes up with the score at moderate level (mean score = 2.978, standard deviation = 1.053). The university is a public organisation under the statutory body and it has to follow the public service circular in promotion procedures (Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam, 2010). As such, only really competent staff that performs well has the advantage for the promotion in view of the number of staffs for the position. Nevertheless, they are

still satisfied with the rewards and recognition given by the organisation which is shown at a high level. Overall, all the respondents in public universities in Malaysia feel that they are rewarded and recognised by their organisations.

Table 6: Mean Score and Standard Deviation for Employee Communication

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
There is a good communication between various parts of the organisation	3.533	0.909	High
I am kept well informed about what the organisation is doing	3.720	0.808	High
Information is shared in a timely manner from the organisation	3.658	0.795	High
I am able to speak up and challenge the way things are done in the organisation	3.483	0.870	Moderate
Management encourages employee suggestions	3.538	0.917	High
Overall	3.586	0.721	High

As shown in Table 6, communication among employees in the public universities is at a high level (mean score = 3.586, standard deviation = 0.721). As we can see, there is a good communication between various parts of the organisation. It gives an opportunity to the respondents to ensure the management of their work goes well. Respondents also kept well informed about the operation's of the organisation. Item two which is the highest score item in employee communication variable has the mean score at 3.720 and the standard deviation 0.808. When employees perceived greater support from their top management, the employees responded, according to Saks (2006), by becoming more engaged in their job. Item three also scores high where "information is shared in a timely manner from the organisation". As found by Saks (2006), he also emphasised the need to communicate with employees clearly and consistently to achieve employee engagement, suggesting that employees who are more engaged will have a more positive relationship with their employers. The employees also are given opportunity to speak up and challenge the way things were completed in the organisation. Other than that, the management also encourages employee suggestion. When there is a two way communication between employer and employee, they feel that managers are critical in sharing reliable and open communications with their employees in order to promote a sense of belonging and commitment as well as helping employees to better understand the goals of the organisation.

Table 7: Mean Score and Standard Deviation for Employee Development

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
My employer encourages me to extend my abilities	3.795	0.771	High
This organisation has provided me with training opportunities enabling me to extend my range of skills and abilities	3.860	0.804	High
I get the opportunities to discuss my training requirement with my employer	3.613	0.857	High
The training I have taken was useful and relevant to my job	3.878	0.744	High
Overall, a staff development programme has helped me to do my job more effectively	3.768	0.781	High
My organisation does provide a good career development for me	3.433	0.976	High
Overall	3.724	0.695	High

Kahn's (1990) model of engagement stated that not only were there key psychological conditions related to engagement, but that those conditions are, to some degree, within the control of the management of an organisation. The aforementioned scores from this study indicated that the management staffs of the studied organisation contribute the positive perception of the engagement of their staff. It is noted that according to the first, second and third items, the respondents agreed with the statement where in it is mentioned that employer encourages them to extend their abilities. Respondents agreed that "this organisation has provided me with training opportunities enabling me to extend my range of skills and abilities". Apart from that, they "get the opportunities to discuss their training requirement with employer" which refers to third item. This initiative focuses on empowering their leadership skills and training management personnel on the process to be effective assistant registrar. The programme employed a variety of strategies, including required attendance in leadership training and the development for improvement plan for every person in selected departments. It is reasonable to assume that this initiative may have had a positive impact on survey scores. Overall, 'a staff development programme has helped me to do my job more effectively' which refers to item five. Employees' track record can show the difference in their performance prior and post training. Staffs' achievements can also be seen from the awards given for excellence in service. The respondents accept that 'my organisation does provide a good career development for me'. When employees are happy with their organisation, they will contribute by being engaged and committed which will directly produce higher productivity. They are also readily oblige and fair in performance (Saks, 2011). An important implication from this finding is that organisation should continue to invest in their leadership initiative and other related programmes in their effort to maintain high staff engagement level. Directing resources and training toward this objective would appear to be an effective investment for organisation. The overall result shows that Employee Development is at a high level (mean score = 3.724, standard deviation = 0.695).

4.3   The Level of Employee Engagement

Table 8: Mean Score and Standard Deviation for Employee Engagement

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
I have received recognition for doing my job well	3.485	0.893	High
My supervisor seems concerned about my welfare	3.583	0.840	High
The mission of the organisation makes me feel like the work I do matters	3.715	0.752	High
I have friends at work	4.348	0.619	Very High
While on the job, my ideas and opinions are taken seriously	3.773	0.729	High
The materials, tool and equipment that I need to do my job are supplied by the agency and made readily available to me	3.760	0.812	High
The people I work with do a good job	3.908	0.678	High
I will still be employed here two years from now	4.085	0.731	Very High
Overall	3.832	0.506	High

By the first survey item, respondents were gauged "I have received recognition for doing my job well" and the result shows a high level. The recognition can be seen from the awarding ceremony for excellent service of which staff will strive to achieve the level of performance desired by the organisation. The respondents also agree that "my supervisor seems concerned about my welfare". As a result, the level of job satisfaction and feeling valued gives them reason to be more motivated and enjoy working in the organization. They are grateful to have friends at work. The respondents are responsible to make sure the task given can be completed on time. The statement for item five "while on the job, my ideas and opinions are taken seriously" is well supported. Here, they feel that the organisation makes them feel like the work they do matters. A resounding mean of respondents give a highly positive answer. An answer in agreement to this survey item would indicate that the employee feels valued, and as though he or she makes a useful contribution to the organisation. Item six of the survey gauges participants on "The materials, tool and equipment that I need to do my job are supplied by the agency and made readily available to me". Again, the overall response is positive indicating that the study organisation provides the tools needed by the staff to do their jobs, thus encouraging them to engage in their designated roles. The assistant registrar also has no problem in ensuring work is carried out smoothly. The case can be seen from the survey item seven in which "the people I work with do a good job". Finally, item eight gauges participants on if they think they will still be employed by the organisation two years from material time. The response shows highly positive feedback and at the same time the respondents are willing to stay longer with their organisation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the highest total mean score among the antecedents is psychological meaningfulness at 4.437 with standard deviation 0.697. On the other hand, the intention to quit has the lowest mean score at 3.003 which is moderate with the standard deviation result 0.488. This paper tries to gauge the highest level of response from respondents towards selected antecedents and employee engagement. This area is certainly worthy of research as many Malaysian organisations are beginning to identify their employees' engagement as a competitive advantage to the degree that it enhances their overall employees' performance. Employee engagement helps the organisation in reducing turnover, enhance team work and improve the employee productivity which in turn will enhance the overall organisational performance. This study is deemed important as it will aid the developmental strategies employed to enhance and improve employee engagement in organisations. The elements that may affect employee engagement will also be imparted. As this paper is only theoretical and the findings were put into descriptive statistic, future studies may incorporate empirical data collected from other private universities in Malaysia.

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