Examining The Impact of Work-Life Culture on Employee Engagement in Malaysian Universities

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates work-life culture impact on employee engagement in Malaysian universities. This study is governed by social exchange theory (SET) that theorises on positive exchanges between employee and employer, of which employers are able to nurture engaged and high performing employees if a conducive work environment is created.
Design/methodology/approach: Drawing on a sample of 167 academics from Malaysian public and private universities, a hierarchical regression using pairwise deletion of missing data was used to test the main effects of work-life culture on employee engagement.
Findings: Supporting SET, this study yields mixed results on variables investigated, findings that are different from other previous studies. This study revealed that organisational time demands shows no major impact on employee engagement. While there is low significant effect between negative career consequences and employee engagement, there is a high significant effect between managerial support and employee engagement. This study highlights the important dimension of work-life culture that positively influences employee engagement.
Research limitations/implications: Owing to the minor sample size and cross-sectional data, generalizability of these findings is limited. Various samples will give more accurate finding work-life culture effects on employee engagement.
Practical implications: Findings from this study have practical implications for universities and policies. The findings highlight the importance for managerial support in work-life balance culture, which directly influence employee engagement.
Originality/value: This study extends the existing studies on work-life culture effects on employee engagement that is scantily researched in developing countries.

Keywords: work-life culture, employee engagement, higher education, Malaysia, academics

Introduction

Over the past decades, work life quality is gradually acknowledged as an element of sustainable workforce (Kossek et al., 2014). The work life quality is the measure of achievement that an employee attained between work and life; an equilibrium of a harmonious life. To balance a successful career with personal life can be challenging, and impact on a person's satisfaction and personal roles (Khairunneezam et al., 2017). Obrenovic, Jianguo, Khudaykulovand Khan (2020) pointed that work-life conflict is inevitable in current Western life. Similarly, Malaysia as a developing country has seen her economy growing rapidly, trailing along not only the high

demands at workplace but also with large family responsibilities. Mismanaging work and life demands may increase work-life conflict. Work-life conflict has posed huge challenges on HRM to devise procedures and policies to minimize its negative effects on organisational performance and employee productivity. Among HR initiatives are work-life programs such as job sharing, child care, and telecommuting (Bao et al., 2020). Research found that organisations with broad work-life programs lead to organisational citizenship behaviour (Fiernaningsih et al., 2019; Shakir & Siddiqui, 2018), higher organisational performance and output (Leitão et al., 2021). Since work and family conflicts have led to employee turnover and withdrawal, organisations can retain valuable workers by reducing those conflicts. Withdrawal behaviours such as reduced work efforts, lateness, and absenteeism can be rectified by creating work-life balance culture (de Sivatte et al., 2015).

Work-life balance is regarded as an absence of work-life conflict or personal roles, with satisfaction or 'fit' in person's multiple roles (Zheng et al., 2015). Haar, Russo, Suñe, & Ollier-Malaterre (2014) argue that work-life balance as equilibrium, but not an equal distribution between work and personal activities in order to sustain harmonious life. Work-life balance can be interpreted differently based on people relevant needs and demands (Kossek et al., 2012). There is no single standard set of work-life balance equilibrium that can be applied to all across the board, as each person experiences balance in different way and at different point of time in their life. Despite the academic and applied interest, scholars defined work-life balance with variations (Gragnano et al., 2020). On that note, work-life balance in this study is defined as successfully accommodating, integrate and balance between work and non-work life with minimum role conflict.

The need for work-life balance is perceived as a significant issue among employees globally, which includes academics (Lai, 2010). High work demand and pressure in teaching and research work among academics are constantly rising globally (Watts & Robertson, 2011). Academic staff have intense pressure for teaching, research and service excellence, leading to disintegration and incompatible priorities (Kinman & Jones, 2008; Lai, 2010). Aisyah et al. (2012) concur that universities no longer provide conducive work-environment for their staff, where majority of academics claimed that they were unable to set an acceptable balanced boundary that balances between work and personal life. More than half of the respondents indicated that they often neglect their personal needs because of their work demands (Aisyah et al., 2012).

Academics today are burdened with increasing workload other than core academic obligations. Administrative tasks, event management, meetings, quality audits and marketing are some of the non-academic tasks that academics are compelled to do on top of their core academic obligations, namely, lecturing, research work, student assessment, project supervision and the like (van de Sande, 2021). The increased workload has drawn off much of their time on work, leaving very little for life, which gives a pang birth to off work-life balance and job stress.

Indeed, job stress is reported to have negatively impacting employees' work and personal lives (Haar et al., 2014). It is commonly associated with negative consequences on employees' psychological and physical wellbeing and close association with a high emotional cost to employee wellbeing (Haar et al., 2014). It also deposits a significant financial burden on the performance of the organisation (Skakon et al., 2010). These suggest that increasing stress level of academics may render the malfunctioning of the university as an institution (Masuku & Muchemwa, 2015).

Notwithstanding, the increasing numbers of public and private universities resulting in high competition among the universities for talented staff especially academics. To gain a competitive edge in this borderless job market, organisations require highly engaged workforce (Leitão et al., 2021). Work-life programs are among top predictor of higher employee engagement, and only highly engaged employees are vigorous, absorbed, and dedicated (Haar

et al., 2017). Employees who possess these factors have high levels of energy, passionate and wholly immersed in their work (Teoh & Kee, 2020).

High employee engagement leads to improved employee commitment and job involvement, creating a motivated workforce that achieve the common organisation goals (Sahni, 2021). Work-life programs could also minimize work-life conflict (Zahoor et al., 2021) and promote employee wellbeing (Wöhrmann et al., 2021).

However, organisations must also have a supportive work-life culture to ensure an effective implementation of work-life programs. Work-life culture is required not only to suit the needs of employees, but also to respond to globalisation and skills shortages in the workplace. (Kossek et al., 2014) Work-life culture transforms organisation into high performing organisation, resulting in a 'best work environment' that offer both financial and reputational reward. Despite the importance of work-life culture, limited research is done to investigate the role of work-life culture in employee engagement within developing countries, which has a different cultural context. Developing countries such as Malaysia is a collectivist society which has a higher need to care for others (Hassan et al., 2010). The collectivism has also impact on higher family interfere with work domain (Hassan et al., 2010; Jayasingam et al., 2021). In India, familial roles are gendered and women play a huge role in family care (Bhalla, 2016). Kumar et al., (2021) added that flexibility working hour in India is regarded as a discreet privilege provided by the big companies to selected few. It is also reported that long working hours culture are prevalent in developing countries (Lee et al., 2007). Indeed, the different cultural context highlights the need to research on the role of work-life culture in developing countries.

Thus, this paper aims to provide empirical evidence on the link between work-life culture and employee engagement for developing economies. By understanding work-life culture and employee engagement, a more proactive HR policies and practices can be developed to cater the needs of employees. The remainder of this section provides an overview of the structure of this paper. First, literature review and hypothesis development are described. Next, the methodology and findings are explained. Finally, this paper concludes with a discussion of finding and implications for future research.

Literature Review

Work-life culture

Organizational culture is a glue that holds organisations together. It is defined as a set of shared fundamental assumptions for resolving difficulties of external adaptation and internal integration, as well as for establishing social collaboration and standards based on what is 'right' and 'wrong' (Dauber et al., 2012). Organisational culture dictates the person's behaviour, how they respond to different situations, what people pay attention to, how they socialise with new members and eliminate the people who are not fit to the organisation. In this sense, the organisational culture determines informal processes in an organisation through the behaviour of employees.

In a similar vein, many authors (Haar et al., 2014; Kossek et al., 2014) agree that organisational culture is a key feature in ensuring the effectiveness of work-life programs. Thus, measuring work-life culture has been a continuous attempt in work-life balance research (Haar et al., 2014; Kossek et al., 2014). Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness (1999, p. 394) defines work-life culture as shared assumptions, attitudes, and values surrounding the extent to which an organisation supports and encourages the integration of employees' work and family lives. Lockwood (2003 adds the extent to which an organization's culture understands and respects employees' family duties and obligations is referred to as work-life culture. In this study, work-life culture is conceptualised based on Thompson et al. (1999) research that includes three dimensions:

organisational time demand, negative career consequences and managerial support. These dimensions are addressed in greater detail in the following section.

Organizational times demand

Organizational times demand concerns norms about the hours spent at work and the manner how employees spend their time. The unique human ability to operate on the experience of change, to react, to organise, and impose meanings on the experience is how time is socially formed (Tabboni, 2001, p. 7). Work-life conflict is exacerbated by time-based conflict, which arises when time constraints in one position (i.e. work) overlaps with the other role (i.e., private life). If resources cannot satisfy demands from one dimension, interference with other demands will create work-family-balance impairment. The interaction of resources and demands determines work-life balance or work-life conflict.

Accordingly, it is crucial for an organisation to offer flexible schedules and maintain a culture in which employees feel comfortable to balance their work and personal needs. Wöhrmann et al. (2021) suggested that individual-oriented flexible working hours will create organisational commitment only, if employees perceive that the flexibility enhances certain degree of their personal control.

Flexible scheduling allows employees to change their start and finish timings, allowing them to meet other family responsibilities at more convenient times. Instead than working long hours, employees are more inclined to adjust their job and family duties by using alternate schedules. Wöhrmann et al. (2021) found that flexible scheduling was helpful and less intense, lessening working hours impact on personal life.

Negative career consequences

The second aspect of work-life culture is related to the unfavourable career implications of work-life programmes. Due to fears of negative career consequences, many employees do not utilize work-life programs (Bourdeau et al., 2018). Some supervisors refused to let their employees participate in or implement these regulations in their workplace (Bourdeau et al., 2018).

Visibility is a standard in most organisational cultures, and "face time" is a measure of an employee's contribution and devotion to their job. Participating in work-life programmes or taking use of privileges such as flexible working hours may jeopardise an employee's ability to be seen as dedicated. Supervisors also reported a lack of understanding of work-life programmes, which hampered their ability to recommend employees to them (Chong et al., 2020). Therefore, de Sivatte et al. (2015) argued that organisational culture must be supportive and ready before initiating work-life programs. Low usage rates may undermine the programs' value (de Sivatte et al., 2015).

Managerial support

Managerial support and sensitivity to workers' family commitments are also factors in work-life culture (Moen et al., 2016). Supervisors play an important role in the success of work-life programmes because they may urge workers to participate or dissuade them from doing so. Rahim et al. (2020) agree that supervisor support would affect employees' perception of work-life programs. Organizations with well-established long-hours work culture and uncooperative managers and colleagues discouraged employees from using the work-life programs, signalling negative supports from the organisation (Skakon et al., 2010).

Managerial support for employees is indeed important in ensuring effective work-life programs. Employees regard their bosses as representatives of the company. As a result, employees see their supervisors' support as organisational support (Haar et al., 2014). Employees who feel their managers are competent, reliable, and have a management style that

they enjoy are more likely to share the company's beliefs and goals. As a result, organisations require successful managers to encourage employees to participate in work-life initiatives.

Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is an essential component of performance (Gruman & Saks, 2011). For a workforce to be engaged and productive, organisations must focus on employees' wellbeing (Saks, 2021). Instead of focusing on human deficiencies and out-of-order behaviour, engagement focuses on human strengths and optimal functioning (Sahni, 2021). Engagement was defined by Taris, Ybema, and Beek (2017) as "energy, participation, and efficacy," which are the polar opposites of the three burnout components (i.e. fatigue, pessimism and inadequate professional efficiency).

There are three approaches to employee engagement. Firstly, it is defined as inspiring resources such as colleagues or supervisors support and recognition, performance response, opportunities for development and skill (Saks, 2021). Secondly, employee engagement is commitment and taking on extra-role behaviour. Employees who have vested interests in the organisation's accomplishments achieved higher performance than stated job requirements (Korsgaard et al., 2010). When employees are engaged, they have personal satisfaction, motivation and affirmation as being a part of the organisation. The third approach describes engagement as independently from job resources, which detailing three interconnected dimensions: absorption, dedication and vigour. Employee engagement has an impact on beneficial organisational outcomes such as commitment (Taris et al., 2017).

Similarly, engagement is an impactful business outcome to many organisations (Gruman & Saks, 2011). Engaged employees concern about the company future and they are willing to invest the discretionary effort that goes extra miles beyond their stated responsibilities. Employee engagement comprises high participation, affective energy, and self-presence at work. In almost 8000 business units of 36 companies, Gallup's meta-analysis studies (Harter et al., 2002) found that employee engagement was linked to corporate performance in a substantial way (i.e., productivity, consumer satisfaction and loyalty, profitability).

Hypothesis Development

Organisations gain benefit from engaged workforce because employees work well together, self-inspired and information is mutually shared. In developing engaged workforce, Skakon et al. (2010) argued for the importance of caring, challenging and rewarding work environments, where people feel passionate and have work-life balance. According to social exchange theory, when an employer acts in a manner that benefits their employees, the employees will reciprocate through positive behaviour. According to social exchange theory, when an employer acts in a way that benefits their employees, the employees will respond positively. Employees' family lives are also an essential source of support and meaning for employee engagement in the job (Saks, 2021).

Many authors (Del Boca et al., 2020; Haar et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 1999) agreed that organisational culture may either advance or hinder the effectiveness of work–life programs. Saks (2021) found work-life culture which includes the accessibility of work-life requirements influences employee engagement. Work-life culture had also been shown to be positively related to discretionary effort, and appears to be the mediating factor in any work-life programs outcomes and employee engagement (Leitão et al., 2021). The benefits of work-life programs will be strengthened by providing a supportive work-life culture, which in return increase employees' discretionary effort.

Consequently, employers are increasingly publicizing their commitment to work-life culture in recruitment advertisement to attract best talent (Bao et al., 2020). The importance for work-life culture urges HR experts and organisations to truly comprehend employees' needs and how to

meet those needs while developing and leveraging talents (Haar et al., 2014). It is important for organisation to nurture work life culture that reflects caring environment and organisation (De Kort, 2017).

Kossek et al. (2014) added that organizational support (i.e. relationship with superiors, role clarity, information, communication, and participation), enlargement opportunities (i.e. variety, opportunities to learn, and autonomy), social support, and improvement were all positively related to work engagement, while job demands (i.e. overwork) were negatively related. Workplaces with a work-life balance have a more devoted, engaged, and productive workforce (Kossek et al., 2014). On the basis of the empirical evidence presented above, this study seeks to test the following hypotheses:

H1: Work-life culture is significantly related to employee engagement.
H1a: Organizational time demand is significantly related to employee engagement.
H1b: Negative career consequences are significantly related to employee engagement.
H1c: Managerial support is significantly related to employee engagement.

Methods

Participants and Procedures
This study gathered data from 6 Malaysian universities: Universiti Malaya (11.4%), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (12.6%), Universiti Putra Malaysia (12.6%), Universiti Tenaga Nasional (32.9%), Lim Kok Wing University (19.8%), and Cyberjaya University College of Medical Science (10.8%). A total of 167 questionnaires were completed, yielding an acceptable response rate of 55.7%. The demographics of participants in this study were 30-39 years old (41.3%), and 57.5% were female. Many respondents were Malay (50.3%) and married (63.5%). The majority of participants were lecturers (44.9%), who have 10 to 19 years of work experience (31.7%).

Instruments
The questionnaire used in this study comprised of three major sections: Participant background, work-life culture, and employee engagement. On a 5-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, all constructs are assessed.

Work-life culture
The measures of work-life culture were adapted from Thompson et al. (1999) 20-item scale. The work-life culture assesses the organisational time demand, negative career consequences and perceived managerial support.

Employee Engagement
The section in employee engagement is assessed with the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Schaufeli et al., 2002). This scale was used as it demonstrated acceptable levels of reliability with $\alpha = .91$.

Primary Analyses
To investigating the relationship of work-life culture on employee engagement of this study, a hierarchical regression using pairwise deletion of missing data was conducted to test the main effects of the variables of interest.

Findings

The reliability of scales was tested using Cronbach's alpha with values of below 0.6 considered too low by Hair et al. (2006). Cronbach's alpha coefficients of work-life culture and employee engagement were 0.827 and 0.706 respectively. Since they were higher than 0.60, thus, could be concluded that the instruments are reliable (Hair et al., 2006). The correlation between organisational time demand and employee engagement was next examined.

Table 1 Correlations between work-life culture and employee engagement

	Mean	Std. Dev	Organizational Time Demand	Negative Career Consequences	Managerial Support	Employee Engagement
Organizational Time Demand	7.71	2.79	1			
Negative Career Consequences	9.37	3.12	.539**	1		
Managerial Support	44.38	4.31	-.275**	-.378**	1	
Employee Engagement	44.07	7.03	-.215**	-3.50**	.381**	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 shows all dimensions of work-life culture are significantly correlated with employee engagement. Organizational time demand is significantly correlated with employee engagement (r= -.215, p< .01). Negative career consequences is notably correlated with employee engagement (r= -.350, p< .01), while managerial support is highly correlated to employee engagement (r= .381, p< .01).

The multiple regression analyses were also performed to determine the magnitude of work-life culture related to employee engagement. Specifically, the analyses were conducted separately for each dimension of work-life culture. The result indicated that organisational time demand was not a significant predictor of employee engagement (Beta = 0.016, n.s.). Accordingly, H1a is not supported.

In contrast, finding reveals a significant relationship between negative career consequences and employee engagement (Beta = -0.26, p < .01). Therefore, H1b is fully supported. Similarly, result also supports a strong relationship between perceived managerial support and employee engagement (Beta = 0.36, p < .001), suggesting that H1c is supported fully. The overall model fit was $R^2 = 0.26$.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the relationship between work-life culture such as organisational time demand, negative career consequences, and perceived managerial support in relation to employee engagement. This study contributes to previous research on work-life culture by providing evidence from non-Western perspectives that highlighting the differential magnitude of impact on employee engagement. The current results support social exchange theory that advocates on behaviours of member in an organisation resulting in benefit exchanges between them.

In general, results of this study revealed a mixture of responses in work-life culture and employee engagement. Organisational time demand was insignificant to employee engagement, while negative career consequences were adversely related to employee engagement. In contrast, managerial support was significantly related to employee engagement (r= .457, p< .01), The lack of a strong association between organisational time demand and

employee engagement can be attributed in part to academics' working environments, which may have incorporated work-hour flexibility. Consistent with Vieten, Wöhrmann, and Michel (2021), many organisations have given flexible work arrangements to help employees manage work and family obligations. Furthermore, despite extended working hours and significant levels of burnout, academics found their profession inherently inspiring, interesting, and potentially satisfying (Doyle & Hind, 1998). According to Kinman and Jones (2003), academics excel despite the tense nature of their profession. Interestingly, Bakker and Bal (2010) discovered that job resources neutralise the negative impact of job demands on employee engagement. For example, for employees with high job resources, there is a negative link between job demands and work engagement (Bakker, 2011).

Furthermore, this study found that negative career consequences were negatively related to employee engagement. Specifically, the current findings suggest that employees who used work-life practices feel engaged when they perceive positive career consequence. The findings also corroborate research by Bourdeau et al. (2018) who found that participants of work-life programs are physically less visible, projecting an image of less commitment to work and organisation which in turn form obstacle for their career development and promotion prospects. Despite negative career consequences, women with dependents still prefer to stay in jobs with high level of responsibility and time demand which reduced their hours to accommodate family commitments, rather than taking up part-time jobs (Bhalla, 2016). Similarly, only 3% of lawyers practices part-time employment policy, although 95% of American law firms offered part-time employment policy (Cunningham, 2001). Part-time jobs are incompatible with promotion and access to higher status occupations (Palumbo, 2020). Telecommuting is also not widely practised in Asia as visibility at the workplace matter for career advancement (Mital, 2010).

Likewise, Eaton (2003) found that work-life programmes enhanced employees' organisational commitment in a study of 463 professional and technical personnel in biopharmaceutical enterprises, but employees must feel free to apply the practises without fear of unfavourable career implications. The fear of having a negative influence on their job prospects appears to be a significant deterrent to employing the methods (Dikkers et al., 2007). Thus, organisation should be aware of the negative career consequences of using the work-life programs. The awareness will enable work-life programs such as job sharing and telecommuting to be implemented and nurtured in organisational culture for the benefits of both organisation and employees (Thompson et al., 1999).

Our results also indicated that employees whose organisations providing managerial support reported greater employee engagement. Past research revealed that supervisors act as gatekeepers, controlling employees' access in using work-life initiative (Bourdeau et al., 2018). According to Bourdeau et al. (2018), supervisor support had a stronger influence on employee outcomes than coworker support. Employees are more likely to perform better when they consider their boss to be more supportive. Daverth et al. (2016) also demonstrated that work and life conflicts have negative impact on employee engagement. The higher role conflict an employee is feeling, the less likely he/she engages to the organisation.

According to Bourdeau et al. (2018), supervisor support had a stronger influence on employee outcomes than coworker support. Employees are more likely to perform better when they consider their boss to be more supportive. Work-life conflicts have a detrimental influence on employee engagement, according to Daverth et al. (2016). The more role conflict an employee has, the less likely he or she is to participate with the organisation.

Managers who are negative about work-life balance may give signal that work-life programs such as part time and flexible working hours are problem for employee and organisation (Breeschoten & Evertsson, 2019). If there is no supervisor support, the availability of work-life programs would come to no avail because employees are fearful to utilize work-life

programs (Kossek et al., 2014). A lack of supervisor support has been also linked to burnout (Taris et al., 2017). These findings suggested that employee decisions to use work-life programs such as job sharing, and telecommuting rested a substantial weight on managerial support. High engagement can only be attained where there is a mutual understanding that connect people at an emotional and personal level (Bourdeau et al., 2018).

Theoretical Implications

Results of this study are in alignment with social exchange theory that vested on the basis of leader-member exchange which is significantly related to employee engagement. When the employees perceived that their manager is supportive, they will in return reciprocate to be supportive, and work hard for the organization (de Sivatte et al., 2015). The outcome of positive exchanges at the workplace create a conducive work environment that propel meaningful psychological environment leading in nurturing engaged and high performing employee (Saks, 2021).

Thus, managers play a substantial role in the effectiveness of work-life culture and employee engagement. It is crucial for managers to be trained if needed, for the benefits of the organisation sustainability. Managers need to set the tone of the organisational climate, establishing priorities, and allocating resources (Breeschoten & Evertsson, 2019). Most importantly, work-life programs must be reinforced and encouraged at all organisation levels, including senior management, line managers and all staff.

Practical and Social Implications

The current findings speak out loud of the need of work-life culture at workplace to create employee engagement. A prominent finding is the diverse connection between work-life culture and employee engagement. As found in an earlier research, the direct link between managerial support and employee engagement is strong, confirming the consequence of supervisory support as the dominant factor (Gruman & Saks, 2011). However, employees' efforts in integrating their work and lives may undermine by supervisors who are of reactive stance, and not conscious of the availability of work-life policy (Daverth et al., 2016).

Undeniably, employees are important capital to an organisation, and a powerful contributor to achieve competitive advantage. Literatures revealed that management that fosters a supportive work environment and concerns for employee well-being results in high employee engagement (Harney & Collings, 2021; Harter et al., 2002; Saks, 2021). Engaged employees are those actively involved, enthusiastic, committed, and have strong attachment to work, colleagues, and organisation. They act in the best interest of their employers, investing effort to ensure organisation success.

Therefore, universities must view work-life programs with supportive lens, in order for the academics to integrate work and non-work roles harmoniously. Universities and organisations alike must foster work-life culture that support diverse values that embrace work and non-work roles, and empower employees to have job control. Consistent with Saks (2021), employees are likely to exchange their engagement for organization resources and benefits.

It is important for management and employees to work collectively to synthesize work-life demands in alignment with needs and preferences. Indeed, building an organisational culture which supports work-life balance is a long-term process. Hence, organisations that are truly concerned in nurturing overall workforce sustainability must approach work-life balance broadly and creatively, in helping their employees to better integrate their work and non-work roles.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Owing to the minor sample size and cross-sectional data, generalizability of these findings is limited. Using one-time measurement of variables, cross-sectional data prevents definitive inferences about causal links among research variables. This study is also drawn from both public and private universities. The influence of different organisational contexts on support may differ. As a result, results must be interpreted with care. Future study might focus on issues that are related or in separate industry. More precise findings on the association between work-life culture and employee engagement will come from a larger sample size.

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