

Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment in the Public Sector: A Study of a ‘Closed’ Government Agency

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Abstract—This paper provides findings from the qualitative stage of a study on organizational commitment and job satisfaction. Whilst a number of studies report empirical research in the private sector, as yet there is little research published on the public sector especially ‘closed’ government departments. Interviews were conducted to explore the influence of job satisfaction and level of organizational commitment in a Malaysian public sector organization. The findings disclosed why employees chose to stay even when they were not satisfied and lacked commitment. Low commitment and lack of satisfaction may lead to low morale and a lack of sense of belonging. These issues may benefit from being addressed in order to reduce negative impacts on performance and wellbeing. Findings from this study provide insights into ways of developing a sustainable public sector.

Index Terms—Organizational commitment, job satisfaction, ‘closed’ government department.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper outlines results from the qualitative stage of a study with particular focus on organizational commitment and job satisfaction in a public service organization. The second stage of the research included a survey that was developed based on the theme arising from the interviews. In view of the crucial role of people as a source of competitive advantage, practitioners and researchers have intensively focused on developing knowledge about human resource management (HRM). There is a need to continuously explore and investigate HRM in different types of organizations and across nations to identify relevant policies and practices which best suit different organizations and countries [1], [2].

The antecedents of employee performance are complex and demanding. Employers need to consider what employees expect from them and what employees do in return as part of their “psychological contract” [3], [4]. Commitment and satisfaction towards jobs and the working environment is a vital feature of organization success [5]. Accordingly government activities are typically personnel intensive and thus good HRM practices are essential factors in improving service quality [6]. Previous study [7] emphasized the importance of having excellent quality public sector delivery systems, as poor system can seriously undermine stakeholders’ confidence. Poor HRM practices can be one of the major causes of inefficiency and ineffectiveness in public sector service delivery. Poor practices are also not conducive to developing and sustaining a happy and committed

workforce. It is important for managers in the public sector to address these problems and explore how to boost commitment such as enhancing employer and employees’ mutual understanding of expectations [8].

II. ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT (OC)

Prior study [9] conceptually defined organizational commitment (OC) as “an active relationship with the organization such that individuals are willing to give something of themselves in order to contribute to the organization’s wellbeing” (p. 226). OC refers to a “psychological state” that characterizes an employee’s attachment relationship with the organization and impacts on employees decisions to continue in the organization [10].

Efforts to accommodate various perspectives of the psychological state have resulted in multidimensional approaches to OC [11]. One reason why employees remain loyal to an organization has been related to the ability of an individual to satisfy their needs at work [12]. Furthermore, affective commitment is higher for employees whose organizational experience satisfies their needs when conspired with those with high personal competence but a less satisfying organizational experience [11], [13]. It appears that genuinely satisfied employees can add more value and effort towards the growth of an organization [14].

A. Job Satisfaction (JS)

Previous studies, [15], [16] have indicated that JS is significantly and positively related to organizational commitment. JS is a positive emotional state when the expectations of the employees are met [17] and “the degree to which people like their jobs” [18]. It can be defined as “the pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job as achieving or facilitating the achievement of one’s job values” [19]. Prior research [20], [21], has found that job enrichment as well as promotion may enhance JS and OC which may manifest in improved performance.

B. Social Exchange Theory

Literature about social exchange theory in a sociological context can be traced back to the seminal work of Blau [22], who built on the Gouldner’s theory of reciprocity to explain the relationship between social commitment and perceptions of the fair exchange between parties. He [22] referred to social exchanges as “favours that create diffuse future obligations, not precisely specified ones, and the nature of the return cannot be bargained about but must be left to the discretion of the one who makes it”. The norm of reciprocity indicates that employees feel a sense of responsibility to reciprocate when they are treated well by their employer and

benefit from the exchange [22]-[24]. In the organizational context social exchange theory posits that employees are motivated to commit to their organization and job when there is a fair and balanced system of exchange [22]. This theory is employed as the lens identifying the potential outcomes when ideal employer and employee exchanges are embedded in the workplace.

With regards to fair social exchange experience they share with their organizations, employees may infer that they are valued and trusted and, in return may be more willing to display positive employee attitudes [25]. For instance, employees may contribute effort and loyalty to their organizations, while in return employers may provide compensation, recognition, job security and career advancement opportunities. Perceptions of fairness illustrate that employees' interests are fulfilled and protected, provide a relational purpose when employees make comparisons with others, and send signals to employers about the morality of organizational treatments [26], [27]. Additionally, a study [28] also emphasized that effective HR practices play a critical part in generating and sustaining the commitment of employees towards the employer.

C. 'Closed' Government Department

A 'closed' government department is one specializing in dealing with a critical field of responsibility or expertise such as military, police and immigration departments, where there are both uniformed and civilian staff. In the Malaysian context, public service staff who work for other government departments under common user services or open scheme services (e.g. diplomatic officers) are not normally permitted to transfer or be promoted to hold operational positions in a 'closed' department, except for Director General, Deputy Director General and several senior administration positions at the Headquarters.

D. Western versus Non Western Countries

Much of the published research pertaining to HRM practices, JS and OC has been conducted in and has a predominant focus on private sectors and Western cultures [30], [31]. Findings obtained in other cultures and contexts may need to be distinguished from those of Western studies [32]. It was concluded that in exploring locally relevant research issues, Asian scholars ought to be more careful in applying theories developed in other contexts and instead develop theories that illustrate Asian specific phenomena [33]. In a developing country such as Malaysia, there may need to be differences in the approaches to HR management than those used in Western settings. There are three main reasons why this study was carried out in the Malaysian context: (1) to examine the applicability of Western HRM concepts to Malaysia; (2) to understand the implications for public sector organizations especially 'closed' government departments; and (3) to make a contribution to the research literature on HRM issues in the Malaysian public sector.

III. METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

To identify and address gaps between Western theory and local Malaysian practices qualitative interviews were

employed as the first step of this study. Empirical data from forty employees (14 men, 26 women) from a 'closed' government department in Malaysia were collected and analyzed.

Interview participants were selected from four different states and six major divisions. Thirty-three were at a senior level, the professional and management group, and seven were junior level or support staff. Ages ranged from 25 to 56 years, with the majority in their 40s (60%). The average age was 41. Most (90%) participants had worked for the department for more than eight years (range from 5 to 37 years). The average year of service was 21. Participants were familiar with the department, core business and management practices.

Participants were asked questions about their background, level of OC, JS, and perceptions of department practices related to HRM and employees' wellbeing. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed and analysis was assisted by the use of N Vivo software.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the 40 participants who provided information about their views on personal job satisfaction could be divided into two main categories; satisfied (34) and not satisfied (6) (Table I).

Level of OC was assessed to be high, medium or low. High was those who committed to the department in an unequivocal and whole hearted manner, and saw the majority of others as having the same level of commitment. Medium included those who expressed commitment but with some degree of negativity or lack of satisfaction. Low were those who expressed a low level of commitment for both themselves and also saw a low level of commitment in others (Table I).

A. Satisfied

TABLE I: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND JOB SATISFACTION

Level of Commitment	Satisfied	Not satisfied
High	20	2
Medium	9	1
Low	5	3
Total Participants	34	6

This category consists of those employees who said that they loved the inherent nature of their job and expressed their satisfaction. They appeared outwardly happy and committed to performing their public duties to the best of their ability. They were thankful for being government servants and being able to do a job that both serves the public and protects the national interest.

TABLE II: ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND JOB SATISFACTION

Level of Commitment	Satisfaction Factors		
	Knowledge & Experience	Promotion & Rewards	Working Environment
High	9	21	5
Medium	8	8	3
Low	1	6	2

Interview results suggested that when employees felt that they were able to apply knowledge gained in their tertiary

education throughout their working environment, they felt confident and satisfied (Table II).

Their enthusiasm to work hard and acquire new knowledge and skills was associated with the interesting nature of their work and broad range of duties associated with their career goals, could also explain. As stated by one participant,

“Yes, I can apply the knowledge I have gained at university throughout my daily job. The job is in line with my qualification. Moreover, the scope of my job and the core business of the department provides ample opportunity for further learning”.

Employees who had gained a level of seniority and expertise in the department felt a sense of satisfaction when their achievements were recognized by their subordinates, colleagues, and supervisor. Of the 34 satisfied participants, there was who enjoyed his job and felt that he gained knowledge and experience, i.e. the chance to get to know people from other agencies both local and overseas, and was recognized as a technical expert. However he viewed his friends and subordinates’ level of commitment as low. He emphasized that,

“Many of them have expressed their disappointment on the slow promotion exercise, bias and cronyism. Thus, definitely they will leave the department if they able to get better offer”.

The 29 out of the 34 satisfied participants who expressed high and medium levels of OC viewed their contributions as recognized and valued. This included promotions, service excellence awards and best officer of the year awards. Receipt of such concrete evidence of recognition motivated them to put in an even greater effort and strive to exceed expectations. One such participant represented the sentiments of these satisfied participants by stating:

“Yes, I have received recognition for my contribution and have been sufficiently rewarded in terms of promotion and its accompaniments of remuneration and a service excellence award”.

B. Not Satisfied

Whilst the majority of the participants expressed satisfaction with their job, this related primarily to their personal work duties. Despite the fact that their contribution had been recognised by means of promotion and rewards, their satisfaction was not all encompassing. They remained not satisfied with the lack of efficiency in policy implementation given that the department had well documented plans, the absence of new prospects to explore in another department if they opt to change job, inconsistency of promotion exercises, insufficient rewards, that the department was perceived as a lack of a supportive working environment (Table III).

TABLE III: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMITMENT AND NOT SATISFIED FACTORS

Level of Commitment	Not satisfied Factors				
	Implementation	Prospect	Promotion Exercise	Rewards	Working environment & Image
High	10	12	16	8	9
Medium	3	3	5	2	9
Low	1	3	11	2	1

To be more concise factors associated with a lack of

satisfaction stemmed from a lack of perceived fairness and transparency in the department’s promotional practices and perceptions about poor management of promotions. The majority viewpoint is represented by the following quote:

“Over bureaucratic. Also the senior management level like to choose from a small pool of employees in their immediate surround. These employees are always given priority relative to recognition and promotion”.

Other major promotion related issues that contributed to forming their outlook included the criteria for promotion and promotion speed. The criteria for promotion caused confusion when the expertise and skills of the person promoted was not compatible with the new job specification or duties in the new division. For instance, they may have been expert in auditing matters but when promoted or transferred are assigned a job dealing with general operation matters. Thus, they felt that were unable to fully utilize their expertise and skills for the benefit of the department.

Interestingly, 100% of the male interview participants reported that they were satisfied with their job whereas only 77% of the female participants were satisfied. All of the 6 out of the 40 participants who were not satisfied with their job (Table I) female. Of these, 2 reported high, 1 medium and 3 a low level of OC. One of the reasons for this lack of satisfaction and lower level of OC was to do with the tarnished public image the department currently experienced. Power abuse and corruption allegations had recently dogged the department. To quote one participant:

“No, the public perception of corruption in this department is too high. I feel ashamed to go outside and introduce myself as a staff here. “

This view is somewhat subjective because the media in Malaysia has greatly exaggerated incidents involving the department officers currently under investigation by the Anti-Corruption Commission. The public has tended to pre-judge officers as being guilty before the investigation is completed. Nevertheless, the image of the department has been tarnished by these incidents.

The 6 participants who were not-satisfied were also unfamiliar with their allotted tasks and confused about what they needed to do to perform well. They believed that the knowledge and skills they had gained in previous placements was not being utilized; and that their input was consequently only of partial benefit to the department. Their sentiments were summed up by one as:

“Depends on where the department assigns me, e.g. if they assign me to the Y division I would be satisfied because not only would I know what I am to do, but I would have some opportunity to contribute my knowledge and skills. In this division I am unclear about how I should perform my allotted tasks and in consequence they provide me with no real satisfaction.”

This answer prompted the researcher to cross check with other questions put to this participant, i.e. Do you think you will be still doing the same job in five years’ time? Do you anticipate any internal promotion opportunities in the near future? The answer was clear and to the point,

“No, I am looking forward to retirement soon!”

This participant had been promoted twice, and given a service excellence award and appreciation certificate for high

productivity. The generally accepted retirement age in Malaysia is well above the fifties. This woman who was still in her forties felt frustrated with the predicament she faced in her division, particularly as she had no other employment alternatives of similar status and seniority outside the department given that she worked in a 'closed' department. To make a move to another government department would mean she would have to start over again as a 'junior' with few career prospects.

Her level of OC was high which she attributed as a result of having a guaranteed regular salary and the religious conviction of her accountability to God in the day of judgement. Although she loved the department she remained frustrated with her situation. This employee was dedicated and committed to her job and as such could rightly be considered an asset to the department. Lack of satisfaction was associated with feeling unclear about how to perform tasks, and that she could not fully utilize prior knowledge and skills acquired in the department. This particular case demonstrated the need to give greater attention to talent utilization and placing the right people in the right place, i.e. ensuring that employees present know how is appropriate for the task at hand.

Result of the interviews suggested that career growth or career development has a critical role to play in increasing OC and JS amongst employees. Career growth was seen as both self and professional development, a recognition, appreciation and reward for employees' contributions, and a catalyst that motivates them to be committed and satisfied. This is in line with previous study [33], where prospective employees indicated that career development was one of the most significant factors in their ideal career choice.

Furthermore, in reference to career growth, [2] it was suggested that, "high pay contingent on performance, career planning and advancement, and performance appraisal for pay and promotion purposes motivate employees to produce" (p. 266). Most organizations have HRM systems such as career development which enable employees to develop through the ranks to higher positions. Career growth is defined as "career ladder" as an improvement in the positions of employees who put in an effort to gain necessary skills and upgrade their performance [1]. The benefits gained by employers who motivate and encourage employees to pursue their career growth is the mutual investment in the employee-employer relationship [31] which is manifested as advanced levels of JS and OC.

In this study, six major themes emerged in reference to elements of career growth which may influence OC and JS. The majority of the coded references emphasized professional ability development (32), followed by promotion speed (18), job rotation (17), promotion equity (14), career goal progress (8) and remuneration growth (6).

Professional ability development is referred to an opportunity to gain knowledge and skills in an organization such as formal training and lifelong learning [34]. It has become a significant determinant of employees' job attitudes and behaviours. Promotion speed such as internal promotion is defined as the pace by which an employee has climbed the ladder as opposed to stagnating in the same function for long time [35]. Job rotation is defined as 'self-explanatory' and

simply rotating work [36]. It is also regarded as cross-training where an employee of a unit or section could be exposed to diversified skills and experience during a specific period of time. Promotion equity is employees' equity perceptions based on a desire to be treated and compensated in a fair and neutral manner by employers [37]. Career goal progress is defined as the convergent of employee-employer relationship leading to employees feeling more affinity with organization and experiencing career development when executing jobs connected to their career goals [34]. Lastly, remuneration growth is encompassed by fringe benefits, salary and yearly bonus [34].

Even though the department had comprehensive plans for career growth, some of the fundamentals were not seen as being properly executed, i.e. the implementation of new policy. Strategic planning and successful implementation are essential if the desired result is to be realized. The perception of unfair treatment and the often cumbersome bureaucratic nature of the organization had an impact on the satisfaction and commitment of employees if not addressed; this negative sentiment may continue to impact on a growing number of employees.

The interview participants strongly suggested that when employees are in receipt of well-considered sound management practices together with a supportive working environment such as dedicated supervisors, colleagues and subordinates, they have every chance of experiencing job satisfaction, and remaining with the organization for the long term.

Moreover, they also emphasized that if employees have some concrete evidence that their efforts are recognized and valued, there is every chance they will reciprocate by putting in an even greater work effort.

Previous research [10], [28] revealed that low organizational commitment and lack of satisfaction may lead to turnover. These findings in this 'closed' department indicated that, employees chose to stay even when they were not satisfied and lacked commitment. This may be because they believed that it could be too late for them to search for new career prospects outside the 'closed' department, and also the security of the job and perks provided in the government sector were seen as positive reasons to remain. 34 out of the 40 participants liked working in the department, liked their job, and offered positive suggestions for improvement and how to address issues such as career growth, the working environment and promotion policy. Among the suggestions for ways to improve the promotion policy was to give more priority to long serving senior officers who perform well rather than to people who "know the top level managers"(perceived as nepotism). Non-aligned panels could be appointed to monitor the fairness of promotion exercises. Promotion panels could consider giving greater weight to seniority and performance rather than activities less related to core business being actively involved in labour union.

Only a few employees said they intended to leave the department after satisfying their initial bond with the government. They were willing to stay and serve the department if given promotion and recognition improved

formal education qualifications. Those nearing retirement age felt they did not have good future prospect in the department, and they felt unhappy because they had been left out in their career growth despite being good workers, senior in service and having always contributed to the department.

Low commitment and a lack of satisfaction may lead to low morale, low productivity and a lack of a sense of belonging the department may need to look into these matters and seek ways to address these issues.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study revealed a common basis on which employees determined how much commitment and satisfaction they offered, which was how fairly they perceived themselves as being treated by the organization. Specifically, if employees perceived the organization as valuing the contribution they made, caring about their well-being and treating them fairly, a high level of organizational commitment and satisfaction ensued. While this department did not seem to be facing a problem with turnover there was a lack of satisfaction and commitment. Those who were committed were not always satisfied with promotion, the working environment and facilities, training and career development. A lack of career paths in a 'closed' department might be associated with low satisfaction. These issues may benefit from being addressed in order to reduce any negative impact on performance and wellbeing. This may be particularly important in 'closed' government departments such as this. The second stage of this research is includes a survey to further investigate the results from these interviews and explore the particular relationships between career growth, organizational commitment and job satisfaction in this particular context.

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