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Learning Organization and Work Engagement: An Empirical Evidence of a Higher Learning Institution in Malaysia

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Abstract: Rapidly changing business environment requires organization to gain competitive advantage in order to survive. As people is known to be the most valuable assets to an organization, having employees that are actively engaged in their work can positively leads to higher performance and subsequently contribute to the success of the organization. One of the factors that would lead to work engagement among employees is through the learning organization concept which provides continuous learning and improvement, directly linked to an employee daily work and development. Despite its importance, seldom has it been reported in the literature that this paradigm has been examined. Therefore, this study attempts to determine: (i) the level of work engagement among employees; and (ii) the relationship between learning organization dimension and work engagement. Data collected from 150 employees of an institution of higher education revealed that work engagement among employees is at high level. Only four learning organization dimensions namely, empowerment, embedded system, environmental connection and strategic leadership were found to have positive and significant relationships with work engagement. The implications and consequences of the study findings for higher learning institutions are further discussed.

Keywords: *Learning organization, work engagement, higher learning institution*

1. Introduction

In today's fast changing environment, becoming a high performing organization has become a top priority in every organization. As employees offer organizations a competitive advantage through its unique contribution, having employees that perceived 'work as meaningful' and subsequently engage to their work is crucial. This is because, when the organization has employees that are positive, enthusiasm and inspired with their work, it will directly give a positive impact to the organization's performance (Anitha, 2014). Work engagement is referred to as a "positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication and absorption" (p. 295) (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzales-Roma, & Bakker, 2002). In other words, employees who are engaged perceived their work positively and this will lead to improved outcomes not only for themselves but also to the organization as a whole. The importance of work engagement has been highlighted in the literature. Work engagement is often been associated with individual's work quality based on their well-performed job which subsequently leads to greater organizational productivity and growth (Saks, 2006). Work engagement provides positive impact on job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intention to quit and burnout level (Anitha, 2014). With high quality and efficient employees, it will directly give impact to the organization's performance. On contrary if the employees do not engage with their work, they might tend to quit their job, take frequent leaves, make mistakes on the work given and have attitude problem in the workplace.

As the element of learning is important in ensuring employees are engaged with their work, having a learning organization culture would serve as a platform in creating continuous learning that can be directly help in enhancing the organization's performance (Weldy & Gillis, 2010). Indeed, when the employees perceived that the organization give them support (with continuous learning culture) they tend to show more positive attitude, good behaviour and offer higher quality of work towards the organization (Islam, Kassim, Ali, & Sadiq, 2014). Despite the logical connection between learning organization culture and engaged employees, only a few studies have examined this connection, especially in the context of Malaysia. If employee's work engagement is to be developed through a culture of learning within the organization, a framework that aligned these variables is necessary. Therefore, this study attempts to determine: (i) the level of work engagement among employees; and (ii) the relationship between learning organization dimensions (individual, team and organization) and work engagement.

2. Literature Review

Work Engagement: Work engagement can be defined as a positive, work-related that is characterized by the dimensions of vigour, dedication and absorption (Balducci et al., 2010). Vigour can be described as a high level of energy and mental resilience while doing work, willingness to put their effort on work, and their persistence cognition and emotion. Meanwhile, dedication is referred to as the characters of enthusiasm, inspiration and feel of pride with their work or strong involvement with their work, and absorption level of employees' happiness with their work (Balducci et al., 2010). Work engagement has positive consequences for both employees and organization. It is proven that the organization also needs work engagement among their employees. When the employees are engaged with their work, they tend to experience positive emotions such has enthusiasm, joy, happiness, better health and often transfer their engagement to others (Banihani, Lewis, & Syed, 2013). Indeed, the positive emotional connection between employees and their workplace can be seen through their positive attitude specifically, when they express it through physical, emotional and cognitive aspects in performing their task (Anitha, 2014). Numerous studies provided empirical evidence on the relationship between work engagement and positive work-related outcomes. For example, work engagement has been found to be positively related to job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviours (Saks, 2006); customer loyalty and employee performance (Salanova, Agut & Peiro, 2005); intention to quit and burnout level (Anitha, 2014).

Learning Organizations: The idea of learning organization has received many interests from both practitioners and scholars. Indeed, learning organization is not the only transformation of the organization but it is a continuous transformation and transformation of mind (Watkins & Golembiewski, 2007). Defined as an organization that adapts continuous learning and transforms itself for improvement, the learning organization culture encourages innovation and the employee's growth with organization (Watkins & Golembiewski, 2007). According to Marsick and Watkins (1994) and Watkins and Marsick (1996), there are three levels of organization learning which is the individual level, team or group level and organization level. The seven dimensions of learning organization are divided into these three levels. The dimension of continuous learning; and Inquiry and dialogue are identified under individual level of learning (Muneer et al., 2014). Meanwhile, the team learning represents the team or group level. At the organizational level, it is consisted of four dimensions of learning organization which are empowerment, environmental connection, embedded system and strategic leadership (Yang, Watkins, & Marsick, 2004). The definition of each learning organization dimension used in the study is summarized in Table 1.

Emerging research supports the significance of learning organization dimensions and the impact it has on work engagement. As highlighted by Park, Song, Song, & Kim (2014), work engagement helps employees to create new ideas and give them initiatives to implement ideas with the support from the learning organization culture. Specifically, employees who perceived that they have high learning organization culture tend to have more proactive behaviours and discretionary efforts. Thus, it is important to get the organization's support for employee's work engagement. This can be done through continuous learning, knowledge sharing, empowerment and social interactions among all employees (Park et al., 2014). At the individual level, when employees are exposed to *continuous learning*, they will be more confident and this will motivate them to be more engaged in their work (Anitha, 2014). As dialogue is the medium where people use to share meaning and their understanding, it provides a platform to listen and give feedback on the perspective that is different from their own, and later use what they have learned to change. This shows that the mutual trust and understanding that built through *inquiry and dialogue* can lead to employee's involvement and get engaged (Raelin, 2012). Therefore, it is proposed that:
H1: There is positive relationship between learning organization dimension (individual level) and work engagement.

Team Learning is another aspect that can enhance the level of work engagement. When team members trust and support each other, it will promote work engagement among employees. Team learning allows each team member to learn together and try new things. Additionally, team learning involves positive interaction among each other. Thus with the positive and good relationship in team learning, their work engagement is expected to be high (Anitha, 2014). Therefore, it is proposed that:

H2: There is positive relationship between learning organization dimension (team level) and work engagement.

Table 1: Learning Organization Dimensions

Dimensions	Level of Learning	Definition
Continuous Learning	Individual	Learning is designed into each employee work in order to give them opportunity to learn on the job, and to continue education and keep growth
Inquiry and Dialogue	Individual	People are gained productive skills in order to express their own views and their capacity to listen to other views. This culture is to support questioning, feedback and experimentation.
Team Learning	Team	Defined as the work designed to groups to access the different modes of thinking, ideas, and expected to learn and work together.
Embedded System	Organization	Both the high and low technology system is use to share learning and integrated with work to provide an access to all.
Empowerment	Organization	Defined when the organizations get the people to be involved in setting, owning and joint vision. This is decision making that makes together will motivated people to learn toward what they are responsible to do.
Strategic Leadership	Organization	Defined as the leaders' model, champion and to support learning to use the learning strategically as the business results.
Environmental Connection	Organization	The environment is to help the people to see the effect of their work and use the environment as information to adjust the work practices and make the organization linked to the communities.

Source: Marsick & Watkins (2003).

At the organizational level of learning organization dimensions, work engagement can be achieved through embedded system, empowerment, environmental connection, and strategic leadership. *Embedded system* or shared learning is where the technology plays an important role in making the learning organization more effective and efficient. One of the advantages using technology is the process of capturing, disseminating and sharing knowledge can be done systematically throughout the organization. It is necessary for organization to have this system for employee's development. As a result, shared learning system will lead to employees to be more actively engaged with the organization (Naujokaitiene, Teresevience, & Zydziunaite, 2015). Previous researches indicate that there is a link between leadership attributes and work engagement. This is important because leaders play an important role in encouraging or discouraging the work engagement (Zhang, Avery, Bergsteiner, & More, 2014). *Leaders* in the organization help employees in clarifying goals and give them directions on how to achieve their goals, which directly have an impact on their performance. Since work engagement is regarded as a long term initiative, the development process should be continuous in ensuring employees are well-engaged and subsequently contribute to the increase of organizational performance (Venkatesh, 2015).

Additionally, *empowerment* can lead to work engagement through effort, persistence and initiative (Macey & Schneider, 2008). *Environmental connection* with employees can be one of the significant factors that contribute to the employee's level of engagement. This is when the environmental of work are harmony and connected in which the employees receive feedbacks and support from the work environment which can help them to be more engaged (Anitha, 2014). Thus, it is hypothesized that:
H3: There is positive relationship between learning organization dimension (organizational level) and work engagement.

3. Methodology

The study utilized a correlational study research design. Data were collected using personally administered questionnaires from employees (academics and non-academics) of a semi-government institution of higher learning. Additionally, the study used census method, where it involves whole entire of the population in the research. The instruments used in this study were adopted from established sources using 5-point Likert scales ranged from 1 to 5 (1= Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Specifically, 21 items of Dimensions of Learning Organization Questionnaires (DLOQ) from Yang et al. (2004) were adopted to measure learning organization dimensions. Specifically, six items were used for the individual level (continuous learning (3 items), inquiry and dialogue (3 items), three items for team level (team learning) and 12 items for organizational level –namely empowerment (3 items), environmental connection (3 items), embedded system (3 items) and strategic leadership (3 items). To measure work engagement, 9 items of Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) from Balducci et al. (2010) was used. Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Software (SPSS) version 20.0

4. Findings

Data were collected from 150 employees, yielding a response rate of 62.5 percent. Most of the respondents were female (57.3 %) and they were in the range of 31 to 40 years old. Most respondents involved in the study were the administrators (65%) and almost half of the respondents have tenure of 1 to 4 years working in the organization. Based on the reliability test conducted, all adopted measurements were found to be reliable as the Cronbach's alpha values were found ranging from .66 to .88. Based on the results, it was found that all variables have mean values ranged from 3.86 to 3.98; with work engagement has the highest mean value of 3.98. The range of standard deviation among variables is reported between .46 and .51. Table 2 indicates the inter-correlation values among variables. It was found that all independent and dependent variables used in the study were significantly inter-correlated.

Table 2: Means, Standard Deviation and Inter-correlation among variables

Learning Organization Dimensions	Mean	Standard Deviation	Individual Level	Team Level	Organizational Level	Work Engagement
Individual Level	3.90	.46	1.00			
Team Level	3.86	.50	.64**	1.00		
Organizational Level	3.87	.51	.62**	.54**	1.00	
Work Engagement	3.98	.49	**.38****	**.37****	**.46****	1.00

Table 3: Regression Analysis

	Dependent variable Work Engagement
Independent variables	
Learning Organization Dimensions	
Individual level	.01
Team level	.15
Organizational Level	.38**
F value	14.63**
R^2	.231
Adjusted R^2	.215

From the regression analysis result (Table 3), only organizational level of learning ($\beta = .38$, $p < .01$) were found to be significantly related to work engagement. Thus, H3 is supported. No support was received for the

relationship between individual and team level of learning organization, with work engagement, which resulted to the rejection of H1 and H2. The research model as a whole explains 23 percent of variance on work engagement.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The two main objectives of the study are to: (1) determine the level of work engagement among employees; (2) to determine the relationship between learning organization dimensions (individual, team and organization) and work engagement. The result indicate earlier reported that the level of work engagement among employees is at a high level. Even though most of the employees have tenure of less than five years working in the organization, work is perceived as positive and hence employees has high energy and committed in doing their work. Based on the analysis conducted, it was also reported that only organizational level of learning was found to have positive significant relationship with work engagement. In another words, the respondents perceived that organization needs to have empowerment, environmental connection, embedded system, and strategic leadership in order to develop work engagement among employees. This also indicates that the culture of learning organization needs to be strongly established at the organizational level first, for the work engagement to be inculcated among employees. This is because learning at the organizational level is strongly linked to the culture of the organization through values, beliefs and practices embedded in the organization. The culture of the organization will directly shape an employee and subsequently influence the outcome of their performance. Therefore, it is true that learning organization involves not only the transformation of the organization but it is also a continuous transformation of mind at the organizational level (Watkins & Golembiewski, 2007). Additionally, work engagement among employees will not be materialized if learning is initiated at the individual and team level without having the support at organizational level. The findings is in line with previous studies conducted on learning organization and work engagement e.g., Naujokaitiene et al. (2015); Macey & Schneider (2008); Anitha (2014); Zhang et al. (2014).

Implications, Limitations: The significance of the study is definitely to the body of knowledge as it adds to the existing literature on learning organization and work engagement. This study particularly, looks at three different levels of learning happening in the organization and explores which has the most influence on work engagement. The study also provides practical implication to the education sector particularly higher learning institutions especially on emphasizing the empowerment practices among employees; having a good system in managing learning and connecting the outcomes of learning; and performance on communities in order to make employees engage in the work. Perhaps, the utmost important to encourage work engagement is the strategic leadership of the organization as they are the key people that drive and chart the direction of the organization – the one that makes an organization a learning organization. For future research, firstly, it is suggested that the study to involve various public and private universities in Malaysia, as this study is limited to one particular institution of higher learning only. Secondly, as suggested in the literature, studies that is organization based (i.e., learning organization) should utilize longitudinal study design as perceptions on it may be captured more effectively across time. Lastly, if possible, moderating and mediating variables should be included in future to enable the researcher to better understand the dynamic framework between learning organization and work engagement.

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