

EMPLOYEE MOTIVATION AND LEARNING BEHAVIOURS IN SELECTED MANUFACTURING INDUSTRIES

By

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ABSTRACT

The topics of motivation and job satisfaction have been of interest to researchers over the past decades. Many researchers and practitioners have studied the driving factors to motivate staff in the workplace, but no specific findings have shown correlation between motivation and job satisfaction. Problems of motivation and job satisfaction have continued to plague many developing countries like Malaysia. This study is an attempt to improve the understanding of the human contribution to variability in manufacturing industries and the focus areas are work motivation, satisfaction and performance as well as relationships with learning behaviours of employees in the workplace. The research work can be categorized into three parts. The first part consists of pilot study which was conducted to determine the practicality and validity of method/instruments used in the research. The pilot study also helped to correct the flaws/weaknesses of the method before employing it in the full-scale research study. Secondly, an experimental study was carried out to identify the motivation, satisfaction, performance and learning behaviour of unskilled and skilled employees doing simple or complex tasks individually or in group. The final part was an industrial study conducted with 356 employees from various positions and backgrounds in selected manufacturing industries in Malaysia. Based on the findings, it has been shown that unskilled employees preferred doing complex tasks in a group rather than doing simple tasks and skilled employees preferred doing complex tasks individually rather than in a group. It increased their work motivation, satisfaction and performance. It was found that task identity (simple tasks) and learning behaviours (individual learning of unskilled employees) can be the reason for employees to leave in the future. The task identity (task complexity) can be an important factor in job design in organisations and it is significant in the learning process of unskilled and skilled employees in manufacturing industries, particularly in Malaysia. It was also found that learning in a team (group) appears to be a very significant factor in workplace learning for both unskilled and skilled employees. The study has shown that there are relationships between motivational and learning behaviours of skilled and unskilled employees and this knowledge is expected to be useful for employers and policy makers in organisations especially in manufacturing industries in Malaysia.

Keywords: Motivation, learning, unskilled, skilled, task identity and task complexity.

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CHAPTER ONE

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

The topic of employee motivation at the workplace is an important aspect of human resource management both practically and theoretically. It is vital to recognize the importance of people in the organisation towards achieving the organisation goals. One way to achieve the goals is by keeping the employee motivated at all times. Atkinson (1964) defined motivation as “the contemporary (immediate) influence on direction, vigor, and persistence of action”. While Vroom (1964) defined it as “a process governing choice made by persons...among alternative forms of voluntary activity”. Managers view motivation as the fundamental part of the performance equation at all levels, while researchers in organisational management describe it as an important structure in the development of valuable theories of an efficient management practice. Definitely, the motivation topic permeates several subfields that include the study of performance management, managerial ethics, teams, leadership, decision making, and organisational transformation.

This thesis aims at discovering how employees’ motivation, satisfaction and performance relate to their learning behaviours while doing certain tasks. This study explores employee motivation, satisfaction and performance among unskilled and skilled employees in manufacturing industries in Malaysia. At the present time with increasing technology and globalization, many organisations, especially in developing countries, have problems keeping their employees motivated and satisfied. Hence, it is important to explore the topic of motivation, satisfaction and performance in order to find the best solution for human resource management, managers, policy makers and practitioners. Employers and policy makers need to be aware of how to motivate and satisfy their employees, hence understanding their motivation as well as satisfaction must be the main concern for employers and policy makers.

This chapter begins with the background of the study and a statement of the research problem and significance of the study. The research aim and objectives are stated and the research

questions are mapped to motivation, satisfaction, performance and learning behaviours as shown in the research frameworks 1 and 2 in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 respectively. Background on manufacturing industries in Malaysia that includes the workforce and economic growth are briefly discussed. At the end of this chapter, the organisation of the thesis is provided.

1.2 Statement of the Research Problem and Gap

Many motivation theories and ideas have been enhanced and further developed from the 1960s and 1970s due to the development of research findings and more sophisticated research methods. In the 1980s a series of improvements and extensions of the existing theories were observed. For instance, researchers made great contributions in the development of conceptual and empirical work that concentrated on social learning theory, together with new work on job design, theory of goal-setting, punishment, procedural justice, reward systems, creativity and innovation, and cross-cultural effects on work behaviours. However, intellectual interest in the theory of work motivation appeared to drop quickly in the 1990s. As a result, there have been few articles available in primary journals over the past decade. This becomes the biggest challenge to researchers in this competitive period where successful organisations across the globe strive in the future based mainly on the superiority of both their human resources and technologies. Therefore, employees with high motivation become valuable assets in such competition (Steers et al., 2004).

This topic needs to be explored broadly as several articles have observed how far we have come with studying work motivation, which leads to open questions such as: What is the future of work motivation theory? How can we improve or transform the existing models so they remain applicable in the future? And what are the new models of employee behaviours and work performance in present modern organisations? These are examples of the challenges for researchers to explore the broader view not only focussing on work motivation theory but also on the relationship between learning behaviours in the workplace.

Learning behaviours or learning activities can be described as specific behaviours that result in a change of knowledge or behaviour. Several studies formulated and categorized the learning activities of employees, with distinctions being made between on-the-job and off-

the-job learning, implicit versus explicit learning (Doornbos et al., 2004). Bolhuis (2001) distinguished four learning activities: learning through experience, learning through social interaction, learning through theory and learning through critical reflection. Berings et al. (2008) classified learning activities within the nursing profession: learning by doing a regular job, learning by applying something new in the job, learning by social interaction with colleagues, learning by theory or supervision and learning by reflection.

Many of the motivation theories were developed, evaluated and tested in developed countries, while less research has been done in developing countries especially in Malaysia. Few articles were found that focused on job satisfaction in manufacturing industries in Malaysia. Dawal and Taha (2004) found in their study on the relationship between job satisfaction and job factors in industrial work design that job factors are predictors of job satisfaction and were influenced by age, work experience and marital status. In a later study, Dawal et al. (2009) also found that job rotation, work method, problem solving and goal setting are outstanding factors in the study of job satisfaction for automotive industries. Therefore, based on these findings, few studies have been done in manufacturing industries in Malaysia, and unfortunately there was no specific study relating these with the motivational theories and also empirical studies examining which theories are relevant are inadequate. Consequently there is a need to explore the employee motivation, satisfaction and performance as well as learning behaviours in manufacturing industries.

Another issue in human resource management is employee turnover and absenteeism. Lack of motivation and satisfaction at work may cause turnover and absenteeism and this will lead to a loss of profitability in any organisation. The relationship between job satisfaction and intention of turnover in an organisation has generated interest among researchers and human resources practitioners. Even though job satisfaction can be viewed as multidimensional, it is important to measure the individual's element of job satisfaction and learning behaviours as well as the environment to examine the remedies of turnover intention. Hellman (1997) suggested that further research is required to identify incentives and strategies for retention of dissatisfied employees. Arokiasamy (2013) found that job satisfaction and job fit are among the causes of employee turnover in manufacturing industries in Malaysia. Employees with less satisfaction will leave their current employer more easily and it is very important that there is good fit between what the employee wants and what the organisation needs. However,

this study only focused on the causes of turnover and did not relate it to any of the motivation theories. Further research is also required to find how and what types of training and learning are related with job satisfaction, under what organisations and with what employee characteristics (Brewer et al., 2008). Therefore, this research may help to fill the gap in the topic of employee motivation, satisfaction and performance in relating the learning behaviours especially in manufacturing industries in Malaysia.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This topic has been a focus of interest to researchers and practitioners in the topic of motivation and job satisfaction over the past decades. They have studied and examined the motivating factors to inspire employees in the workplace, however there are limited specific findings to indicate associations between motivation, job satisfaction and performance. Problems of motivation and job satisfaction have continued to plague many developing countries like Malaysia. Although a number of research studies have been conducted on motivation and job satisfaction primarily in developed countries such as USA and UK, very little study has been done on these issues either in the government or private sectors in Malaysia. There is a need to study motivation and job satisfaction among employees in Malaysia to examine their causes and association.

This study is an attempt to improve the understanding of human contribution to variability in manufacturing industries and the focus area is work motivation and job performance (satisfaction and turnover) and its association with learning behaviours especially employees' skill variety and task identity in workplace. Based on the literature review, it is shown that the study to investigate the association of employees' motivation, satisfaction, performance and learning behaviours particularly in manufacturing industries in Malaysia is relevant to researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

The main aim of this study is to explore work motivation, satisfaction and performance among unskilled and skilled employees in manufacturing industries in Malaysia. This can be achieved through the following objectives:

- (a) To characterise the differences between learning behaviours and each of work motivation, satisfaction and performance of unskilled and skilled employees.
- (b) To identify job characteristics of task identity and skill variety among employees in manufacturing industries.

This study involves the three stages of pilot, experimental and industrial studies. For the pilot study the subjects were Mechanical Engineering students from the Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka and the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. The experimental study was conducted with the participation of technical staff from the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and the industrial study was conducted in selected manufacturing industries in Malaysia. The employees who participated in the industrial study were mostly from supply, automotive and electronics industries with some from service, machining and computing industries.

The study involved the participation of unskilled and skilled employees as defined by working experience in the company and competency doing the assigned task. Unskilled employees had obtained no specific training and the tasks conducted required little independent judgement or little previous experience. Skilled employees participating in the study were capable of working independently and effectively and produced fewer errors in performing the given task.

1.5 Research Questions

The main intention in this research is to explore the motivation, satisfaction and performance between unskilled and skilled employees while doing either simple or complex tasks. The identified research questions are:

Motivation:

- RQ1a *Will doing simple tasks individually by unskilled employees increase their work motivation?*
- RQ1b *Will doing complex tasks individually by skilled employees increase their work motivation?*
- RQ1c *Will doing simple tasks in a group by unskilled employees increase their work motivation?*
- RQ1d *Will doing complex tasks in a group by skilled employees increase their work motivation?*
- RQ1e *Is there any difference between unskilled and skilled employees in their motivation?*

Satisfaction:

- RQ2a *Will doing simple tasks individually by unskilled employees increase their work satisfaction?*
- RQ2b *Will doing complex tasks individually by skilled employees increase their work satisfaction?*
- RQ2c *Will doing simple tasks in a group by unskilled employees increase their work satisfaction?*
- RQ2d *Will doing complex tasks in a group by skilled employees increase their work satisfaction?*
- RQ2e *Is there any difference between unskilled and skilled employees in their satisfaction?*

Performance:

- RQ3a *Will doing simple tasks individually by unskilled employees increase their work performance?*
- RQ3b *Will doing complex tasks individually by skilled employees increase their work performance?*
- RQ3c *Will doing simple tasks in a group by unskilled employees increase their work performance?*
- RQ3d *Will doing complex tasks in a group by skilled employees increase their work performance?*

RQ3e *Is there any difference between unskilled and skilled employees in their performance?*

Motivation – Intention of leaving:

RQ4a *Will doing simple tasks in a group by unskilled employees increase their work motivation and will they have no intention of leaving the task in the future?*

RQ4b *Will doing complex tasks individually by skilled employees increase their work motivation and will they have no intention of leaving the task in the future?*

RQ4c *Is there any difference between unskilled and skilled employees in their work motivation and they have no intention of leaving the task in the future?*

Figure 1.1 shows the research framework 1 for work motivation, satisfaction and performance between unskilled and skilled employees.

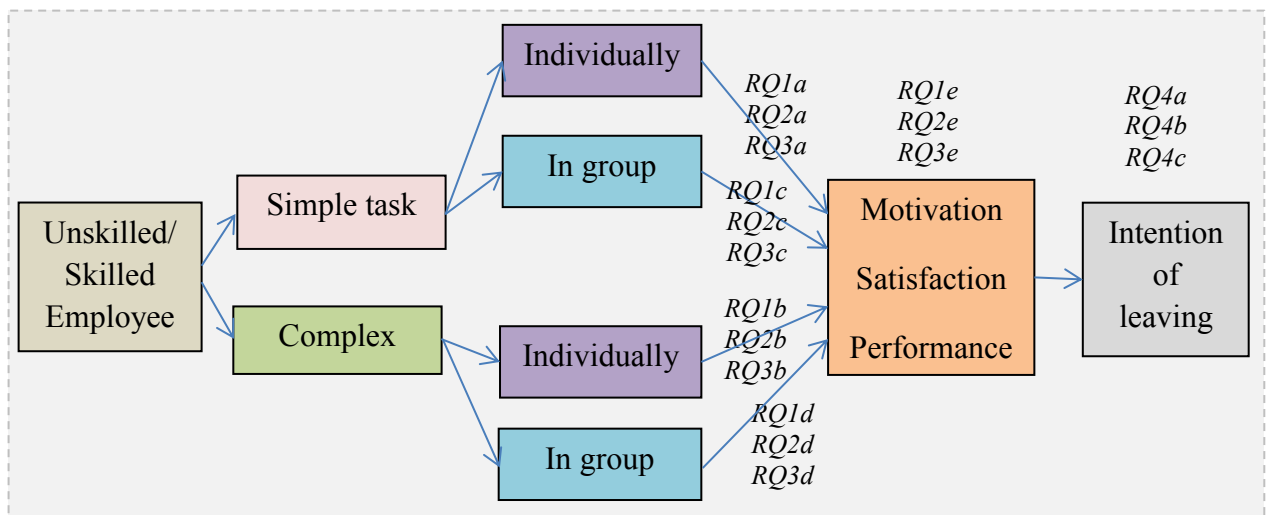


Figure 1.1: Research Framework 1 for unskilled and skilled employees doing simple and complex task individually or in a group

Learning behaviours:

RQ5a *Will learning by doing simple tasks by unskilled employees increase their work motivation, satisfaction and performance?*

RQ5b *Will learning by doing complex tasks by skilled employees increase their work motivation, satisfaction and performance?*

- RQ5c *Will learning by doing simple tasks individually by unskilled employees increase their work motivation, satisfaction and performance?*
- RQ5d *Will learning by doing complex tasks individually by skilled employees increase their work motivation, satisfaction and performance?*
- RQ5e *Is there any difference between unskilled and skilled employees in their learning behaviours?*

Figure 1.2 shows the research framework 2 for learning behaviours between unskilled and skilled employee.

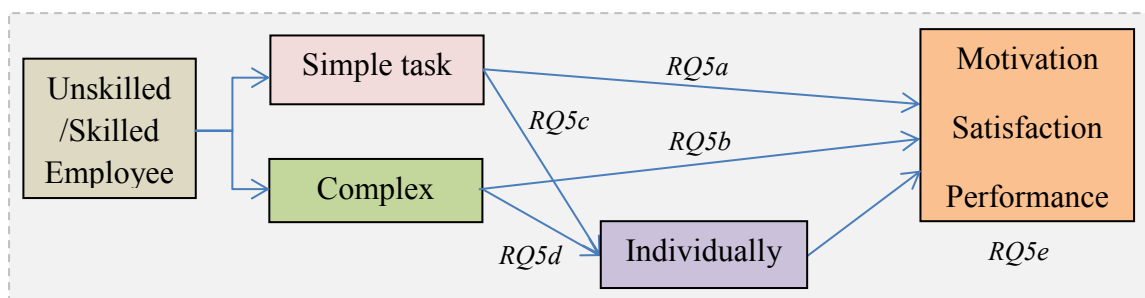


Figure 1.2: Research Framework 2 for learning behaviour between unskilled and skilled employees

1.6 Manufacturing Industries in Malaysia

Malaysia is one of the most developed countries in the ASEAN region. Its economy is mainly dependent on the manufacturing and service sectors. The agricultural and mining sectors are also important to the economy. Malaysia is one of the largest exporters of natural rubber, palm oil, tropical timber, cocoa beans and pepper in the world (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2016). The government of Malaysia has encouraged a comparatively open market-oriented economy and has introduced important changes by encouraging the private sector to take part in many of the projects to develop the country. Manufacturing activities in Malaysia have increased rapidly and also have been successful by improving communication and energy facilities, developing sophisticated industrial areas and giving significant tax relief for the investors in export-oriented activities (Ministry of International Trade and Industry, 2016).

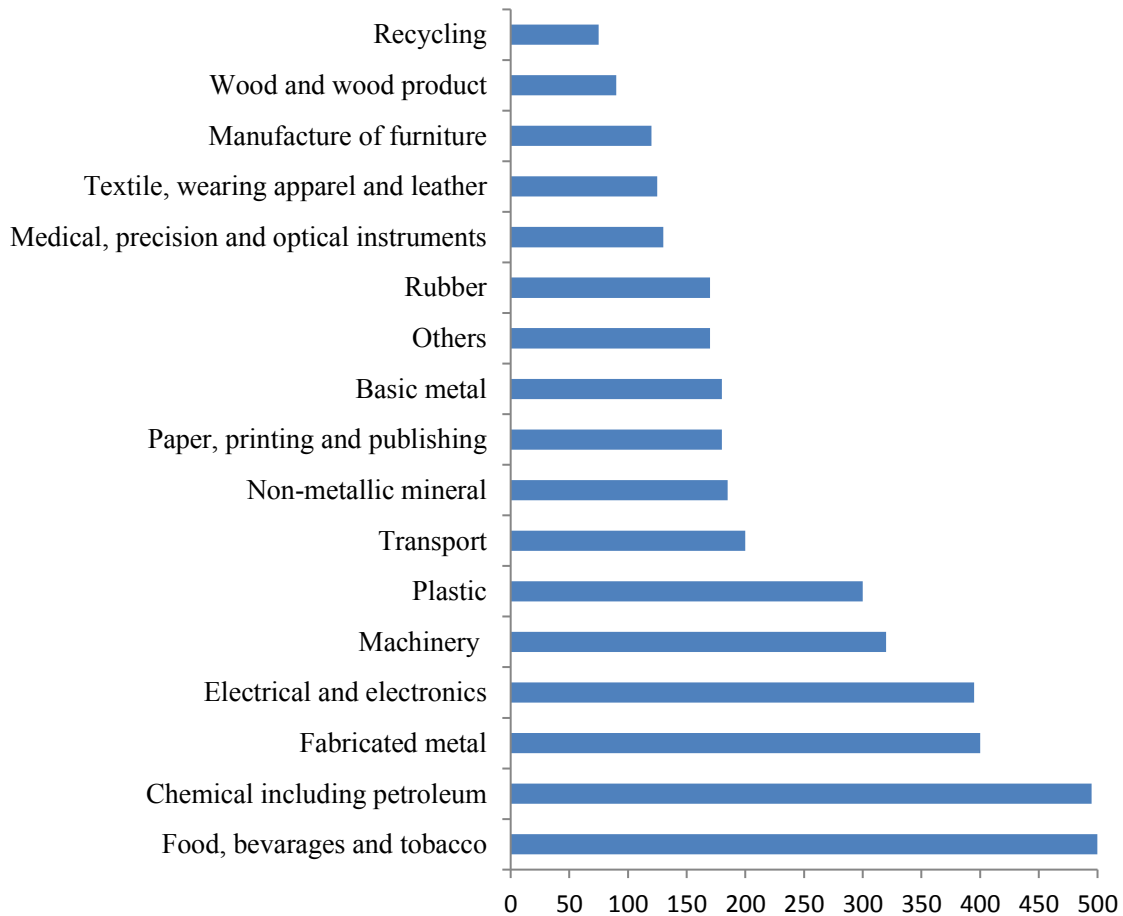


Figure 1.3: Companies in Malaysia (FMM, 2015)

According to the report by Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (2015), the manufacturing industries in Malaysia can be grouped into seventeen categories from the largest food and beverages industries to the smallest recycling industries. The food and beverages sector with about 500 companies forms the biggest group, followed by chemical including petroleum industries also having about 500 companies operating in locations across Malaysia especially in Selangor which is known as the biggest industrial state in Malaysia followed by Johor in the south of Malaysia. The third place goes to electrical and electronics, machinery and plastics industries that form about 300 to 400 companies across Malaysia. The remaining industries in descending order include transport; non-metallic minerals; paper printing and publishing; basic metals; others; rubber; medical and optical instruments; textiles, wearing apparel and leather; furniture; wood (including wood furniture) and recycling (FMM, 2015). Those above listed companies are registered with the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM) and it is believed that there are other small companies that are not listed perhaps due to their very small size (Figure 1.3).