

The Impact of Language Barriers and Discrimination Issues on Work Productivity of Foreign Workers

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the impact of language barriers and discrimination issues on the work productivity of foreign workers. The study was conducted at Sheraton Hotel, Petaling Jaya. A total of 76 questionnaires were completed using an online survey of Google Form. The literature review was conducted to examine the information regarding independent and dependent variables. The findings indicated that language barriers and discrimination issues could affect the work productivity of foreign workers. This study showed that language barriers, discrimination issues, and miscommunication were significantly correlated with the work productivity of foreign workers. All in all, the researchers can conclude that both independent variables can affect the work productivity of foreign workers.

Keywords: Language Barriers, Discrimination Issues, Work Productivity.

Introduction

It has been widely exposed to the world that the level of international immigration is burgeoning lately. The total stock of migrants in OECD countries has surpassed 113 million. In contrast, the stock of migrants in Asia is more than 71 million, surpassing the number of migrants in the European Union (Jordaan, 2018). International migration is increasingly recognized as an important driver of growing inter-connectedness and interdependency globally (International Organization for Migration, 2008). Few studies have been conducted to testify that foreign workers could subsume skills within them as they experience the work for a certain period, which can benefit the industry. By hiring migrant workers, firms can benefit from these attributes in the form of productivity improvements.

Migrants moving into a specific country to look for work have been highly discussed in well-developed and developing countries. Foreign workers coming to the country is nothing new to the locals. It is non-exceptional for Malaysia as a fast-growing country in the high demand of hiring foreign workers. According to the Human Resources Ministry, there are 2.1 million registered migrant workers or what we called as legal foreign workers in Malaysia. Still, however, the number of overstaying illegal foreigners is even more significant, approximately around three million (Pook, 2016). The Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) estimated a more significant number by putting the total number of legal and illegal foreign workers all together at six million (Pook, 2016). There is a high demand for semi-skilled and unskilled workers in the hospitality industry since the total number is rising. The cheaper cost required for foreign workers and surplus demand in labour related to economic growth is the reasons for the rapid increase of foreign workers in Malaysia.

The policy implementation for foreign workers is all below the responsibility of the Immigration Department, which is under the Ministry of Home Affairs. The migrant workers will be examined before importation is allowed. Before this, the employers must forward their recruitment advertisements and be reminded that local workers should be given priority (Othman & Rahim, 2014). The hospitality industry is one of the largest industries that is multiplying worldwide (UKEssays, November 2018). In conclusion, this industry applies to any organization that offers customer service. The hospitality industry has a wide range of businesses which include hotels, restaurants, and resorts. According to Ndiuini and Baum (2021), migrant hotel workers can tap into the workers' cultural capital to improve hotel business performance whilst making meaningful use of their qualifications and skills. The job is usually in contract forms where it is available for a certain period and tends to be long working hours with low salaries, which does not seem attractive to the local population, especially in the developed countries (Poulston, 2009).

Literature Review

Language Barriers

According to the Cambridge dictionary, language consists of sounds, words, and grammar. Language is a communication system that helps people convey important messages and express feelings and knowledge (Ramlan et al., 2018). Two-way communication is essential when dealing with expatriates. However, when there is a language barrier, communication becomes difficult. Language barriers are a common issue when working with foreign workers (Ramlan et al., 2018). Often, the person's way of speaking creates a barrier towards effective communication, not their accent (Javadpour & Samiei, 2017). In addition, the language barrier often impacts work performances due to messages being misinterpreted. Other than that, language barriers sometimes lead to other problems such as delays in work and safety (Valitherm & Rahman, 2014). Foreign workers are having difficulty when talking with other co-workers. Lack of communication may result in low productivity of the worker. To ensure peace and a pleasant working environment, communication plays a significant role in achieving the high productivity of workers (Iqbal, 2014). Valitherm and Rahman (2014) supported and stated that language barriers might lead to other problems such as delays in work and safety.

Discrimination Issues

Discrimination is known as the inadequate and unfair treatment given to someone solely based on their ethnicity, race, or religion from others. Many foreign workers have been employed by

fraud. The definition of discrimination offered by the Declaration of Principles stated that under the principle of equal treatment, it abandons the framework of formal equality, whereby individuals would not be treated indifferently based on their economic, social, political, cultural, or civil life.

Direct discrimination may be categorized as mistreatment of foreign workers. Direct discrimination in Malaysia usually relates to forced labour, where the employer itself abuses foreign workers. According to Ayub et al. (2016), the researchers identified that the conditions of migrant workers often amount to forced labour. None official statistics can be found regarding this issue in Malaysia (Ayub et al., 2016). Forced labour is usually reported in the hospitality industry, where they are forced to work in excessive working hours daily. For instance, according to the president of Malaysia Trades Union Congress (MTUC), Datuk Abdul Halim Mansor, foreign workers are not paid higher during the public holidays or when working overtime. However, they work for 12 hours a day, seven days a week and are given one-off payment (Shah & Yusof, 2018).

Moreover, discrimination happens among recruitment agencies. This agency takes advantage of the power they have over the foreign workers by promising something to the worker in the contract but later breach it. According to Hector (2018), there is a breach of promise or agreement by the employer concerning wages, working conditions and or type of work, harassment, or violation of worker rights. Researchers also agreed that employers often ill-treat foreign workers. Most foreign workers are usually abused and discriminated against by their employer, where they are not paid according to their working hours. Shah and Yusof (2018) supported this, who said that foreign workers are not paid higher during public holidays and when working overtime. Workers should be treated equally despite being locals or migrants (Mohamed, 2017).

Work Productivity

Work productivity means how competent the workers do their job in achieving their goals and delivering goods or services to them. Ismail (2015) expressed that an increase in labour productivity will give the employer, consumers, and the nation advantages. To further understand the role of work productivity, it can be seen through the workers' work performances. Donohoe (2018) said that low work productivity could be evaluated by how long the duration is needed for the worker to do a specific task. This will result in the lower output of goods and services. Low work efficiency may put the company's competitiveness at stake and jeopardize its place in the market if the competitors create more value at a lower cost (Donohoe, 2018; Kamal et al., 2020). As a result, both researchers supported this study, and the result of this study agreed with Donohoe (2018) that it could put the company at stake due to low work efficiency. The workers need to be motivated for the company to achieve their goals.

Development of hypotheses

This section describes the development of the hypotheses that was conducted throughout the research. There are four hypotheses to be discussed: (1) the relationship between language barriers and work productivity; (2) the relationship between discrimination issues and work productivity; (3) the relationship between miscommunication and work productivity; and (4) the relationship between language barriers and discrimination issues on work productivity.

Based on a study conducted by Rubin and Rubin (2011) in the article of Ramlan et al. (2018), 65% of the companies have language barriers problem that existed among the top management as well as the employees, and 40% noted that the work productivity decreased due to language barriers. The impact of language barriers on the work productivity of foreign workers is that they may struggle in expressing their needs or replying to requests from other co-workers if they do not articulate in the primary language used in the workplace (Habas, 2020). Habas (2020) also claimed that language barriers could impact the work productivity of foreign workers. Language barriers will cause low productivity in the workplace. Workers may face high risks of injury due to lack of training and exposure to safety and health as they cannot articulate well in English.

All employees must be treated equally and dignity, whether they are foreigners or locals and all forms of mistreatments are banned by international and domestic legislation (Ali Mohamed, 2017). Supported by the MTUC president, Datuk Abdul Halim Mansor, foreign workers should also be protected under labour laws (Shah & Yusof, 2018). Hence, the impact of this issue is that the foreign workers will be stressed, and there will be decreased satisfaction, commitment, and citizenship behaviour. Nasir (2013) stated that the communication problem among foreign workers is not a new topic in Malaysia. According to the researcher, the rise of foreign workers will create a communication issue between local and foreign workers. Foreign workers have a hard time understanding working instructions, safety rules and safety caution signs which then cause accidents to occur (Mat Nasir, 2013). The research conducted by Trajkovski and Loosemore (2006) showed that the language factor is the leading cause of accidents because foreign workers use a language other than English in the workplace. The researchers also showed that 48.7% of the foreign workers could not comprehend the instructions given to them due to the lack of understanding of the English language. To sum up, all foreign workers must be treated equally by the locals. According to the Malaysian government, they acknowledge that all workers, including foreign workers, are entitled to receive a minimum wage but delaying it will be unjust and discriminatory (Syed Mohamud, 2013).

Methodology

Research Design

This study concentrated on determining the language barriers and discrimination issues towards the work productivity of foreign workers at Sheraton Hotels in Malaysia. Besides that, this study aimed to engage as many respondents as possible and apply a more significant number of the independent variables that will affect the dependent variable. Moreover, the researchers applied the usage of Google Form to obtain the data by circulating it electronically. Data analysis and interpretation take place after the data collection stage. According to Sekaran (2003), the start of deduction reasoning comes from identifying the relevant theoretical framework of the literature, followed by formulating hypotheses and finally making a logical deduction from the results.

Data Collection Process

In the data collection method, data is collected throughout the research. There are two types of data collection used to carry out this research: primary and secondary data. Primary data refers to information obtained firsthand by the researcher according to the purpose of the study (Sekaran, 2003). The researcher gathered primary data using a questionnaire. In addition,

secondary data is obtained from research reports such as journals, textbooks, and articles. Secondary data research aims to gather descriptive information to support decision-making (Sekaran, 2006). The use of primary data is more straightforward and efficient in terms of gaining the information needed. Secondary data, on the other hand, is more cost-effective and well organized. The information can be easily accessible from the internet, such as journals and articles. The questionnaire was distributed via Google Form due to time and money constraints and to increase reachability. Data collection was conducted through a survey questionnaire. All measurements were standardized using a five-point Likert scale, with one being 'strongly disagree' and five for 'strongly agree'. A total of 75 responses were collected from the Google Form platform.

Population and Sample Size

The target population involved in this study consisted of foreign workers working at Sheraton Hotel, Petaling Jaya. The unit analysis of this study is individual. The sampling method used is convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is one of the best ways in getting the respondent's information because it is easier and cost-effective. According to the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2019) data at the Ministry of Home Affairs, more than 37.9% of employees in Malaysia consisted of foreign workers as of June 2019, which then affected the Malaysian economy. We narrowed down the findings into studying a sample and not the whole population to reduce error in collecting data. The sample size is just a part of the primary research process (Hair et al., 2007). According to a well-known theory by Roscoe (1975), a sample size larger than 30 respondents but smaller than 500 respondents is adequate for quantitative research.

Research Instrument

The instrumentation of the questionnaire was divided into five main sections. Section A focused on collecting data on the demographic of the respondents. This section included gender, working experience at current job position, total working hours per day and salary. In section B, measurement of the scale was used based on productivity with point-5 as strongly agree to the least one of point-1 as very disagree. Diep and Balam (2011) said that the perks of using the Likert scale are because it is not complex and easy to use, as cited in Neuman (2002). The reliability of data conducted using this scale is highly valued; hence, making it easier for the authors to interpret the analysis for the credibility it has created for. Section B consisted of an independent variable that focused on the language barrier. Section C consisted of an independent variable that focused on discrimination issues, while Section D consisted of an independent variable that focused on the impact of miscommunication on work productivity. Lastly, section E consisted of an independent variable that focused on the relationship between language barrier and discrimination issues towards work productivity.

Data Analysis

Questionnaires collected were analyzed using SPSS (Version 20). The statistics that the researcher used were descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics is the term given to the analysis of data that helps to describe, show, or summarize the data in a meaningful way. For example, the pattern might emerge from the data. Pearson's correlation analysis was conducted to measure the strength and direction of a linear relationship between X and Y variables.

Result and Analysis

Analysis of Findings

The language barrier was the second part of the questionnaire, which covered as many as four questions. Those four items were used to report and examine the mean score in determining the impact of the language barrier on the work productivity of foreign workers. Below is the mean score of the items.

Table 1:

Mean score for Impact of Language Barriers on Work Productivity of Foreign Workers

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I am comfortable when talking with my superior	76	3.30	1.317
I understand the working instructions that is given to me	76	3.47	1.390
I have opportunities to contribute ideas in discussion	76	3.03	1.366
I am able to make others understand my words	76	3.42	1.268

Referring to Table 1, the second item scored ($M=3.47$) where the respondents were neutral in understanding the working instructions given to them. Next, the fourth item scored ($M\sim 3.47$) where they can make others understand their words. The first item scored ($M=3.30$) where they were comfortable talking to their superior. Finally, the third item was valued neutral ($M\sim 3.03$), where the respondents had the opportunities to contribute ideas in discussion. It can be said that most of the items were neutral. As a result, it can fairly be said that language barriers do not affect much on the working productivity of the foreign workers as the work can still be done if both parties understand each other regardless of the mixed languages.

Table 2:

Mean score for Impact of Discrimination Issues on Work Productivity of Foreign Workers

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The management put their trust in me	76	3.01	1.351
I see improvements in my skills gradually	76	3.39	1.367
I feel appreciated by my superior and colleagues	76	3.46	1.270

Table 2 reveals the highest mean reported for item 3 ($M=3.46$), where the respondents agreed they felt appreciated by their superior and colleagues. The second item showed that the respondents agreed that they could see improvements in their skills ($M=3.39$). Lastly, item 1 had the least mean score of ($M\sim 3.01$) in which the respondents felt the management put their trust in them. Therefore, it can be said that the discrimination issue is equally affecting the work productivity of foreign workers.

Table 3:

Mean score for Impact of Discrimination Issues on Work Productivity of Foreign Workers

Items	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The management put their trust in me	76	3.01	1.351
I see improvements in my skills gradually	76	3.39	1.367
I feel appreciated by my superiors and colleagues	76	3.46	1.270

Table 3 reveals that item 1 had the highest mean with (M= 3.76). It showed that the respondents agreed they know what is expected of them at work. Next, the second-highest mean was (M~ 3.46), in which the respondents agreed the supervisors gave clear instructions and felt appreciated by their superior. Lastly, the least mean score showed that the respondents agreed that the organization applied two-way communication (M~3.26). In conclusion, it can be said that the respondents agreed miscommunication has an impact on the work productivity of the foreign workers as the total mean score had an average scale of 3.49. The research conducted by Trajkovski and Loosemore (2006) showed that the language factor is the main cause of the increase of accidents because foreign workers use a language other than English in the workplace.

Discussion

The first research objective of this study is to determine the impact of language barriers on work productivity. The variable result for this objective is 0.875, which shows that it is good and effective. The result for Pearson Correlation Coefficient is 0.738, which shows a strong positive linear relationship. A prior study conducted by Ramlan et al. (2018) stated that understanding the relationship between language barriers and social identity patterns of an expatriate is important to determine work performance. This shows that the respondents mostly agreed that language barriers somehow play a massive role in the work productivity of the workers.

The impact of discrimination on work productivity shows that the variable for discrimination issues is 0.886. The result is excellent and reliable. As recorded in Pearson Correlation as 0.823, it shows that it has a strong positive relationship. This means discrimination issue does have a significant impact on the working productivity of foreign workers. As supported by the previous researcher (Ali Mohamed, 2017), workers should be treated equally despite being locals or migrants. Similarly, the researcher agreed that facing discrimination causes foreign workers to go through stress, decreasing satisfaction, commitment, and citizenship behaviour (Shah & Yusof, 2018).

Besides, the third research objective is to determine the impact of miscommunication on work productivity. It is found that the variable result is the highest with 0.897, which shows miscommunication on work productivity is a reliable variable. As presented in Pearson Correlation, the result is 0.749, which is a strong positive relationship. This shows that miscommunication could have an enormous impact on work productivity. This finding corresponds to Livesey (2013), who stated that inadequate communication in the workplace is the most crucial factor. It could affect staff productivity which is directly linked to business profits.

The last research objective is to investigate the relationship between language barriers and discrimination issues towards the impact of work productivity of the foreign worker. It is found that the variable result for this objective is 0.839. This means that the variable is acceptable and reliable for the relationship between language barriers and discrimination issues. Moreover, the results in Pearson Correlation stated that it is 0.830, which indicates a strong positive relationship. This shows that the respondents agreed with the variable, saying that language barrier and discrimination issues can impact the work productivity of foreign workers.

Conclusion

The language barrier and discrimination issue have an impact on the work productivity of foreign workers. Foreign workers often get discriminated against by local employers. According to Ayub et al. (2016), the researchers identified that the conditions of migrant workers often amounted to forced labour. In Malaysia, the Employment Act refers to anyone employed in this country, including the foreigners who deserve protection like locals do, as mentioned by the president of Malaysia Trades Union Congress (MTUC), Datuk Abdul Halim Mansor (Shah & Yusof, 2018). Miscommunication often occurs because one party did not understand the other. Miscommunication can lead to a decrease in work efficiency. Low work efficiency may put the company's competitiveness at stake and jeopardize its place in the market if the competitors create more value at a lower cost (Donohoe, 2018).

In brief, the employer should provide training and development programs for the workers. Besides, two-way communication is needed to ensure what has been said is being delivered correctly. The employer should also use simple words and terms. Upper-level management must ensure that the foreign workers receive equal payment according to their jobs. Other than that, foreign workers who cannot understand the Malay or English language should be sent home to their respective countries because of their inability to understand work order. The management must have the ability and skills to interact with foreign workers and ensure that their information is being understood correctly.

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