The Relationship between Occupational Stress, Employee Engagement and Turnover Intention

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Abstract

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This study examined the relationship between occupational stress, employee engagement and turnover intention. Occupational stress was measured through three dimensions namely role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload. Teachers from primary schools were randomly selected as the respondents and asked to complete a questionnaire adopted from previous research with high level of reliability. The findings show that teachers who experience high level of occupational stress had low employee engagement and high turnover intention. All relationships were significantly correlated. A major implication of this study is that the Ministry of Education should seriously consider monitoring the level of stress among teachers and take appropriate actions to help reduce the stress.

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Keywords: Occupational stress; employee engagement; turnover intention.

1. Introduction

Teachers play an important role in building and training future generations toward success. The basic precursor to high levels of student achievement is deep engagement in learning and the teacher's own engagement in teaching. In general, employee engagement is the extent of employee commitment to the organization, amount of hard work and how long they stay with the organization (Schein, 1978).

When employees are engaged, they are emotionally connected to others and cognitively attentive to the direction of the team (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002). Engagement occurs when employees understand what to expect, have the resources to complete their tasks, participate in opportunities for growth and believe their contribution is significant to the organization. Employees tend to quit from their organization when they do not engage in or no longer committed to their work.

The teaching profession has gone through changing levels of value, affection effects and benefits over the years. Occupational stress among teachers will not only affect thems but also students and the learning process. Teaching is among the professions with high levels of stress (Pithers, 1995). The implementation of SBA (school based assessment) and the new Malaysia Education Blueprint along with many policies challenge teachers' ability to teach efficiently and effectively as well as capability to manage in school. The high expectations and greater needs to perform effectively increase occupational stress among teachers as they are not only expected to teach but to shoulder the responsibility of molding and shaping better citizens in the future (Jamil et. al., 2010).

A report by Dinham (1997) stated that 40 percent of teachers' partners felt that teaching-related issues impact on the personal lives of their families. Apparently, many teachers are currently attempting to find a balance between their personal obligations at home and their commitment to teaching. This is one of the reasons why teachers are unable to commit to their work and decide to quit. The loss of knowledge and talent of experienced personnel like teachers is a critical concern in the current era of producing knowledge workers (Delong, 2004). Therefore, it is important to understand the impact of occupational stress on employee engagement and turnover intention among teachers.

2. Literature Review

Occupational stress is the interaction between working conditions and people involved in the workplace, where the work demand exceeds the skills of worker (Randall &Altmaier, 1994). Low levels of stress result in immobility and laziness while an optimal level of stress can motivate employees (Nydegger, 2002), enhance creativity (Griffin, 1990), and result in high performance (Schermerhorn, Hunt & Osbor, 2010). Distress, or high level of stress cause dissatisfaction and loss of spirit in workers (Griffin, 1990), lack of harmony in the workplace (Hubbard, 1995), reduce productivity and result in burnout (Dunham, 1992).

Teachers' stress is a specific type of occupational stress as they experience unpleasant emotions such as tension, frustration, anger and depression due to their job challenges (Kyriacou, 1987). Stress among teachers can be caused by several factors such as work demand, students' problems, school environment, colleague relationship, perceptions by members of society and administration conflict (Detert et. al., 2006; Kyriacou, 2001). These stresses often affect their ability to function effectively (Poornima, 2010) and, sometimes, to the extent of causing burnout (Reddy, 2011). In this study, occupational stress was measured through three dimensions related to their role at school namely; role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload.

Role ambiguity occurs when the employee feels that he or she lacks important information needed to carry out their role effectively (Kahn et. al., 1964). The deficiency of information including supervisory evaluation of individual's work related to opportunities and advancement, responsibility and expectations from their role leads to role ambiguity (Viator, 2001). In Malaysia, teachers' responsibilities are not only limited to the teaching and learning process but also overall development of students, be it academic and non-academic.

Meanwhile, role conflict happens when workers feel that they have to meet more expectations diverging from their original goals (Kahn et al., 1964). There are two types of roles stated by (Kahn et al., 1964) namely sent-role conflict and person-role conflict. Sent-role conflict transpires when workers identify expectations conflict from one or more senders. Person-role conflict happens when workers face conflicts with their own values, needs or abilities. Therefore, role conflict is determined by conflicting demand, incompatible requests from colleagues and unreasonable job pressure (Fenlason & Beehr, 1994).

On the other hand, role overload refers to the burden of magnitude because their role requirement is higher than the employees' expectations of their job (Fogarty et al., 2000). This happens when an employee does not have enough resources to fulfill various roles, which concentrate on commitment, requirement or obligation (Lu & Lee, 2007). In order to increase employees' work efficiency and effectiveness, organizations should be able to control work overload (Fogarty, 1994).

2.1. Employee engagement

Employee engagement is an individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work (Halpin &Winer, 1957). It refers to a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption. Vigor characterized by high levels of energy, readiness to put effort in work, and persistence in a time of difficulties. Dedication refers to being deeply involved in work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride and challenge. Absorption means being fully concentrated on and engrossed in work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties detaching oneself from work. A survey by Henry and English (2012) revealed that employers who supported their employees' well-being benefited from a healthier, more committed, engaged and productive workforce. Employee engagement occurs when employees know what to expect, have the resources to complete their work, participate in opportunities for growth and feedback, and feel that they contribute significantly to the organization.

2.2. Turnover Intention

Turnover intention is defined as the cognitive process of thinking, planning and desiring to leave a job (Mobley, 1982). In the research of applied psychology, organization behavior and management treated turnover intention is rated as one of the most widely studied outcomes of job satisfaction and predictors of actual turnover behavior (Currivan, 1999). Compared to labor turnover that measures the rate of change in the workforce (Abelson, 1987), turnover intention focuses on workers' intention to withdraw from their job or organization, to look for other jobs or career alternatives. Turnover

intention can also be described as the probability of extending the individual's attachment to the occupation or organization. Turnover among teachers in Malaysia is not high due to complicated procedures and high cost of leaving. However, the threat of turnover intention among teachers is critical since it will affect their job performance and satisfaction which, in turn, will affect students' achievement and development.

3. Research Methods

The conceptual framework in this study was constructed to test the relationship between Occupational Stress and Employee Engagement with Turnover Intention as the mediator. The conceptual framework for this study is presented in Fig. 1. A general hypothesis and several specific hypotheses are listed below to measure the relationship as illustrated in the conceptual framework:

General Hypothesis, H1:There is a relationship between occupational stress, employee engagement and turnover intention.

Specific Hypothesis:
    a) H1: There is a relationship between occupational stress and employee engagement.
    b) H1a: There is a relationship between Role ambiguity and employee engagement.
    c) H1c: There is a relationship between Role conflict and employee engagement.
    d) H1b: There is a relationship between Role overload and employee engagement.
    e) H2: There is a relationship between Occupational stress and turnover intention.
    f) H2a: There is a relationship between Role conflict and turnover intention.
    g) H2b: There is a relationship between Role overload and turnover intention.
    h) H2c: There is a relationship between Role ambiguity and turnover intention.
    i) H3: There is a relationship between Employee engagement and turnover intention.
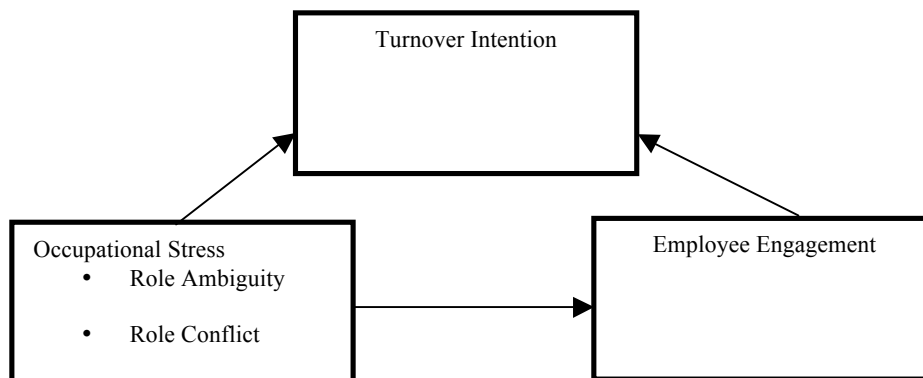

Fig. 1. Conceptual Framework

Occupational Stress items adopted from Glazer and Beehr (2005) had 9 items with 3 items per dimension; role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload. The items focused on the teachers' perception of their role at school. The reliability analysis of occupational stress items is considered high as the Cronbach's alpha for these three dimensions ranged from 0.812 to 0.961. Employee engagement instrument consisted of 12 items about teachers' work climate and culture at school and their perceptions of their engagement with their workplace. The instrument was adopted from Gallup

(2006). The Cronbach alpha obtained for this instrument was 0.815. Meanwhile, turnover intention items adopted from Mary (2014) had 14 items. The Cronbach's alpha for the turnover intention instrument was 0.718, considered as acceptable. All items were measured on a five-point Likert scale with 1 indicating strongly disagree and 5 indicating strongly agree.

3.1. Data and Sample

A questionnaire consisting of four sections; Demographic (A), Occupational Stress (B), Employee Engagement (C) and Turnover Intention (D) were distributed randomly to 170 primary schools teachers in Malaysia. The demographic information of the respondents is given in table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information

Characteristics of respondents	Number of respondent	Percentage
Gender		
Male	68	40
Female	102	60
Age Group		
Baby Boomers	15	8.8
Gen X	79	44.7
Gen Y	76	46.5
Education Level		
SPM	16	9.4
Diploma	49	28.8
Degree	91	53.5
Master	11	6.5
PhD	3	1.8
Teaching Experience (years)		
0-5	63	37.1
6-10	52	30.6
11-15	31	18.2
More than 15	24	14.1

4. Findings and Discussion

The correlations between all variables were illustrated in fig. 2. Occupational stress had a positive relationship with turnover intention and negative relationship with employee engagement. The results were consistent with previous studies. A study by Fairbrother and Warn (2003) stated that the high level of stress in work reduces employee engagement with the organization and increases potential to leave the organization (Chen, Lin & Lieng, 2010; Applebaum et al., 2010). Employee engagement is negatively related to turnover intention since employee engagement significantly correlated to retention of talent, customer service, performance and productivity (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002).
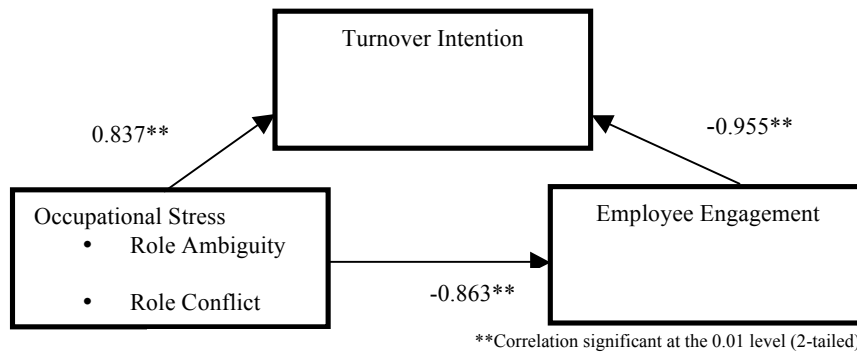
Fig. 1. Correlation between three variables

Table 2 shows the significant correlation every dimension of occupational stress to employee engagement and turnover intention. All hypotheses are accepted. The negative relationship between role ambiguities align with the previous study by Cervoni and Delucia-Waack (2011) which stated that a higher level of role ambiguity leads to a lower level of employee engagement. Meanwhile, the study by Zhu (2013) concurs with this study in which role conflict causes a decline in employee engagement among teachers. Role overload which had a negative relationship with employee engagement aligns with the study by Coetzer and Rothmann (2007).

Table 2. Correlation of occupational stress dimensions with employee engagement and turnover intention

Occupational Stress	Employee Engagement	Turnover Intention
Role Ambiguity	-0.875**	0.910**
Role Conflict	-0.834**	0.867**
Role Overload	-0.873**	0.868**

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

The results of this study revealed that role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload positively related to turnover intention. Role ambiguity might be due to inadequate training, poor communication or a deliberate withholding or distortion of information by co-worker or supervisor that makes them quit their job (Luthans, 1994). Meanwhile, role overload caused decline in performance and can lead to burnout among teachers then increase their intention to quit. A research by (Bettencourt and Brown, 20030; Harris et. al., 2006) has found that role conflict is related to employee attitudes, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intention and employee engagement, thus, consistent with our findings.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between the occupational stress, employee engagement and turnover intention of primary school teachers. The result of this research study shows that an important and significant relationship exists between occupational stress, employee engagement and turnover intention. Consistent with prior research, occupational stress was found to

negatively correlate with overall employee engagement, as well as role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload, but occupational stress was found to positively correlate with overall turnover intention, as well as role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload. Besides that, employee engagement was found negatively correlated with turnover intention.

The Ministry of Education should be more concerned about the level of stress experienced by teachers, as teaching is a demanding task that requires full commitment every day both mentally and spiritually. It appears to be a professional necessity for teachers to be emotionally committed to their work, since without this emotional connection, teachers face constant danger of being stressed out in an increasingly intense work environment.

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