Humanising Working Environment for Sustainable Job Satisfaction: A Case Study of Teaching Engineers in a Malaysian Technical University

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Abstract

Studies have shown that the job satisfaction of employees is essential. Moreover, high job satisfaction often relates to better productivity in the organization. Nevertheless, studies have shown that the organizational context plays a vital role in employees' job satisfaction. This study aims to examine the effect of the working environment on the job satisfaction of teaching engineers working in a technical university in Malaysia. This study was conducted to investigate the themes of working environment, which affects job satisfaction and, in return, affects the work performance of teaching engineers in the university. This is a qualitative study conducted utilizing focus-group discussions with 20 teaching engineers, divided into three sessions. The discussions were recorded and transcribed by thematic analysis. As a result, five themes were identified: (a) job promotion, (b) benefits, (c) salary, (d) organizational structures, and (e) working relationships. Overall, teaching engineers express their satisfaction with their jobs but add that job promotion is a factor that requires the most improvement. In conclusion, this study provides an insight into the issues and concerns faced by teaching engineers. Furthermore, it presents the best practices and suggestions to boost job satisfaction, contributing to understanding the working life of teaching engineers in the university.

Keywords— Grounded theory, job satisfaction, teaching engineers, working environment

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is swiftly developing globally and urgently needs a technical and engineering workforce at differing levels, especially technology and engineering. To meet the demands, the government has emphasized technical and vocational education and training (TVET) to produce more Knowledge workers (K-Workers) [1]. In 2011, four Malaysian public universities started to offer engineering technology programs to support the TVET agenda. These universities are grouped in a cluster known as the Malaysian Technical University Network (MTUN) [2]. It is a cluster of public technical universities that aids in technical and technology programs, having the sole purpose of teaching and preparing skilled human resources to contribute to its prospects. These clusters currently have only five universities in Malaysia, one of them being UTeM.

Universiti Teknikal Melaka Malaysia, or the Technical University of Malaysia Malacca, is a higher education establishment established on the 1st of December 2000 under the University and University College Act 1971. It is widely regarded as the first technical public university in Malaysia and the 14th public university listed in Malaysia. It has had many local as well as overseas admission since its establishment. It

was initially known as Kolej Universiti Teknikal Kebangsaan Malaysia (KUTKM) but had since undergone a rebranding and was given a new name on the 1st of February 2007, the term now known as UTeM. There are three campuses: the main campus, the city campus, and the technology campus. UTeM also houses eight faculties and two learning centers specializing in engineering, engineering technology, ICT, and technology management disciplines, which is why the university is categorized as an MTUN university.

Despite being new, UTeM has progressively produced quality students over the years. Regardless, academic staff in the establishment have expressed their concerns regarding the working environment. Like every other university in the country, this university strives to be one of the best. This can only be achieved if the work productivity of the university is boosted. Out of the eight faculties in UTeM, two are technical faculties, the Faculty of Electrical and Electronic Engineering Technology (FTKEE) and the Faculty of Mechanical and Manufacturing Engineering Technology. These faculties comprise academic staff, such as lecturers, professors, senior lecturers, associate professors, and teaching engineers. However, an essential academic staff that seems to be overlooked by many is the teaching engineers. Teaching engineers are considered the backbone of the technical faculties.

Teaching Engineers

Teaching engineers or jurutera pengajar are professionals brought into the university after working in the industrial sector for five years or more. According to the universities, teaching engineers are also called Vocational Training Officers or Pegawai Latihan Vokasional (PLV). Despite the difference in name, they are the same thing, with similar scope and schemes. Most teaching engineers possess an industrial qualification in terms of degree and industrial experiences of more than five years and are associated with government and non-government boards of engineers. Initially, they were placed in the engineering faculty but were

then transferred to the engineering technology faculty.

The transfer was made because teaching engineers possess industrial experience and are deemed appropriate to create the syllabus. Higher education must develop practical teaching competencies with excellent pedagogical practices and instructional qualities to ensure quality teaching [3]. According to the respondents, one of the main requirements of a teaching engineer is having industrial experience and a minimum degree-level education, emphasizing the former. Most teaching engineers would have to manage many practical and lab sessions, and having prior industrial knowledge would be beneficial. The job description of teaching engineers mainly focuses on the faculty labs, technical programs and curriculum, and industrial networking. The figure below depicts the job scope of teaching engineers.
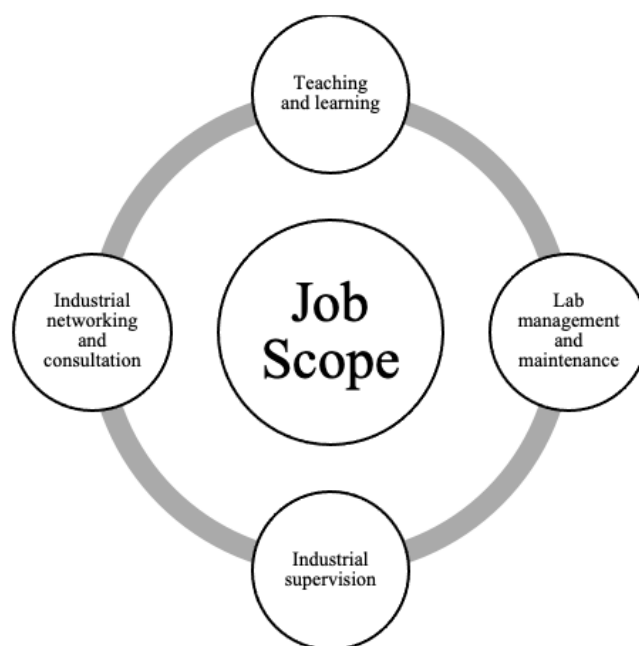

Fig 1 The job scope of teaching engineers

Therefore, it could not be denied that these academics are fundamental, and their contribution and skills should be well regarded. Hence, the working environment of the university must be looked upon to ensure sustainable job satisfaction for the teaching engineers. This study aims to understand how the work environment affects the job

satisfaction of teaching engineers by providing insights into the issues and concerns faced by them. The study also seeks to determine the best practices of the work environment that can be utilized or have been utilized to boost job satisfaction amongst the teaching engineers. This study will focus on a technical university in Malaysia and discuss the various themes of the working environment while also discussing the improvements that have been and can be made to ensure the satisfaction of teaching engineers and boost the productivity of the educational establishment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Job satisfaction is an orientation of employees' emotions towards their workplace role [4]. Work has been done to understand the relationship between the working environment and job satisfaction worldwide in different contexts. Several studies have examined the relationship between employees' job satisfaction and employee performance [5][6][7]. All these studies prove one thing in common: employee satisfaction depends on the working environment. Therefore, the working environment is one of the most crucial factors influencing employees' satisfaction and motivation.

The working environment is defined as the designated area provided by the organization for the employees to achieve their goals [8]. Organizational and physical factors are the stimulus for tasks and activities that influence employees' performance [9]. Therefore, the employees' productivity is determined excessively by their work environment. Consequently, job satisfaction plays a significant factor among academic staff in the educational establishment, resulting in differing organizational behaviors and mood changes at work [10].

There are many types of research done by researchers who believe that job satisfaction is related to job promotion opportunities, and there exists an association between promotion and job satisfaction [11]. Furthermore, another study found that work satisfaction is linked to prospects for promotion [12]. Hence, it could

not be denied that promotion is an essential aspect of an employee.

Increasing fringe benefits would improve employee performance and induce higher organizational levels of commitment. Wages and other benefits arbitrarily affect lecturers' work motivation [13]. Employees are given "benefits" to improve worker satisfaction and workplace engagement.

Financial aspects, especially salary, are essential for other variables (working conditions, employment security, autonomy) because each employee desires a livelihood to help their family [14]. Therefore, pay and work performance have always had a good relationship, impacting job and organizational behavior.

Organizational structures allow for discovering possible organizational activities because the parts are drawn with names and positions of every level of leadership, duties, and responsibilities [15]. Here, communication is also crucial to ensure smooth organizational flow. It is said that communication can lead to better performance, resulting in a good relationship [16]. Organizational communication also affects the organization's satisfaction, commitment, and trust.

Having a relationship with your superior and peers can lead to job satisfaction [17]. Many employees find solace in working at a place where they can learn and acquire new skills [18]. Every employee also needs to feel valued or respected, which is the focal point of every human interaction [19]. Respect is regarded as one of the most critical entities for employees in an organization.

Methodology

Twenty (20) teaching engineers in the technical faculty are chosen for this study. These academics have worked years in the working industries and have more insights into the workplace. Initially, the faculty deans were notified of this study. Once their approval was given, the selection of participants was made at the behest of the faculty. Once done, they will be contacted via phone, email, or in person. The participants were provided with a personal

information letter (a letter where participants must fill out basic information) and a letter of approval (to ensure they approve of themselves being in the focus group discussion, which also explains the interview). The focus group discussion was conducted on the chosen participants in three sessions throughout the day. In addition, they were provided with verbal and written information regarding the study.

Table 1 Focus group discussion information.

Sessions	Participants
1	6
2	7
3	7
TOTAL	20

A team of graduate students of varying faculties with experience conducting qualitative research served as helpers to discuss. The primary researcher is the leader who conducts interviews. Two students worked as a team; one set up the recording equipment, and another photographed the sessions. The discussions were recorded with a voice recorded with permission from the participants. Once each session completes, the data is transcribed verbatim. To compensate for the participants' time, they were provided with food and beverages after each session.

This study utilizes the Grounded Theory approach, a method to create a theory. The approach gathers, synthesizes, analyzes, and conceptualizes qualitative data to construct a valid theory. The sampling procedure used in this research is theoretical sampling, which is gathering, coding, and simultaneously studying data to create a theory. This study involves a researcher picking well-known and experienced participants in the phenomenon under study. The researcher would create the sampling population through their thoughts and comprehension of the collected and analyzed data [20]. This study also follows the Constructivist paradigm, whereby the experience and reflection of participants are taken into consideration. Since the research method used to collect data is a focus group

discussion, it will allow the researcher to have a plethora of data that can be utilized.

After each focus group discussion session, the data collected will be transcribed verbatim. Transcription is essential as it builds theoretical sensitivity. Theoretical sensitivity is the need for being sensitive over what data are crucial in building the grounded theory [21], brings the researcher closer to the obtained data, and allows the researcher to critique and improve the interview procedure. Each completed interview transcript will be checked at least twice for any mistakes, such as misspelled words or acronyms. The collected data will also be viewed through the preliminary data analysis. Researchers skim the data repeatedly to figure out the initial pattern, categories, concepts, themes, and ideas of the study.

For this study, an adequate number of participants will be interviewed to get a clear illustration of how the working environment affects the teaching performance of the teaching engineers. An appropriate sample size is obtained once data saturation occurs. Theoretical saturation happens when no new or relevant perceptions regarding a specific class exist, and the relationships between the classes are well defined and validated [22].

Results and Discussion

The overall discussions with these teaching engineers revealed five main themes regarding the working environment which affects job satisfaction: (a) job promotion, (b) salary, (c) benefits, (d) organizational structure, and (e) working relationship. The table below depicts the number of participants who spoke on each theme by session.

Table 2 Total participants for each theme of the working environment.

Themes of Working Environment	Sessions			TOTAL
	1	**2**	**3**	
Job Promotion	5	5	6	16
Benefits	4	5	5	14
Salary	4	4	5	13
Organizational Structures	3	4	2	9

Working Relationship	3	2	2	7

Table 3 below presents the descriptive words and terms that participants associated with the themes of the working environment.

Table 3 Words associated with the themes of the working environment.

Job Promotion	Career path, service scheme, service grade, career prospect, work experience, upgrade, advancement, progress, achievable and exciting scheme, circular imposition, ministry, promotional period, key performance index, criteria, protocols, requirements, fast-track
Benefits	Advantage, gains, perks, privileges, aids, help, pensions, packages, extra, insurance, allowance, loans, further studying opportunity, study leaves, scholarship, grants, paid leave, postgraduate degree
Salary	Income, pay, money, cash, bonus, compensation, finance, increment, pay raise, financial burden
Organizational Structures	Hierarchy, management, flow of communication, administration, authority, university, complexity, workflow, head of department, organizational chart
Working Relationship	Seniority, respect, connection, bond, friendly, committee meeting, interaction, involvement, brother-sister, cooperation, acknowledgement, recognition, gratitude, work dynamics, partner

During the focus group discussions and semi-structured in-depth interviews, the respondents identified the themes of the discussion. According to Table 2, the theme spoken about the most was job promotion, purporting a more significant concern amongst teaching engineers. This concern is evident due to the notable changes implemented, which changed the course of the career of teaching engineers. In addition, Table 2 highlights how some of the themes were described positively and negatively, signifying concerns and issues highlighted by the respondents. The themes are further discussed below.

Job Promotion

Job promotion was brought up most often by the respondents. The respondents mention that job promotion has been an issue for them for a long time. The job promotion scheme has had a major revamp, completely changing the promotional period from one service scheme to another. The change was a circular move imposed by the Public Service Department of Malaysia (JPA), which had subsequently made it more difficult for them to be promoted. There also exists partiality whereby teaching engineers are deemed unqualified to be promoted, despite achieving the required key performance index (KPI) and having adequate working experience. Their promotional scheme differs from lecturers, who can quickly get promoted while teaching engineers to undergo numerous procedures and protocols. This was mentioned by one of the respondents:

The promotion period for us teaching engineers is unreasonable; we have to wait approximately 13 years to get to the second grade. Even with enough KPI, a teaching engineer has to go through a long process. It is not time-based like lecturers, where one automatically gets promoted after a certain period. This has proven quite demotivating for all of us.

The respondents felt that promotion plays an essential role in job satisfaction. Moreover, a study shows that job promotion affects employee performance [23]. Hence, it could not be denied that promotion is an essential aspect of an employee, and the respondents frequently voice the circular imposition that changes the job promotion path in almost all sessions.

Benefits

Teaching engineers are usually provided with many benefits such as job security, bonuses, healthcare plans, leaves, pensions, and allowances. However, one perk that is often mentioned is further studying opportunities. While the higher education system has policies

that encourage all higher education institutions to provide tertiary education, the respondents said teaching engineers are not allowed further study. A respondent stated that teaching engineers are not encouraged to further study due to a lack of allocation from the university despite being considered academics. In addition, there are a lot of processes and formalities to undertake, which is deemed tedious. They also will have to do so independently and are not provided with any financial aid. On the other hand, lecturers benefit from doing so with added study leave and allowances. This issue has compelled many to leave the university to study further and become lecturers. As stated by a respondent who has been with the faculty for sixteen years:

Further studying benefit is not encouraged and not allocated to teaching engineers. Even though we are considered under the academic category, having a similar workload and job scope as lecturers, we still cannot further study. Even if we want to, we need approvals from many stakeholders, and there are many formalities, no study leaves, and we also have to do it on our own time and money. Due to this, we have considered shifting to other universities to pursue our studies and become lecturers.

Overall, the importance of education and continuing education affects an individual's present profession and entire working life. Hence, providing the opportunity to study further is a must for all and was also considered a factor that affects the job satisfaction of teaching engineers here.

Salary

Salary is a significant factor in an employee's work and is an equally crucial factor. The respondents feel that their salary is unreasonable compared to their work. As mentioned before, teaching engineers focus on managing labs and tutorials. However, the respondents cite that they are also made to do more, such as conduct lectures and regulate subjects, yet are not provided with reasonable and equal pay compared to lecturers, albeit with

almost similar job scope. Thus, there exists a disparity in the salary of both academics. According to one study, if an employee receives low salaries, it would cause profound upheavals [24]. Respondent 11 stated:

In general, we do not have any issues regarding our salary. However, we feel that it is not worth the amount of work we do here. We are doing lecturer duties in terms of job scope, but we get paid differently. We honestly would not mind doing much work if we get paid more, but that is not how it is here.

Many studies have shown that salary is the most important indicator of employee work satisfaction [25][26]. Hence, it is only fitting that teaching engineers are adequately compensated for the amount of work they do.

Organizational Structures

Organizational structure is a mechanism whereby members of an organization or community are classified according to their respective positions or authority. Overall, teaching engineers felt that the organizational structure of the faculty where they work is intricate and complex. A respondent highlights mismanagement, stating that many positions, such as the subject coordinator, are being helmed by teaching engineers. The team of staff led by them is all senior lecturers who have higher credibility and experience. They added that by right, those senior lecturers should lead while teaching engineers assist. A lot of the work done by all levels is given by teaching engineers, with a respondent stressing that it is always them who do the most work, causing job dissatisfaction to occur. A teaching engineer stated:

Teaching engineers also have to be subject coordinators, which technically should be a lecturer's job. They have the skills and experience which would only seem right. Not only that, the structure of the subject coordination team itself is very mismanaged. There are a few academics for a team, but the leader is teaching engineers. The ones below are usually senior lecturers or professors. This

does not feel right to us at all. Even at the committee level, the teaching engineers are almost always picked to do the job. Nearly every committee's position is being held by us, even if it is not our job scope.

The respondents have spoken about how things work here in the faculty and raised concerns about the flow of communication. Communication is crucial, and it plays a significant role in an organization. Organizational communication is a complex process that includes communication methods, networks, and channels [27]. They were steadfast in stating how the whole charade of teaching engineers managing senior lecturers should not happen anymore. Hence, the organizational structure of an organization is a factor that impacts job satisfaction.

Working Relationship

Working relationships are distinct interpersonal relationships with significant consequences for the people involved and the organizations they operate and grow. In teaching engineers, some respondents add that they are not acknowledged or respected for their work here in the university. They feel that they are sometimes looked down on in the academic community. The respondents also mentioned that they expect recognition. One respondent highlights a lack of recognition, stating that they are only recognized as lab assistants, despite being more than that.

We feel that many staff and students in the university are not aware of teaching engineers. It is rather unacceptable when other faculty or lecturers do not know about us. It feels like discrimination, especially in faculty meetings, where you can somehow sense it. Not only that, there are times when they consider us merely as lab assistants, which we are not. We not only handle labs, but we also handle almost everything. So it feels like a downgrade when they consider us as only the people who work in the lab.

Many times, the teaching engineers only demand respect from other academic staff. They usually feel that their voices are sometimes submerged by other higher-ranking academics, making it difficult to voice their opinions. The respondents also identified a lack of recognition solely based on the qualification and experience of teaching engineers. Recognition has been identified as a highly successful motivating tool, with notable effects on the employee's work satisfaction and success [28].

Discussion

Overall, the qualitative study has provided empirical evidence on the themes discussed regarding the work environment that impacts job satisfaction. Based on the themes determined to influence the working environment among teaching engineers in UTeM, a theoretical model has been built, suggesting their relationship. Figure 3 depicts the model made.
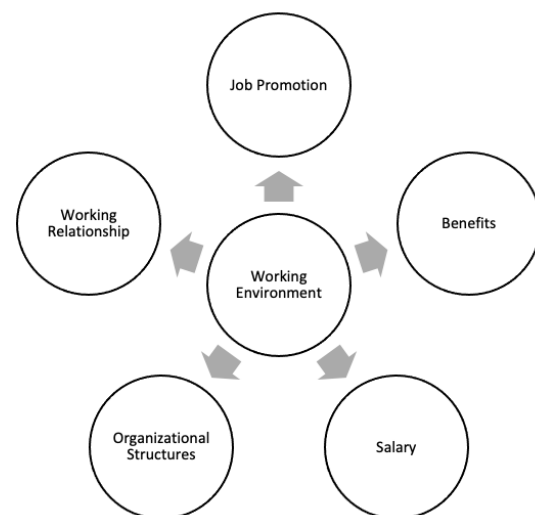

Figure 3. Theoretical Framework of Working Environment

The study has somewhat highlighted all significant issues faced by the teaching engineers. While the respondents primarily discuss their problems, they have also provided some insights and suggestions to improve the working environment. On the theme of job promotion, the teaching engineers suggest that the job promotion scheme be thoroughly revised and time-based. This revision meant that promotion is guaranteed, as long as it checks on all the requirements. Not only that, but the respondents also wished for

standardization and allocation for job promotion and hoped that the ministry would reconsider the impact of implementing the circular. On the theme of benefits, the teaching engineers wish to study further and had hoped that the university would consider the recommendations of the teaching engineers. Providing the opportunity to study further is a must for all. Teaching engineers should also be provided with benefits and motivation to study further. Some examples of benefits that can be given are paid study leave and sponsorship to study further. Not only that, but the respondents also wish that teaching engineers be acknowledged as academics and given equal benefits such as lecturers, which would mean a restructuring of the job scheme for teaching engineers. On the theme of salary, the respondents suggest that the pay scheme of teaching engineers be made equal or considerable to the pay scheme of lecturers and are provided with compensation and bonuses from time to time to boost motivation. Providing a compensation plan that inspires and enables employees to stay for extended periods should also be made, as it helps recruit, maintain, and please the employees [29].

On the theme of organizational structure, the respondents stated that task delegation needs to be improved. Hence delegating the work and position among qualified academics would be beneficial. The overall hierarchy and organizational structure need to have a proper redo to ensure a balance. Also, providing an organizational chart that clarifies the hierarchy and communication channels would be advantageous. It is easier to comprehend the complicated role of directing an efficient organization until one realizes a link between the processes taking place within it. On the theme of the workplace relationship, the focus of respect is highlighted by the respondents. To achieve harmony between their aspirations and the university's goals and maintain their morale, the university must reward and appreciate these teaching engineers [30]. The respondents mention that teaching engineers should be respected and acknowledged by other academic staff. One way to do that is by allowing the

management or higher authority to listen to their opinions or insights and make them feel welcomed.

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