



EXPLORING THE FACTORS AFFECTING QUALITY OF WORK LIFE AMONG MILLENNIAL ACADEMIC STAFF IN MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES



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ABSTRACT

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The article aims to explore factors that affects the quality of work life (QWL) among millennial academic staff in Malaysian public universities. Qualitative approach using semi-structured interview was conducted on ten millennial academic staff from four public universities in Malaysia to provide an in-depth explanation on the important factors that affect their QWL. The data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings identified that factors such as heavy workload, inadequate facilities, lack of advanced technology, leaders that provide less care on welfare, as well as students' issue could affect the ability of the millennial academics to achieve a good QWL. On the other hand, other factors such as flexibility, supportive colleagues and job security help to ease their working life, hence, making their job more meaningful. The present study generates a deeper understanding of the QWL factors specific to the academics from millennial generation, thus indicating the importance of recognizing generational differences in QWL. The implication of this study is expected to facilitate the design and implementation of appropriate strategies to decrease the academics' work stress, increase their job satisfaction and overall QWL.

Contribution/ Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature by presenting an in-depth exploration of the factors affecting quality of work life (QWL) specific to the academics from the millennial generation. This study is one of the very few studies which have investigated the QWL using qualitative approach in the Malaysian context.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recent studies have shown that stress among academic staff had risen due to the change and development in the higher education sector (Shin and Jung, 2014; Ismail and Noor, 2016). Work stress, if not managed effectively, could impact the quality of work life (QWL) of the academic staff (Hans *et al.*, 2015), decrease their productivity and lead to negative repercussion on student's learning and achievement (Phillips *et al.*, 2007; Banerjee and Mehta, 2016). Thus, QWL is an important subject to focus on as high quality of work life is a main factor that contributes to a high quality learning environment and high quality students. When an academic staff leads a high quality

working life, it will leave a positive impact on the organization in terms of work quality, performance level and work effectiveness (Hong *et al.*, 2010; Shahbazi *et al.*, 2011). Previous studies have identified various factors as contributing keys to an effective quality work life including work environment, job security, relationship and teamwork, training and development, benefit and compensation, facilities, job satisfaction, work autonomy, adequacy of resources and work-family interface (Casio, 1998; Edwards *et al.*, 2009; Zare *et al.*, 2012; Colichi *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, it is imperative for an organization to identify relevant factors that can affect their employees' QWL and ensure that these factors are taken care of effectively. It is also important to note that the impact of work organization on individuals' QWL may be different due to demographic differences (Gupta and Hyde, 2013; Parveen *et al.*, 2017). Generational differences for example, affect the perception of employees regarding their QWL (Lai *et al.*, 2012; Nambiyar, 2014). Lai *et al.* (2012) for instance, found that Millennial workers will experience more decrease in their QWL as compared to Generation X when their workload gets heavier. Meanwhile, Nambiyar (2014) reported that Millennial employees value job security more than challenging job, and prefer flexible work arrangement to settle their tasks and goals. Considering the specific characteristics possessed by employees from different generation, the present study attempts to explore the factors that affect the quality of work life among Millennial academics in Malaysian public universities.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Sirgy *et al.* (2001) QWL is related to employee satisfaction with a variety of needs through resources, activities, and outcomes stemming from participation in the workplace. Therefore, need satisfaction resulting from workplace experiences contributes to job satisfaction and satisfaction in other life domains. Swamy *et al.* (2015) on the other hand, defined QWL as an extent to which an employee is satisfied with personal and working needs through participating in the workplace while achieving the goals of the organization. It is regarded as an indicator of overall working experience of an employee in an organization which emphasize on work environment that could increase the employee's wellness and satisfaction (Jaiswal, 2014).

Many factors have been studied and found to impact the quality of work life of employees in an organization. Walton (1973) developed a quality of work life model which involved eight measuring factors, namely adequate and fair compensation, safe and healthy working condition, career growth opportunity, constitution in work organization, social relevance of working life, a total life space, social integration in work organization and development of human capacities. Hackman and Oldham (1976) on the other hand, emphasize on the structure and organization of work, where work environment that is able to fulfil employees' personal needs is expected to contribute to an excellent QWL. Sirgy *et al.* (2001) in their study, found seven important QWL dimensions based on different needs namely health and safety needs (protection from ill health and injury at work and outside of work, and enhancement of good health), economic and family needs (pay, job security, and other family needs), social needs (collegiality at work and leisure time off work), esteem needs (recognition and appreciation of work within the organization and outside the organization), actualization needs (realization of one's potential within the organization and as a professional), knowledge needs (learning to enhance job and professional skills) and aesthetic needs (creativity at work, personal creativity and general aesthetics). Prior studies on quality of work life have also been done in different kind of context. Rose *et al.* (2006) for example, reported career satisfaction, career achievement and career balance as the main contributors to QWL among managers in Malaysia. Meanwhile, Nowrouzi (2013) found five important factors which include workplace stress, relationships with colleagues, changes in care delivery and model of care, and demands for resources as significant for nurses' quality of work life. Edwards *et al.* (2009) investigated QWL among staff in higher education institutions and found factors such as job satisfaction, general well-being, home-work interface, work stress, work control and working condition as the affecting factors. Lanctôt *et al.* (2012) found structural and physical aspects of job (working tasks, working conditions, working environment, and organizational management), in addition to interpersonal and intrapersonal

aspects (having sense of belonging to the enterprise, having the feeling of being a good worker, establishing relationships with co-workers, and establishing relationships with supervisor) as determinants for QWL specifically for employees with severe mental disorders.

A number of studies have focused specifically on the quality of work life among university lecturers. Winter *et al.* (2000) for instance, found that features such as role clarity, motivating job characteristics, and low levels of self-estrangement lead to positive QWL among Australian academics while negative QWL features included role overload, low levels of job feedback, and limited opportunities to influence university decision making. Additionally, Mohamed and BedelKhalif (2017) reported that general well-being, job satisfaction and working condition are impacting QWL among university lecturers in Somalia. Meanwhile, De Paula and Boas (2017) found that academic productivity, excess of administrative work and bureaucratic activities as well as inadequate working condition affect directly the quality of working life among professors in public universities in Brazil. Based on these studies, QWL can be seen as a multi-dimensional concept with various factors regarded as significant, as the variables are different according to the context studied. As suggested by Gupta and Hyde (2013) and Parveen *et al.* (2017), the impact of work organization on QWL varies according to individual differences such as in terms of age, income experience and education. Therefore, research on assessing the factors affecting QWL among Millennial academic staff in higher learning institutes is vital in order to improve their QWL. While many studies on QWL were mostly conducted in the western countries, there is still a lack of exploration of this concept in developing countries (Sinha, 2012; Farid *et al.*, 2015). In Malaysia, empirical studies regarding QWL among academic staff in universities are still lacking (Farid *et al.*, 2015). Current studies on QWL among academic staff in Malaysia are still restricted and many of them were using quantitative approach (Siron *et al.*, 2012; Narehan *et al.*, 2014; Farid *et al.*, 2015; Ramos *et al.*, 2015; Abdullah *et al.*, 2018). In Malaysia, one of the key focus in the country's Education Blueprint (Higher Education), 2015-2025 is "Talent Excellence", which aims to attract, recruit and retain the best talents among the academic community at the higher education institutes, especially the younger academics. Attention on young employees such as the Millennials is very important as employee retention has become a prevalent issue among this generation (Aruna and Anitha, 2015). Millennials have their own work values and expectations (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008) and therefore, it is very important for university's management to identify important factors that can improve the quality of work life of academic staff from this generation.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research is carried out under the interpretivist philosophy. Interpretivism as a research paradigm provides a deep insight into "the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" Schwandt (1994). Therefore, this approach enables researchers to understand the experience of people from their point of view, and in this context, the millennial academics in order to gain an in-depth understanding of their working life experience. As many studies related to quality of work life in Malaysia mainly adapted the quantitative approach, this study employed qualitative method using semi-structured interview to generate a deeper understanding on the factors affecting the millennial academics' quality of work life.

The use of qualitative method is beneficial in gaining an understanding about the aspect that drives peoples' behavior and their underlying values (Yauch and Steudel, 2003; Choy, 2014) as well as generating thick description of the social actors in their natural setting (Denzin and S., 2003). A semi-structured interview was chosen due to the need to focus on specific topics and issues. As suggested by Rubin and Rubin (1995) the conversation will be initiated by the interviewer by introducing the topic and will be followed with particular questions as guidance for a further discussion. Using semi-structured interview, this study not only examined the factors frequently mentioned in previous literatures, but also identified elements that are specific to the context of the present study. A total of ten academic staff from four public universities in Malaysia were selected as respondent. Purposive sampling was conducted to select respondents for interview session.

These respondents consisted of Millennial academic staff (born between 1980-1994) with PhD, considering their heavy workloads and responsibilities in terms of teaching, supervising, research and publication. The respondents consist of 4 males and 6 females from four public universities in Malaysia. The interviewees for this research were selected by personal contact and recommendation. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 90 minutes. The interviews were audio-taped and the data obtained were transcribed *verbatim* soon after every interview to produce fewer error. The findings were analysed manually to determine the themes of the study using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyse and record themes into data. A number of important issues and concerns have been identified emanating from the data. The frequency of occurrence of each theme within the data set established the strength of each theme. The findings of this study were presented according to the themes and the interviews extracts were included to illustrate the important themes emerged in the study.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Demographic Profile of the Interview Participants

Table-1. Demographic Profile of the Interview Participants.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Length of Service
Yusof	35	Male	5 years
Husin	37	Male	10 years
Rashid	35	Male	7 years
Nizam	36	Male	10 years
Kamalia	35	Female	6 years
Rachel	32	Female	5 years
Miza	37	Female	12 years
Emma	31	Female	3 years
Masna	36	Female	5 years
Rozita	35	Female	6 years

As illustrated in Table 1, the sample comprises 10 academic staff including four male and six female. The interviewees ranged from 31 to 37 years old with their length of service ranged from 3 to 12 years. Pseudonyms are used for the purpose of confidentiality of their identities.

Eight key themes emerged from the interviews, indicating the important factors that affect the quality of work life among millennial academic staff in Malaysian public universities. These factors include workload, work condition, relationship with colleague, organizational leadership, students' issues, work-home interface, flexibility and job security.

4.2. Heavy Workload

Based on the interviews conducted, heavy workloads is said to be the main contributor to the pressure faced by the academic staff and affecting their performance and quality of work. This is in agreement with a study made by Chui *et al.* (2014) and Lai *et al.* (2012) which found that workers quality of life will decrease when heavy workloads increases. As pointed out by a Kamalia:

“People said that being a lecturer is just about teaching but the reality is you also have to supervise PhD and Master students, conduct research, compete for grants which sometimes stresses you out...because we have deadlines to meet to publish our research in indexed journal and else...so we sometimes lack in focus to produce the best work. Sometimes there is no time for us to make full preparation for the class because of our busy schedule”

While Miza Commented:

“The workload is definitely heavy, I have to teach 18 hours per week. Even after this I have to cover for my colleague who is going to take maternity leave. So the workload is heavy. Plus, I am the supervisor of the practical unit, so the workload continues every semester. Even at night, some students will ring me until I have to tell them ‘Please don’t call me when I am at home, at night’. It is as if I am working 7 days a week, when weekend is actually very precious to me”

As an academic, the responsibilities of performing various task seems to be a major challenge in their working life. It can be denoted that heavy workloads was associated with stress and lack of concentration for the staff to perform their best at work which consequently affecting their QWL. In addition, the workload worsen when some of the staff are burdened with excessive responsibilities of administrative duties. As described by Rozita:

“Coping with administrative duties and other responsibilities are tiring...but I don’t want to stress out so much and end up with health problems like some of our older colleagues”

The contention by Rozita regarding the challenges of administrative duties and multiple responsibilities is parallel with previous study by De Paula and Boas (2017) regarding the excessive workload among university staff which produce detrimental effects including health problems, thus affecting their quality of work.

4.3. Work Condition

Similar to previous studies by De Paula and Boas (2017) and Mohamed and BedelKhalif (2017) work condition was also regarded as one of the determinant factors in affecting the quality of work life among the Millennial academic staff. This matter is explained by Yusof:

“Work condition does have a lot of influence on my quality of work life...although in general I am satisfied, but the facility here is quite limited. It would be great if more facilities are provided, such as the facilities for lecturers to do research”

Meanwhile, Rachel commented about the affect of work condition on her:

“Okay...I am grateful for this university has plenty of facilities for lecturers, spacious room...that allows me to work with comfort. However, there are few things that need improvement such as the frequent malfunctioned air conditioner that interrupt the learning process in class and the most apparent issue for this semester is the internet connection which I am not happy with”

The statement was supported by Miza who stressed on the importance of having efficient technology facilities at work:

“Students nowadays are very advanced with internet application...that is why we need to conduct blended learning to attract their attention in class. Hence, facilities such as computer and access to internet in lecture rooms must be upgraded for us to teach and perform better”

The emphasis given by the staff on facilities particularly internet access and computers provides an indication on the importance of technology facilities for Millennials in carrying out their work. This finding is consistent with studies conducted by Tay (2011); Hershatter and Epstein (2010) and Nambiyar (2014) which reported that Millennials prefer working with organization that provides high technology facilities to their employees.

4.4. Relationship with Colleague

Prior research has pointed out how establishing relationship with co-workers affects QWL (Sirgy *et al.*, 2001; Lanctôt *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, in this study, good relationship with colleague has emerged as important in determining the quality of work life among the Millennial academic staff. Supportive colleague is regarded a great source of support in overcoming challenges in workplace. Husin elaborated this matter in the following statements:

“Alhamdulillah I am satisfied with my colleagues. For me, I have very supportive and positive colleagues...sometimes there are issues and conflicts arised but in the end we can still sit together, work together and that is the best part.”

While Emma Added:

“I think one of the most critical thing that makes me enjoy working here is the atmosphere...we have friends who understands each other well and are very supportive.. despite the generation gap that we have with some of the seniors, we can blend very well”

It can be seen from Husin and Emma's experiences that good relationship with supportive colleague is an important contributor for the staff to have a more positive working environment. Despite the generation gap that they have with the senior staffs, the good relationship established in the workplace makes them enjoy their working life and contribute to a better QWL.

4.5. Organizational Leadership

Besides colleague, organizational leadership is also an important factor affecting staff QWL. In this regard, the leaders' consideration of the staff is a major concern. For instance, the leaders that prioritize students more than the staff and the lack of concern over their welfare, bring a significant impact on the their QWL. As mentioned by Masna and Rachel:

“In my opinion, the university's leaders emphasize the well-being of students more than of the lecturers. For example, when scheduling classes for students, they prioritize the needs of the students more while lecturers are left with a full work schedule from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.... as long as the students are happy”

“they expect so much from the lecturers without taking into care much of our welfare...not as much as they concern about the students. Of course, I am not happy with this”

The opinions of these staff reflects the tendency of Millennials to favor management with a more caring attitude. This is in line with previous literatures regarding the preference of Millennials towards leaders that display a friendly and caring behavior, as well as the preference for supportive leader with good follower-leader relationship (Hershatter and Epstein, 2010; Kultalahti and Liisa, 2014; Sharkawi *et al.*, 2016). Hence, organizational leadership is an important determinant factor that affects their QWL.

4.6. Students' Issues

Interestingly, issues concerning students' also have been found to be a contributor to the staffs' QWL. For example, Masna describes how students' behavior can affect her:

“For me, dealing with student indeed has a big impact...sometimes I was so stressed out dealing with problematic students that it disrupt my mood. But when I enjoyed teaching in certain classes, I would feel happy and my mood lightened up”

Meanwhile, Miza added:

“Everyday in our job we will face with a variety of emotions, behaviors of students from different backgrounds. So definitely it have impacted my quality of working life”

The remarks by Masna and Miza are parallel with the study conducted by Gowrie (2014) that pointed out how issues related to the students are a factor that can greatly affect the staffs' quality of work life. As an academic staff, the people around them such as colleagues, leaders and students definitely present a great impact on their QWL.

4.7. Work-Home Interface

Additionally, work-home interface, particularly in the situation of conflicting demands, also emerged as a significant factor in affecting their QWL. Kamalia elaborated her experience in the following statements:

“...when I am too busy with my work, for example when I have to mark lots of test papers or assignments, I have to bring it all to home...but when I do that, I will not have the time to monitor my son's homework...”

While Rozita explained how the demands of both work and family affects her life:

“...we are currently lacking of staff in my department. Therefore, we have to work more hours compared to the staff in other departments. Hence, I need to do lots of preparation for teaching. I felt very pressured...I don't have enough time to do all the preparation....at home I'm busy with the kids and couldn't do much work”

According to Hershatter and Epstein (2010) and Nambiyar (2014) Millennials place high value on work-life balance and have strong desire to achieve them. Hence, this creates some pressures on them to cope with multiple demands and affects on their work life.

4.8. Flexibility

Despite the numerous challenges and conflicting work-home demands faced the academic staff, the flexibility in their job helped them to cope better with the challenges, thus providing a better QWL. As highlighted by Emma:

“ I think flexibility is one of the main factors that allow me to experience a good quality of work life. As a mother of three toddlers, I could arrange and plan my time between work and family easier...thanks to my flexible schedule”

Masna, on the other hand, talked about her experience:

“Sometimes my husband and I bring the children with us to the office, for example when the day care is closed...but I bring them more often than he does...not because I am the mother (laugh) but it is easier for me to bring them there as compared to him because his schedule is more rigid than mine”

Most of the Millennial staff that were interviewed are in the phase of building their own family. Therefore, a flexible schedule is found to be very helpful for them in balancing work and family demands. This result agrees with studies by Kultalahti and Liisa (2014) and Malik and Khera (2014) that reported the tendency of Millennials towards flexible schedule in their respective line of work to help them achieve a good work-life balance.

4.9. Job Security

In addition to the factors that have been discussed, the respondents also talk about how job security leads them to achieve a better QWL. Rashid's statement highlighted this factor:

“Of course, there are many pressure and stress but I still feel that my working life is good. After all, as a public servant I have a stable job and I feel very grateful for that”

While Nizam Mentioned:

“One of the thing that I like the most about my job is the security. Even though there are lots of challenges, I know I can still have good salary every month”

Paralell with prior studies by Zare *et al.* (2012) and Casio (1998) job security are regarded as a crucial factor in QWL. Indeed, as a staff for public university, these Millenials have a secure job which makes them feeling grateful leading them to experience a positive QWL. This findings is also in line with Subbarayalu and Al Kuwaiti (2017) which states that job security is regarded as “Highly Compromised” by teaching staff, indicating that it would affect their academic career if unattended. Therefore, regardless of pressures and challenges faced, the security are found to be helpful in producing a better QWL.

5. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study has contribute to deepen our understanding on how several factors such as workloads, work conditions, relationship with colleagues, organizational leadership, students’ issue, work-home interface as well as flexibility and job security affect the quality of work life among academic staff in Malaysian public universities specifically to the millenials. Heavy workload, inadequate facilities, lack of advanced technology, leaders that provide less care on welfare, as well as students’ issue could affect the ability of the millenial academics to achieve a good QWL. Nevertheless, other factors namely flexibility, supportive colleagues and job security help to facilitate their working life, making it more meaningful and more satisfaction. Thus, strategies that incorporate a better management of all these factors are important to be given consideration. The implementation of effective management of these factors are crucial as they can help to reduce the stress and create more satisfaction for the millennial staff with their working life. Other future studies can apply quantitative methods to confirm the findings and make further generalization using a larger sample size. The research can also be extended to academic staff in private universities so that a more detailed comparison of QWL in different academic setting can be produced. As studies concerning QWL in Malaysian setting are still limited, this study provides an in-depth understanding of the QWL in the specific context. This research also provide a more detailed explanation on how the emergent factors act to influence the Millennials’ QWL thus indicating the importance of recognizing generational differences in QWL. Hence, this study is hoped to benefit the higher educational institutions in understanding and implementing appropriate mechanism and strategies that can help to reduce their employees’ stress, increase work satisfaction and improve their quality of work life.

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