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### An Analysis on Work Happiness Among University Staff in a Malaysian Context

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#### ABSTRACT

Much had been mentioned about workplace happiness as it is poised to enhance productivity and organizational development. It was identified that little empirical evidence is available on the level of happiness among university staff. Thus, this study investigates the happiness index of a public university in Malaysia. A total of 856 university staff both academic and non-academic participated in this study. Previous literature and a nominal group technique method were used to develop the instrument of the study. Overall, the findings showed that the happiness index stood at 70.19 indicating generally the staff are happy working in the university. The study suggests that to further enhance happiness among university staff emphasis should be placed to improve on communications, infostructure, and human resource management.

**Keywords:** Happiness index, staff, university, well-being.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Lately, employees are given tasks based on key performance indicators and this according to Sang et. al. (2013) has escalated occupational stress at workplace. Occupational stress is fast becoming a silent assassin and has the potential to diminish the mental capacity of individuals in addition to making individuals have problems in the process of thinking, communicating and collaborating (Heath, 2016). Without a doubt, occupational stress will lead to employees having problems in relation to health, job burnout, and in addition their contribution towards the productivity of the organization. Thus, happiness at the workplace

is deemed as the mechanism that could escalate workforce to achieve a double fold objective of securing the well-being of both individuals and organizations.

A plethora of literature exists regarding the concept of happiness. However, according to Fisher (2010) happiness is still considered as a green area in the field of psychology research. Yassin (2014) mentioned that the notion regarding happiness has started way back during the era of Plato and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Bentham, the utilitarianism ethics, stated that happiness is regarded as the evaluation of peoples' experiences based on the moments of delight and despair. Over the years, many authors distinguish the definition of happiness into two major views, namely, the hedonic and eudaimonic approach. The hedonic approach sees that the objective of life is to pursue maximum pleasure in life while the eudaimonic approach looks at life and happiness as a pursuit towards doing things that are morally right, meaningful, honest, and doing what is worth doing. An effort was also undertaken to develop an indicator to measure happiness in a nation and this gave birth to the Gross National Happiness Index in the 1970s that measured elements regarding governance, economics, culture, and the environment.

Measuring happiness among workforce at their workplace is gaining interests of late as studies have found that happy workers are 12% more productive while workers that are unhappy become 10% less productive (Revesencio, 2015). Moreover, according to Alexander (2017), by being happy at work one can boost the organizations' productivity due to a number of reasons such as the individual becomes more creative, able to work better with others, fix problems instead of complaining about them, has more energy, optimistic and motivated, learns faster, gets sick less often, worry less about making mistakes, and makes better decision.

A number of domains had been identified based on some of the studies that had been undertaken to measure happiness among workers. Chaiprasit and Santhidirakul (2011) stated that factors that contribute towards workplace happiness are job inspiration, leadership, relationship, quality of work life, and organization's shared value. On the other hand, Fisher (2010) acknowledges that happiness-related constructs in the workplace are placed in three levels, namely, the transient level, person level, and unit level. The transient level is referred to the real-time affective events that occur at work and the momentarily experience individuals gain out of it. At the transient level, the constructs are as follows: state job satisfaction, momentary affect, flow state, the momentary mood at work, state engagement, task engagement, emotion at work, and state intrinsic motivation. Meanwhile, the personal level is referred to all the experiences an individual garner in the workplace. At the person level, the domains are job satisfaction, dispositional affect, affective organizational commitment, job involvement, the typical mood at work, engagement, thriving, vigor, flourishing, and affective well-being at work. For the unit level, happiness is referred to experiences gained working as a team, unit or organization. At the unit level, the constructs are moral/collective job satisfaction, group affective tone, group mood, unit-level engagement, and group task satisfaction.

There were also other studies done on happiness in the workplace. A study done by Fereidouni (2013) identified that having good governance in the workplace has a positive relationship with happiness among staff. On the other hand, Helliwell (2013) stated that the factors that contribute towards staff happiness are updated students' management system, empowerment of support staff, and matters pertaining to distribution of research grants. Williams et. al. (2017), on the other hand, proposed that workers happiness is much depended on what is inside and what is outside of workers. The inside factors are the factors that are inherent in the individual and these include individual's attitudes, values, beliefs, emotions, and behaviors. On the

other hand, the outside factors are the external factors that contribute towards individual's happiness and these include work environment, the scope of work, culture in the organization, and influence of managers and supervisors.

Even though there are ample studies carried out to determine the level of happiness among workers in the organization, not many empirical pieces of evidence are available to seek the happiness of staff working in a university environment. One study done on UK higher institutions in 2015 revealed some important insights namely that there is a wide difference in the opinions of academics and non-academics in many areas of working life, many academics are feeling the strain of working for long hours and taken advantage of, non-academics are more satisfied with their working lives compared to the academics, and that universities are facing a hard time to give recognition to the input provided by their staff (Parr, 2015). What will the outcome be on the level of happiness of a public university that is fast-rising and recognized as a research university in a Malaysian setting? This study aims to unveil the level of happiness index among university staff in this particular context.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This is a quantitative study using the survey method to gather data from the respondents. The population of this study consists of 6.502 university staff. Base on the margin of error of 5 and a confidence level of 95%, the minimum sample size required was 363. However, since this study is geared towards producing a University Happiness Index, the total sample was raised to 1000. However, the final sample was 856 respondents representing an 85.6% rate of return. The sampling technique applied in this study was systematic sampling so that the selected sample would be in accordance with the size of the staff in a particular faculty or department. The instrument for this study was derived from previous literature and also via views provided by the university staff through a Nominal Group technique. Altogether there are 18 domains that contribute towards the happiness scale namely (a) governance, (b) career development, (c) work ethics, (d) workload, (e) infrastructure facilities, (f) infostructure facilities, (g) nature of work, (h) salary/incentives, (i) communications, (j) attitude, (k) staff welfare, (l) image and reputation, (m) location, (n) networking, (o) work ecosystem, (p) work appreciation and expertise, (q) developing organization, and (r) work-family balance. The instrument was pilot-tested with 30 respondents and all domains showed a Cronbach alpha of greater than .7 indicating that the instrument is sound and reliable. Questionnaires were used to collect data from the respondents and the aid of enumerators was used in the data collection process. SPSS and MS Excel software were used in the process of analyzing the data.

## **3. RESULTS**

Table 1 depicts the socio-demographic profile of the university staff. 40.3% of the respondents are males while the other 59.7% are females. The data also showed that 40.4% of the respondents are aged between 31 to 40 years followed by 26.8% aged 30 years and below, 17.8% aged above 50 years and 14.3% aged between 41 to 50 years of age. The majority of the staff (75.8%) are permanent staff while the balance of 24.2% is either contract or temporary staff. Besides, in terms of work experience, 56.7% of the respondents have been working at the university for between 5 to 15 years, followed by 21.6% for more than 15 years, and 20.7% for less than 5 years. In relation to health, 25.2% of the respondents are experiencing non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma, etc.

**Table 1**  
**Demographic factors of University Staff**

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	345	40.3
Female	511	59.7
<i>Age (years old)</i>		
30 and below	229	26.8
Between 31 – 40	346	40.4
Between 41 to 50	122	14.3
Above 50	152	17.8
<i>Work Status</i>		
Permanent	649	75.8
Contract	181	21.2
Temporary	26	3.0
<i>Work Experience (years)</i>		
Less than 5	177	20.7
Between 5 to 15	485	56.7
More than 15	185	21.6
<i>Sickness</i>		
None	637	74.4
Noncommunicable disease	216	25.2

#### 4. OVERALL UNIVERSITY HAPPINESS INDEX SCORE

Table 2 shows the overall Happiness Index of University Staff. In general, the overall happiness index of the university staff is 70.19% indicating that the staff is happy to work in the university. Further analysis revealed that three prominent domains that contributed to index score were Image & Reputation, Location, and Staff Welfare. On the other hand, two domains that produced the lowest scores were Infostructure Facilities and Networking.

**Table 2**  
**Overall Happiness Index Score**

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Point</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Score</i>
Career Development	3.3037	57.5925	0.062775	3.615382
Work Ethics	4.2652	81.63	0.040911	3.339599
Work Load	3.594	64.85	0.051664	3.350417
Infostructure Facilities	3.594	64.85	0.040911	2.653105
Nature of Work	3.7202	68.005	0.062775	4.269029
Salary/Incentives	3.7856	69.64	0.062775	4.371666
Attitude	3.8213	70.5325	0.042499	2.997541
Staff Welfare	3.9504	73.76	0.062775	4.6303
Image & Reputation	4.2996	82.49	0.062775	5.178328

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Point</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Score</i>
Location	4.1887	79.7175	0.062775	5.004283
Networking	3.7395	68.4875	0.040911	2.801921
Work Ecosystem	3.9393	73.4825	0.062775	4.61288
Work Appreciation & Expertise	3.9036	72.59	0.062775	4.556853
Developing Organization	4.0841	77.1025	0.040911	3.154373
Work-Family Balance	4.0339	75.8475	0.051664	3.918593
Governance	3.4801	62.0025	0.062775	3.89222
Infrastructure Facilities	3.5649	64.1225	0.062775	4.025304
Communications	3.4347	60.8675	0.062775	3.820971
Overall Happiness Index Score				70.19277

### 5. OVERALL HIGHEST DOMAINS

Next is a thorough analysis on the specific domains that contributed to the highest scores on happiness. Overall, the items that constituted the domain of Image and Reputation scored a good mean score. As in Table 3, the major contributing items were “I feel proud working in this university” (M = 4.33; SD = .73) and “This university is recognized by society” (M = 4.27; SD = .74)

**Table 3**  
**Image & Reputation**

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
I feel proud working in this university	4.33	0.73
This university has a good image	4.25	0.72
This university has a worldwide brand	4.08	0.85
This university is recognized by society	4.27	0.74

Next, the focus is on the second best domain, namely location. For this domain, it has four items and the two items that obtained the highest scores as in Table 4 were “The location of this university is strategic” (M = 4.35; SD = .71) and “The location of this university eases my life” (M = 4.03; SD = .87)

**Table 4**  
**Location**

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
The location of this university is strategic	4.35	0.71
The location of this university is near to my house	3.96	1.07
There are no traffic problems in this university	3.56	1.18
The location of this university eases my life	4.03	0.87

Staff Welfare has five items and this was the domain that obtained the third highest score. Specifically, two major contributing items as in Table 5 were “Quality health services exist in this university” (M = 4.11; SD = .79) and “There are adequate sports and recreational facilities in this university” (M = 3.85; SD = .81)

**Table 5**  
**Staff Welfare**

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Deduction of tuition fees to staff who wish to further their education exists in this university	3.77	0.86
There are adequate sports and recreational facilities in this university	3.85	0.81
There exist pre-school education facilities to be used by children of staff in this university	3.75	0.88
Adequate number of staff quarters is provided in this university	3.50	1.01
Quality health services exist in this university	4.13	0.79

## 6. OVERALL LOWEST DOMAINS

Following are the results on the overall lowest domains and the two domains that obtained the lowest scores were Infrastructure Facilities and Networking. Infostructure Facilities was the domain that scored the lowest and this domain has four items. If improvements were to happen to this domain, then the university should focus on improving the efficiency of the management of computer system, the computer network system should be easily accessible and be used at any time, and the management of the computer information system should be user-friendly (refer Table 6).

**Table 6**  
**Infostructure Facilities**

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
The computer network system at my university makes it easy for me to communicate	3.75	0.83
The computer network system at my university is easily accessible and can be used at any time	3.52	0.94
The management of the computer information system in my university is user-friendly	3.52	0.87
The management of computer system in my university is efficient.	3.43	0.93

The domain concerning Networking recorded the second lowest marks. There were five items that constituted this domain. Analysis as in Table 7 shows that this domain could be further improved by focusing on increasing opportunities for university staff with the industry and providing an additional budget for the internationalization of staff.

**Table 7**  
**Networking**

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Opportunity for international networking is open to all staff	3.80	0.88
Budget is allocated for internationalization of staff	3.58	0.95
The existence of staff and students from different countries enhance interaction with the international community	3.85	0.78
Staff is given the opportunity to interact with industry players	3.59	0.77
Staff is given the opportunity to interact with communities	3.68	0.74



## **7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The results showed that the overall University Happiness Index stood at 70.2% in comparison to the 81% obtained by the study done by Times Higher Education Best University Workplace Survey 2015 on university staff that worked in UK institutions of higher learning (Parr, 2015). However, such comparisons are still vague because there are differences in the aspect of methodology in terms of instrumentation and the total number of sample of the study. However, the study showed that in general university staff are happy working in a university environment.

Further analysis revealed that the staff working in this university are happy because of the university's image/reputation, location, and the welfare of staff is not neglected and this is in line with the findings from Helliwell et. al. (2013) that mentioned people will be happy working if the environment is conducive. However, there are two domains that have much room for improvement, namely, infostructure facilities, and networking. These findings demonstrate that the major domains that contribute towards the happiness of staff are the natural elements that exist in this university. Continuous efforts should be devoted towards a better management and leadership that will enhance infostructure facilities and networking.

Moreover, the present study has highlighted some useful insights for the attention of the management of the university. These are as follows: -

This study suggests that the health of young staff which has a service record of fewer than 15 years should be given attention. This is because they represent 75% of the total surveyed. The current data indicate 25% of university staff has chronic health problems such as high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Hence, preventive measures need to be focused on improving the health status, especially among the younger university staff to ensure work productivity could be maintained among the university staff.

The findings clearly indicated that the university happiness index score is driven by fundamental values such as the location of the university and its' image. Even though there was some contribution from the element of human resource management towards happiness but the impact is not substantial. This indicates that there is a need to examine on whether there exists or any form of manipulation of the management system at different levels and this should be refined in the future. Besides, the current findings also displayed that the current work system is not a major factor that drives university staff to be happy. This is something that needs to be addressed as work system is supposed to be among the main drivers for staff to be happy to be in the organization.

It is evident from the current study that the university staff are happy working in the university because of its' strategic location in addition to what the university has become. From one angle, it is undeniable that the staff are happy to be attached to this university due to its' recognition both locally and internationally for over the years. This finding represents a major milestone that has been passed by the pioneers of the university in the past to determine the direction and achievements of the university. On the other hand, the finding calls for a more dynamic and sophisticated method to be implemented so that the various happiness domains may provide the multiplier effect towards increasing the happiness of staff to work in the university. This is especially in the context of governance, human resource management, and communications. Moreover, much effort is needed to instill values on the philosophy of university to its staff so that the staff would better appreciate the working environment that they are attached to currently.

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