



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES



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ISSN: 2222-6990

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i6/10245>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v11-i6/10245

*Received: 11 April 2021, Revised: 15 May 2021, Accepted: 29 May 2021*

Published Online: 13 June 2021

In-Text Citation: (Othman et al., 2021)

To Cite this Article: Othman, R., Asri, N. A. M., Alias, N. E., Jahya, A., Koe, W.-L., & Krishnan, R. (2021). The Effect of Job Resources on Work Engagement: Does this Matter among Academics in Malaysia? *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 11(6), 1165–1175.

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Vol. 11, No. 6, 2021, Pg. 1165- 1175

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## The Effect of Job Resources on Work Engagement: Does this Matter among Academics in Malaysia?

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### Abstract

A rapidly changing business environment requires an organization to gain a competitive advantage to survive. As people are known to be the most valuable asset to an organization, having employees that are actively engaged in their work can positively lead to higher performance, and subsequently contribute to the success of the organization. One of the predictors that lead to work engagement is through the dimensions of job resources, which is rooted in Job Demand-Resources Theory. Therefore, the primary purpose of conducting this research is to examine the role of job resources on work engagement among academics in a local public university. Before the actual study, a pilot study was conducted to assess the reliability and suitability of the measurements used. The data from 87% out of 101 academics were collected, and then analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 23.0). The result from the Multiple Regression analysis indicated that only two dimensions in job resources, which are autonomy and social support, have significant and positive relationships with work engagement, while performance feedback is insubstantial. Moreover, from the analysis, a predictor of social support represented the most significant variable influencing work engagement among academics. Theoretical discussion, practical implications, limitations of the study and direction for future research were also discussed in this research.

**Keywords:** Job Resources, Work Engagement, Academics, Jd-R Model, University.

### Introduction

In today's fast-changing environment, many organizations face complex challenges in the propensity to becoming a high-performing business entity. It is of dire importance for employers to have highly engaged employees who view 'work as meaningful' as they offer a comparative strength through their unique contribution (Anitha, 2014). In this respect, many organizations believe that work engagement is the key to retain organizational success (Alzyoud, Othman, & Isa, 2015). Employees that are engaged in their work will feel more motivated to perform better, produce more and succeed in their jobs (Christian & Slaughter, 2011). In the meantime, the disengaged employee would result in significant loss to the organization (Othman et al., 2019).

Likewise, this phenomenon has become an epidemic in educational organizations, especially among academics in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), since current global HEIs have been confronted with structural changes and challenges (Arinto, 2013). Motivated and proactive academics are vital for any university to achieve the goals of high-quality performance (Dubbel, Rispens, & Demerouti, 2016). Besides, rapid growth in terms of the number of universities has necessitated institutions to optimize their strategic internal and external resources to maintain top academic performances while ensuring profit maximization (Akanji et al., 2018). In the Malaysian context, work engagement among academics has been impacted, as many changes and restructuring episodes have been brought into HEIs through the transformation plan by the government (Azman, Jantan, & Sirat, 2011). Moreover, the expansion of the higher education system, especially in public universities, has posed a great challenge to academics. Prior studies have shown that high teaching commitment, the struggle to find external funding, and administration and research works are among the sources of job-related stress for academics (Alzyoud et al., 2015). Due to these challenges, academics in Malaysia must have a strong work engagement to improve their skills, promote a good working relationship, manage workload and increase the quality of work (Ali, 2014).

Despite the abundance of studies that have been conducted, it is revealed that there are limited empirical studies on work engagement related to academicians, and that the majority of studies concentrate on the healthcare sector (Gabel-Shemueli, Dolan, & Ceretti, 2017), banking (Albdour & Altarawneh, 2014), the hotel sector (Božac, Sušan, & Besim, 2017) and telecommunications (Li & Qi, 2015). Hence, work-related issues among academicians, particularly in the higher education sector in Malaysia, have been ignored (Ayob & Zainal, 2011). The Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) theory is the most common theory used to describe work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker, Demerouti, & Sanz-Vergel, 2014). However, it has been argued that this theory suggests that job resources are more closely linked to work engagement compared to job demand (Bakker et al., 2014). Thus, studies should be conducted to continue to explore which elements of job resources may impact work engagement in public universities, especially in the Malaysian context.

## **Literature Review**

### **Work Engagement**

The concept of personal engagement at work was originally conceptualized by Kahn (1990) as “the psychological experiences and conditions that shape how individuals employ and express themselves physically, emotionally, and cognitively during role performances” (p.700). Afterwards, Schaufeli and colleagues (2002) defined work engagement as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption” (p. 74). Consequently, it has brought about the evolution of the most used assessment instrument, which is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (W. B. Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). In recent years, work engagement has received more attention, and shows that researchers and organizations are highly interested in this matter (Jay Lee & Ok, 2016; Knight, Patterson, & Dawson, 2017). Numerous studies have shown that work engagement has influenced desirable organizational results by contributing potentially higher yields for organizations (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Thus, having an engaged employee is highly valuable for public and private organizations (Bakker et al., 2014).

### **Job Resources as Antecedents of Work Engagement**

The JD-R model is commonly used to summarize and analyze the relationships between job-related/organizational variables and wellbeing/ill-being outcomes in various work settings (Bhatti, Mat, & Juhari, 2018; Boštjančič, Antolović, & Erčulj, 2018). In this study, the JD-R model was primarily used to explain factors that play a vital role in work engagement. The model is also frequently used to investigate the effect of job characteristics in terms of job demands and job resources on an individual's wellbeing (Bakker et al., 2003). Job resources have been defined as those physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that possibly reduce the adverse effect of job demands in achieving organizational objectives and stimulate the growth of employees (Bhatti et al., 2018; Demerouti et al., 2001). Past research shows a positive association between job resources' components and work engagement in various settings and countries (Buys & Rothmann, 2010). Prior study has proven that job resources such as social support from co-workers and superiors, feedback on performance, autonomy, and opportunities for professional development are strongly associated with work engagement (Halbesleben, 2010).

#### **Autonomy**

Autonomy has been recognized as a crucial variable by most researchers in the academic context as it remarkably influences motivation levels among employees (Yu-Ping, Shih-Nan, & Jehn-Yih, 2010). Autonomy is characterized as the degree to which employees are given freedom and independence over their work schedules and working processes (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Prior research has found that autonomy has a positive relationship with dedication, psychological wellbeing and the motivational and meta-cognitive learning processes of employees (Thompson & Prottas, 2006; Wielenga-Meijer, Taris, Kompier, & Wigboldus, 2010).

Research conducted among public servants revealed that autonomy improved their work engagement when they were satisfied with the work-related aspects (Borst, Kruijen, & Lako, 2019). Moreover, a study has shown that autonomy has a significant positive relationship with work engagement among academics (Alzyoud et al., 2015; Johari, Tan, & Zulkarnain, 2018).

#### **Social Support**

Prior studies have proven that social support has become a part of job resources, and has recently been promoted to an essential predictor for work engagement (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008; Schaufeli, Bakker, & van Rhenen, 2009). Social support can be referred to as social interaction with superiors and coworkers that supports one's wellbeing (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Support can stem from different sources; perhaps the organization or superiors as well as co-workers (Simosi, 2012). Previous studies have shown that support from the organization, supervisors and co-workers was the most often debated predictor of work engagement (Karatepe, 2012; Suan & Nasurdin, 2016). Prior studies have also indicated that employees who gain healthy support from their supervisor may display higher outcomes in their work engagement (Nasurdin, Ling, & Khan, 2018; Rothmann & Jordaan, 2006; Swanberg, McKechnie, Ojha, & James, 2011; Thongpoon, 2013; Toyama & Mauno, 2017).

#### **Performance Feedback**

Performance feedback is recognized as information provided by an agent from the aspects of productivity and understanding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feedback, is also

acknowledged as the availability of information about performance effectiveness (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Receiving feedback may reduce job ambiguity, and allows employees to increase their understanding and clarity of work goals as well as enhance individual and team performance (Aguinis, 2009; Beenen, Pichler, & Levy, 2017). Performance feedback is included in the predictors of work engagement, and is considered as one of the essential resources affecting work engagement (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Xiao, Liu, & Chen, 2018). Past studies have discovered how job resources such as receiving constructive feedback were positively related to work engagement, with workers being more motivated to improve their performance and increase the level of contribution to their job (Hakanen, Perhoniemi, & Toppinen-Tanner, 2008).

### **Data and Methodology**

This study performed a quantitative research design, which integrates scientific research to investigate the relationships between the independent variables and the dependent variables. 105 respondents have participated, and there are only 88 samples were usable. The data was collected through an online questionnaire and blast to all the respondents through the "convenience sampling" approach. The respondents were asked to complete the survey as part of study on the relationship between job resources dimensions (autonomy, social support, and performance feedback) and work engagement among academics in a local public university. Additionally, the unit of analysis of this study is the individual level (academic staff) to act as respondents. The cross-sectional study was also used to collect data through the distribution of questionnaires.

### **Measurement**

A set of self-administered questionnaires were used as the instrumentation for this study. By using a Likert type scale of 1 to 5, a collection of the surveys was administered to the respondents. The data was evaluated and clarified by the IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 23.0). The reliability analysis of all variable items for both pre and post-test demonstrated above 0.7; this indicated that the consistency of inter-item data in this study was reliable.

The questionnaire for the purpose of this study was divided into three main sections; section A (demographic profile); section B (work engagement); and section C (job resources). All variable items in the survey used a five-point Likert type scale (1; strongly disagree, 5; strongly agree). All the items used to measure the relationship among variables were adopted from past studies, which are: to measure work engagement (9-items) (W. B. Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003), autonomy (5-items) (van Veldhoven et al., 2004), social support (8-items) (Karasek, 1985) and performance feedback (6-items) (van Veldhoven et al., 2004).

### **Participants**

The sample for this study comprised 88 academicians, who were selected from six faculties in a public university located in the Southern region of Malaysia. A total of 19 (21.6%) male and 69 (78.4%) female respondents participated in this study. The majority of the respondents are aged between 31-40 years old, making up 62.5% of the total number. Out of the 88 respondents, 92% of them were Malay. It is reported that most of the respondents had a Master's degree. In terms of faculty, 81.8% were from the Business and Management Faculty, which was indicated as the most prominent faculty. Almost half of the respondents' had tenure of at least ten years or more, making up 47.7% of the total sample.

## Results

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
<b>Autonomy</b>	.185	.077	.234	2.388	.019
<b>Social Support</b>	.522	.098	.580	5.312	.000
<b>Performance Feedback</b>	-.060	.100	-.068	-.603	.548

As specified in Table 1, autonomy and social support have a significant and positive relationship with work engagement ( $\beta=0.85$ ,  $p<0.019$ ,  $\beta=0.522$ ,  $p<0.098$ ). This can be explained as the higher the level of autonomy and social support to the job, the higher the work engagement level among academics.

Meanwhile, the third independent variable in this study, which is performance feedback, shows no significant relationship with work engagement ( $\beta=-0.060$ ,  $p<0.548$ ). Additionally, social support has received the highest significant beta value ( $\beta=0.522$ ). This study therefore indicates that social support is the most significant factor in work engagement among academics, followed by autonomy ( $\beta=0.85$ ).

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.683a	.466	.447	.36025
<b>F Value</b>	24.422			
<b>Sig. Level</b>	.000 <sup>b</sup>			

Table 2 shows that the regression model was statistically significant, and the r-square value of 0.466 explained that 46.6% of the variation within the dependent variable could be explained by all independent variables, which include autonomy and social support. The remaining 53.4% of the variations can be explained by other predictors, which did not fall under the research scope of this study. Table 2 also displayed the F value as ( $F=24.422$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), which indicated that the model of the study is statistically fit and significant.

## Discussions, Limitation and Direction for Future Research

This study aims to investigate the role of job resources such as autonomy, social support and performance feedback towards work engagement among academics in one of the public universities located in Malaysia. The findings are consistent with the JD-R model of theoretical prediction that was contended, which is that the higher the level of job resources, the higher the level of work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

Our findings suggest that autonomy is positively associated with work engagement. This result is consistent with a prior study conducted among academicians in Jordan, which exposed that autonomy and work engagement were positively significant, and the employees believed that they would be more interested in their work if they gained more autonomy (Alzyoud et al., 2015). Besides, a recent study also reported autonomy could affect teachers' efficiency as it may increase their level of productivity in the workplace (Johari et al., 2018).

Working conditions that offer substantial freedom and independence as well as give employees control over their work therefore promotes engagement in the organization. These practices are more crucial to academic institutions than other organizations as high teaching commitments, research, and administration have been associated with a high level of stress and anxiety.

Second, the results also show that social support has a significant positive impact on work engagement. This finding is consistent with a study conducted in Thailand's public universities, which showed that social support could increase engagement and loyalty among academics (Thongpoon, 2013). Academics in HEIs are likely to devote and invest themselves in their work roles if they are provided with sufficient resources and the necessary work environment. Besides, a supportive organizational environment will promote psychological safety among academics and associates with work engagement as they are not worried about negative consequences for expressing their true selves at work.

On the other hand, this study shows contradicting results, as performance feedback did not predict work engagement among academics. Performance feedback is a performance evaluation result given by managers to their employees to ensure that they understand their work and help them to improve performance. Useful performance feedback information will encourage employees to feel accepted and recognized, which makes them more motivated, which can in turn promote work engagement. However, employees will express different behavioural responses depending upon the quality or attitude of the manager in delivering the feedback. Besides, performance feedback may become insignificant towards work engagement for academics in public universities as they need to wait for six months or even a year to discuss their performance. This situation may make employees feel neglected, undervalued and disengaged.

As the scope of study was only focused on academics in a public university, this therefore represents the limitation of this study. The generalizability of the outcome may increase if future research is conducted on other universities throughout the states. Moreover, other possible predictors of work engagement can be researched in future studies such as personal characteristics, job characteristics and leadership style. Future researchers are also recommended to extend the comparison type of study between academics in private and public universities to obtain in-depth findings that can be added to the body of knowledge.

## **Conclusion**

The findings of this study revealed a more comprehensive understanding of how job resources (autonomy, social support and performance feedback) influenced work engagement. Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that autonomy and social support play a significant role in the work engagement of academics at HEIs. Social support was found to be a strong predictor of work engagement. More interestingly, the finding reported that performance feedback was not a significant predictor towards work engagement in an academic context. Thus, the results offer vital insight for managers or superiors, specifically in higher education institutions, where emphasis could be placed on providing freedom towards academics in doing their work and to be independent in decision-making. Further, HEIs should continue to provide academics with security in terms of social support, such as having positive relations with superiors and colleagues in order to make them feel safer and more comfortable in their job.

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