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Elangkovan Narayanan, Leena Ismail, Palani Krishnasamy, Asnidar Hanim Yusuf, Asniza Yusuf, Isai Amutan Krishnan

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Why Do Employers Extend the Probationary Period of Fresh Graduates after Employment Feedback from The Human Resource Managers

Elangkovan Narayanan

Perdana University, School of Business

Email: Elangkovan.narayanan@perdanauniversity.edu.my, elangkovank@gmail.com

Leena Ismail

Perdana University, School of Liberal Arts and Science and Technology

Email: leena.ismail@perdanauniversity.edu.my

Palani Krishnasamy

Teachers Training Institute

Email: palani@ipgmipoh.edu.my

Asnidar Hanim Yusuf

Perdana University, School of Business

Email: asnidar.hanim@perdanauniversity.edu.my

Asniza Yusuf

Universiti Geomatika Malaysia, Business School

Isai Amutan Krishnan

Perdana University, School of Liberal Arts and Science and Technology

Email: isai.amutan@perdanauniversity.edu.my, amuthan.isai@gmail.com

Abstract

Many fresh graduates became employed after graduation. However, when employed they are still placed in the probationary period by the firm, organisation or organisation and are issued extension of probation by their employers once that period ends. Therefore, the study investigated factors that led to the extension of the probationary periods for fresh graduates when they commenced work. Semi-structured interviews were employed to interview 10 human resource managers. The data were analysed qualitatively using NVIVO. The main reasons were: poor attitudes/behaviour or disciplinary measures, poor work competence, unable to exhibit the values of the organisation, unable to meet the performance targets, and a mismatch with what was indicated during the job interview. The

findings further revealed that most graduates were not willing to accept constructive criticism and later vented their frustrations and anger on social media, which violated the organisations' work ethics. It is expected that this study can benefit trainers of fresh graduates/new employers and undergraduates to improve their potential organisations and consider providing additional training, support, and counselling on how to meet their probation periods.

Keywords: Employers, Fresh Graduates, Probationary, Attitude

Introduction

Getting a new job can be a difficult problem. Adjustments have to be made by both the hirer and worker to cope with different situations and fluctuations. Workers have to acquire new responsibilities and techniques of procedure, whereas managers have to study the diligence, abilities and failings of newly employed workers. A trial period of employment is useful to both employee and employer as it allows some time for both parties to understand each other better, with the expectation that it will lead to a potentially constructive association, although, no rapport is solid (Bai et al., 2006).

The word probation, as mentioned in Grey (1986) journal, 'has been used interchangeably to mean a legal disposition, a measure of leniency, a punitive measure, an administrative process and a treatment method'. This article will look at the probationary period in employment of fresh graduates. During this initial period, of employment, the employees may be dismissed by a firm without any cost, whereas after probation the employees may acquire a high degree of employment protection (Vincenzo, 2008).

The probationary period and approval system offer details regarding the rules and procedures that a newly employed worker has to adhere to while on probation. The procedure indicates that the probationary phase provides an occasion to the new staff and the manager to get familiar and also to enhance performance (Gray, 1986).

The issue of an employee under probation is often associated with poor performance, thus the employer is required to prove that he/she have provided appropriate training and counselling, and that the employee has been warned of termination if he/she fails to prove their quality of work (Aminuddin, 2009). Employers may also extend an employee's probationary period as stated in Jomo's (2013) study that in Malaysia there is a 'tendency for the probation periods to grow leaving more workers to be in an insecure status'. Houseman, Kalleberg and Erickcek (2003) hypothesised that managers find it difficult to terminate workers on probation. However, Jomo further exclaims that the reasons behind the extension of employees' probationary periods are that they can be easily fired and given lower pay and other benefits.

The Malaysian Employment Act 1955 (EA) states that an employee under probation enjoys similar rights and benefits as a confirmed employee. They are entitled to a security of tenure, thus where an employee under probation feels wrongfully dismissed he/she is reserved the right to file a report under Section 20 of the Industrial Relations Act 1967 to the Industrial Relations Department for unfair dismissal within the sixty days from the date of termination. A court hearing is held to determine the validity of the report and if found to be true, that the employee under probation was terminated without a just cause, he/she is entitled to a compensation or back wages (Scoppa, 2010).

However, there is no law on how long a probationary period is set on an employee. Probationary periods are set solely by the employer, but it is commonly a period of six months (Singh, 2008; Donovan & Ho, 2015). An employee under probation when confirmed is usually

given a confirmation letter. If a confirmation or termination letter is not given and the probationary period has ended, the employee is still considered under probation.

Fresh graduates are employed after obtaining their qualifications. Nevertheless, they still fail to complete the probationary period. During the probationary period, an employee is shown a formal structured procedure from his/her manager. The procedure consists of a series of monitoring and reviews between the employee under probation and his/her manager. However, where an employee's probation period is extended due to poor performance, he/she is given a warning and sufficient opportunity in order to improve their performance. A manager assigned to the employee under probation also provides sufficient guidance and advice. Extension of a probationary period is seen as an alternative way for employees with potential to improve and benefit the organisation. Hence, this study aims to investigate the reasons employers extend the probationary period of fresh graduates.

Literature Review

Legal Impacts during the Probationary Phase

Various employment professionals do not favour the probationary phase for new workers employed by an organisation or recently moved to a different post. Their reasoning is centred on the argument that various courts have stated that the mere conclusion of the preliminary probationary period indicates prompt or indirect contractual commitments that make it rather problematic for organisations to dismiss arbitrarily (Bates & Khasawneh, 2005).

Upon successfully completing the probation period, it becomes increasingly difficult to dismiss an employee without strong reasons. Exponents advocating the abolishment of probationary period contend that workers follow the same rules and requirements during the whole period of their employment; therefore it is unnecessary to have a probationary period, and the question of a secure employment will not arise for workers once they have completed probation (Chen et al., 2006).

Some employment professionals support the continuation of the probationary periods but removing the term 'probationary period', because of the adverse interpretations by the courts. They propose replacing the term 'probationary period' with other words like initiation, assessment, training, starting, suitability, or placement periods. Rightfully, these changes could be helpful in avoiding the unwanted repercussions and promises as the word probation has traditionally implied (Blume et al., 2010). Nevertheless, a worker could still surmise from these other words that the manager follows a rule of not dismissing in the absence of very strong reasons once the probation period is over. Therefore, an employer may still face legal problems due to allegations that he/she has a duty to accord fair treatment once an employee has completed the probationary period.

Probation Period and Performance

During the probationary period the actions and conduct of the new employee is evaluated by his or her employer so as to assess their capabilities to handle the job. The probation and approval procedure evidently states that a new worker has to reach the benchmark in his/her work performance, should adhere to established procedures of the organisation and conduct oneself in a satisfactory manner. Most companies have probation periods ranging from 3 months to a year. The probation evaluation phase is also regarded as an addition of the interview procedure. The probation procedure commences with the placement and subsequent job provision, the end of probation period and assessment of accomplishment (Chiaburu & Lindsay, 2008). If the organisation is satisfied with the performance, a letter of

confirmation will be handed to the employee, which usually means that he or she is now a permanent worker. The reporting manager and HR department have critical roles to play during the initial analysis and assessment period. If the worker is unable to achieve the normal level required while on probation, the organisation has a reasonable cause to dismiss the worker. However, some companies do extend the probationary period on a case by case basis. Further, employees on maternity or paternity leave and non-recurring illness, should be provided with longer probation periods by companies, if the concerned employees make an appeal.

Utilisation of Innovative Practices by Industry

Being inventive is an important factor that ensures success, and some companies incorporate innovative ideas that are worker friendly in the probation guidelines. These innovative ideas are specifically formulated in order to ease stress, confusion, insecurity etc., the new worker may experience while working in an unfamiliar setting. Such a program is managed by Infosys called 'Buddy'. In this innovative program an executive and an experienced employee are assigned to assist and guide the new worker to adjust himself or herself to the new working environment, during probation. The team members will assist new workers to be fully aware of the rules and regulations they have to adhere to during the course of the probation period, and assist them to develop their abilities. The 'Buddy' system facilitates new workers to conclude their probation time successfully and become eligible to be confirmed in their employment (Jodlbauer et al., 2012).

Some universities also undertake innovative programs. In the university setting it is often not possible to begin classes on the first day a student enrolls. During the probation or orientation phase the new instructors will be concerned about students' reactions to the new educational environment and how they will be rated by the students. Consequently, some institutions permit new staff to join the senior level staff in their classes to observe and take notes on how the class is conducted as well as to take notes of students' responses or demeanour. At the conclusion of classes, the senior staff familiarises the new staff to the students in order to create a good and confident beginning to their employment. This is a good and suitable technique to reduce apprehension, afford precise details regarding the job scope and assist the new worker so as to enable the probation period to be concluded successfully.

The Framework of Probation Policy

The structure of a probation procedure comprises of various aspects and conformation methods. The new worker, reporting executive, and the HR section make up the probationary procedure. After selection the HR department validates the employment of the new worker and make arrangements for the orientation. The orientation process is crucial for new workers, as they provide important information to them about their duties and actions, the administrative procedures and social rules of the organisation. Following the initiation procedures, the reporting executive allocates the job to the newly recruited workers by taking into consideration their profile (Naquin & Holton, 2002). Pending conclusion of probation time, the workers carry numerous assignments as required by the organisation. At the conclusion of the probation phase, the manager proceeds with the performance appraisal. The appraisal comprises of an assessment of the anticipated performance or fixed goals set by the organisation to the workers in contrast to their real achievements. Employees who meet the criteria set by the manager and the organisation are confirmed in their employment.

Employees, who are unable to satisfy the anticipations of the organisation can be terminated or be considered for additional training to enhance their abilities, see figure 1.

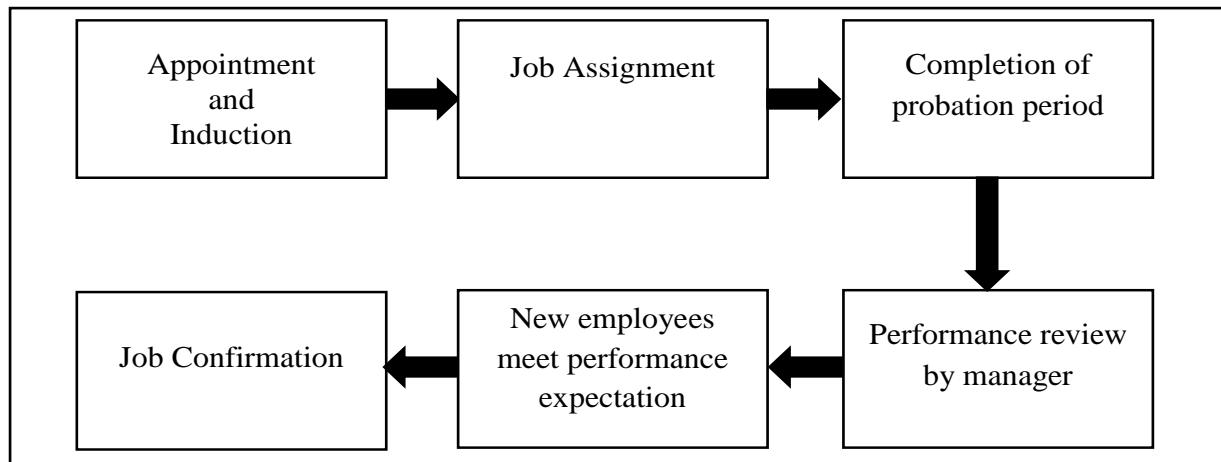


Figure 1. The Framework of Probation Policy

Past Studies

Several studies in the past decade have been done on probationary periods in employment both locally and internationally. A local study by Parasuman and Muniannan (2010) focused solely on the rights and status of a probationer within the context of Malaysian Employment Law. They have stated that probationers under the Employment Act (1955) enjoy the rights of a permanent employee. To enjoy these rights, employees must agree to a contract with their employers where stated by Hassan (2012), 'employees have to be faithful and perform to the best ability in all tasks because when employees enter into a contract of employment, they have promised to undertake and discharge the terms of the contract, whether those terms were expressed or implied'. Hassan's also includes during the probationary period, the new worker is evaluated using a selection criteria classified as 'Key Performance Indicators' (KPI). Hashim (2015), further states the KPI is perceived and set differently by different organisations. An example of a different KPIs are for organisations that adhere to Islamic Human Resource Practices, that base these on values mentioned in the Holy Quran, was analysed by (Azmi, 2010). The process of accepting and terminating is also fundamentally the same under Islamic human resource practices with confirmation letters. The new worker is given warnings as well as guidance from their respective managers, but differs in additional practices such as religious sermons and Islamic discussions. It is vital to take note that Azmi's (2010) study consisted of data collected from questionnaires distributed to Islamic institutions in Malaysia such as the Shariah Court and Takaful but is also related to this study as Malaysia is considered an Islamic country. In the case where an employee under probation is not up to the organisation's standards, Aminuddin (2009), the employee is warned of termination and given appropriate time and training in order to improve. Jomo (2013), in his study states that employers tend to extend probationary periods as opposed to terminating them when they do not meet the organisation's satisfaction.

Studies on temporary employment contracts have been made by international researchers where probation is considered as a form of temporary employment, but the general practice of probationary periods are fundamentally similar locally and internationally. An article posted by Stephenson and Bowal (2014) quotes on probationary periods states that 'since it takes away an employee's usual rights, a probationary period must be expressly agreed to by the employee. It cannot be implied into the relationship. The [employer] must

clearly indicate what will happen if the relationships ends before the probation terminates.’ They further state that an employee on probation status has less job security than a permanent employee, the main difference being a secure tenure. A temporary employment, or probation in this case, could seem as a period of specific training and integration within an organisation that leads to a fixed employment as a first form of security in a professional career (Salladarré & Hlaimi, 2014). Employers are still required to provide a ‘just cause’ in terminating an employee under probation (Bagenstos, 2013), and that evaluation is done from both the employee and employer’s perspectives by assessing suitability in terms of performance and work ethics (Byrnes, 2017).

Vincenzo (2008) states in his study that within the probationary period, an employee is at the will of the firm to release him/her without any cost. The basis of poor performance as seen by supervisors is illustrated in Holmstrom’s (1999) statement: ‘a person’s concern for a future career may influence his or her incentives to put in effort or make decisions on the job’. Therefore, from Holmstrom’s view, it can be inferred that workers under probation need to display effort to instil confidence of their abilities to their supervisors. However, Holmstrom’s study did not focus on absenteeism as part of the factor for employees work incentive, instead focuses on the employees labour and effort. As seen in other literature from Ichino & Riphahn (2004); Drever (2005), absenteeism is seen as a form of shirking, an act of neglecting or avoiding duty. ‘Absenteeism rates differ across countries in ways which are not easy to explain and are typically connected to substantial costs for the respective economies’ (Ichino & Riphahn, 2004). However, Ichino and Riphahn (2004) consider days of absence officially classified as “due to illness” as part of their data and state that there is a difference in rates of absenteeism during certain stages of the probationary period, which span between the first week, the following weeks and the duration after probation. It has been established by examining previous investigations that, there is hardly any research conducted to establish the reasons why employers extend the probationary period of fresh graduates.

Methodology

Due to the involvement of human interactions i.e; interviews, qualitative method was used in this study (Creswell, 2018). The data acquired cannot be quantified in measurements as it encompasses human experiences and opinions through the language of the informant which can be analysed to discover trends in thought, which this study aims to find. There was a total of 10 participants participated in this study; and they were Human Resource managers (HR) with 25 to 35 years of working experience from multinational companies and other institutions within Klang Valley. Multinational organisations referred as the organisation has strong businesses locally and regionally or internationally. Each HR manager represents an organisation; therefore, 10 different organisations exposure and experience were shared. The industries range from electronic, educational, insurance, banking, medical, customer service and laboratory. Consent was obtained from the authorities to obtain the data and semi-structured interviews were used in this study. According to Pathak (2012) semi-structure interviews provide an easy approach and access to in depth information within the informant. This method also allows for flexible technique for a small-scale research (Dreber, 1955), as a form of data collection through human involvement such as interviews, conversations and other interactions, where the interviewers had limited time to answer questionnaires. The questions posed in the interview were, the duration of newly appointed employee’s probation period in their organisation, the minimum and maximum extension of probationary

periods, the main reasons for extension of probationary periods, the employees' confirmation after the extended probation, the processes undergone by the employee to go for extended probation, the quality of improvement during the employee's extended probation, and the employee's acceptance of the probation.

Analysis

There were 5 questions asked to elicit for information. They were:

1. What is the probation period for a newly appointed employee in your organisation?
2. Do you encounter any extended probation for the employee? If yes, what is the minimum and maximum of probation period?
3. What are the main reasons for the employee to extend his/her probation?
4. Are the employees finally confirmed after the extended probation? If no, what are the reasons?
5. What are the processes for the employee to go for extended probation? e.g any counselling by Head of Department (HOD) or Human HR? Any affirmation or input given by employees?

'What is the probation period for a newly appointed employee in your organisation?'

The results were drawn from the answers given by the Human Resource Managers during the interviews. The first interview question inquires on the usual length of the probationary period set for new employees. All the respondents stated that a three months probationary period was given to non-executive employees, and a six months period was given to executive employees which are the common practise.

'Do you encounter any extended probation for the employee? If yes, what is the minimum and maximum of probation period?'

Human Resource Managers were also asked the reasons for extending an employee's probationary period. Overall, they answered that they seldom extend probationary periods, but if they choose to do so it is only extended for a maximum of three months for non-executive staff and six months for executive staff. This does not align with Jomo's (2013) statement where employers in Malaysia tend to extend contracts and probationary periods of employees, and indicates a shift in employer's attitudes towards extending probationary periods of their new staff.

'What are the main reasons for an employee to extend their probation?'

From the responses given in the interviews for the third question, it was found that the reason for extension of fresh graduate's probationary period was mainly due to fresh graduate's attitude. There was a long list of attitudes mentioned by the HR Managers and could be categorised into 3 distinct levels which were mild, intermediate and drastic attitudes.

'Mild Attitude'

The mild attitude involved being absent from work for 2 days without any notification or informing the superiors, being late to work, not accountable to projects and did not display team coordination. Being late was referred to as arriving an hour or later to work. If this problem was repeated three times without any valid reason or evidence for being late, action could be taken according to the employment act as stated in the appointment or offer letter. The evidence or proof required by the organisation for being late could be due to vehicle

breakdown or health problem. There should be some kind of valid evidence in the form of invoice, bill, receipt or medical certificate produced. For example, if the vehicle's tyre was punctured, there should be some form of receipt from the tyre shop. Another example could be the closure of road due to flash flood that caused heavy traffic; images should be taken and sent to the immediate superior for being late to work. These types of evidence will be taken as genuine proof and will not affect the employee's record. The other area of concern was not being accountable for work e.g. when there was a fault at work, the involved employee would not admit the mistake and pointed to others or put the blames on other co-workers. This showed the employee was unwilling to be responsible for h/her work. Failing to display team coordination was also categorised under the mild attitude problem. This was because it caused delay in the work and affected the production output. Without team coordination, miscommunication easily occurred and work would not be efficient. This type of attitude was still tolerable and was often counselled in order to improvise his/her work efficiency. However, when this attitude was repeated then it would be filed and recorded for probationary extension.

'Intermediate Attitude'

The intermediate attitude showed fresh graduates having a habit of being absent from work for 5 days or more, presenting medical certificate from non-panel clinics or clinics that were not recognized by the organisation. They also failed to commit to projects, and failed to meet the organisation deadlines. This attitude caused more workload for other working colleagues, as there was no choice but to give last minute or ad-hoc duties to others so that the organisation could meet the deadline. It should be noted that the organisation's deadline was not the same as the employee's deadline. The organisation might incur loss and would not be able to meet its target. An employee facing this kind of attitude might definitely be provided an extension in probation and perhaps given counselling.

'Drastic Attitude'

The final attitude responded by the HR Managers were manipulation, hallucination, arrogance and breaking organisation's rules. Graduates who exhibited drastic levels of attitude problems were manipulative and suffered from hallucinations, egoistic and arrogant, and frequently violated the organisation's terms and conditions.

These responses echoed the study of 'Key Performance Indicators' by Hashim (2015); Azmi (2010); Byrnes (2017) on the set of requirements, values, work ethics employees that were evaluated by during probation.

It was observed that during the probation period there were cases of fresh graduates as probationary employees who were found to be absent from work for a number of days without informing the office or the superiors. This was termed as AWOL (absent without official leave or notice or permission) that a direct violation to the organisation. There were also incidences that the medical certificate or MC obtained was issued by the non-panel clinic. Every new employee was informed and given a list of panel clinics for them to seek medical treatment and yet these probationary employees failed to comply. The severe case of absenteeism was the medical certificates or letters were not recognised. Upon closer observation of the medical certificates it was discovered they were forged. This was also a direct violation of the organisation's regulation. It appeared that being 'absent' to work had become a kind of trend among the current generation. They were prepared to listen to complaints by the superiors and yet preferred to repeat them. The reasons presented agree

with Ichino and Riphahn's (2004) statement as it indicated that attitude was also a contributing factor for absenteeism among workers, specifically among fresh graduates in local companies.

Apart from absenteeism as a trait among the local graduates, the HR Managers also mentioned the lack of other traits among the fresh graduates like the lack of commitment, lack of concern, lack of effort, lack of initiatives and lack of interest.

Interestingly, the fresh graduates under probation demonstrated a lack of effort in not committing to projects and failure to meet the organisation's deadlines. Holmstrom's (1999) study has focused on a person's concern for future career advancement, and has suggested that the fresh graduate's failure to cooperate and display commitment is a lack of concern for any career advancement. However, the reason behind the fresh graduates' behaviour cannot be understood without interviewing them. The following interview questions asked the Human Resource Managers of actions they had taken after an employee's probation period had ended. Generally, they stated that the employee in question was confirmed as a permanent employee if they had done well during the probation. However, if the employee under probation was found unsuitable, the organisation would not confirm his /her employment, but would reconsider extending the probationary period. In the case where the organisation chooses to extend their probationary period, the employee would undergo three evaluation processes and were informed of the areas they needed to improve, besides providing counselling from the human resource manager. If the employee did not improve within the timeframe of the extension, which was another three months, they were terminated and expected to leave the organisation. This complies with Aminuddin's (2009); Stephenson and Bowal's (2014) statements that when an employee is not confirmed for permanent employment, they are instead warned of termination and given proper training and counselling in order to improve their performance to meet organisation's requirements.

Discussion

The findings showed that all participants had mentioned that the normal duration of the probationary period required for new workers and it should be three months for non-executive workers and six months for executive workers. They added that the probationary periods were rarely extended, and if given, was only for three months for non-executive employees and six months for executive employees. This contradicts Jomo's (2013) announcement that Malaysian employers are inclined to extend employment contracts and the probation periods of workers, and indicated a change in employers' views regarding prolonging the probationary periods of their new workers.

Additionally, the reasons for the new employee's probation being extended were found to be primarily due to the employee's approaches and attitudes. The HR people revealed an extensive list of employee mind-sets that fell into 3 classifications, namely minor, intermediate and severe. In addition to that, the worker refused to take responsibility for his/her task. Failure to show team spirit was also regarded to come under the minor mind-set category. The reason being poor team disrupted workflow causing delays which impacted the manufacturing process. In the absence of team work, there was a high likelihood of miscommunication which caused disruptions in the smooth workflow in the organisation. This attitude could still be accepted to a point with counselling being provided to these employees to improve their work attitudes. Nevertheless, if there was a lack of improvement or positive

change in their attitudes the information gathered would be retained for the purpose of the extension of probation.

It was also observed that they lacked commitment to plans and ventures, and were unable to complete the organisation's assignments on time. This behaviour resulted in other workers having no choice but to accept the additional work and complete it to meet the deadline set by the organisation. It must be noted that the deadline set by the organisation is not equivalent to employee deadline. If employees delayed their jobs, the organisation was bound to suffer losses and would be unable to meet its budgetary needs. To avoid adverse situations that might affect the organisation's bottom line, new employees should receive more intensive training as well as counselling during the extended probation. In the context of poor performance by new employees, the HR executives mentioned that some of them had serious attitudinal issues like manipulation, hallucination, egoistic and compulsive rule breakers. These findings resonate with the research conducted by Hashim (2015); Azmi (2010); Byrnes (2017) on 'Key Performance Indicators' that are a series of conditions, principles, and work ethos on which workers are assessed by during probation.

The Human Resource Managers can take actions after an employee's probation period has ended. Generally, they stated that the employee in question is confirmed if they had performed well during their probation. However, if the employee under probation was found unsuitable, the organisation would not confirm their employment, but reconsider extending their probationary period. If the organisation chooses to extend their probationary period, the employee will undergo three evaluation processes and are informed of which areas they need to improve, besides providing counselling from their human resource manager. If the employee does not improve within the timeframe of the extension, which is another three months, they are terminated and expected to leave the organisation. This complies with the statements made by Aminuddin (2009); Stephenson and Bowal (2014) where an employee is not confirmed, instead they are warned of termination and given proper training and counselling in order to improve their performance to meet the requirements of the organisation. It is clearly evident the all possible help is provided to the new employee during probation to ensure that he/she successfully completes this impotent period before he/she is confirmed in the job. Companies also need to maintain their rules and regulations to function smoothly and cannot change to favour an individual. As such any action implemented on negligent new employees is considered carefully as companies are also bound by employment acts that would later lead to legal actions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is necessary for the organisation to undertake a careful study of the background of the new graduates undergoing probation in the organisation. In general, background investigation, may reveal that their quality of emotional, and social well-being but at a lower scale. This investigation proposes that senior executives have to improve and upgrade the human resource linked procedures so as to increase the standard of assurance to the probation period and also the employee. Managers should also consider the socioeconomic factors of employees during probation to facilitate the designing of a strategy or other work connected programs. These programmes can enable improvements to their job commitment that can later do away with extensions of probation period. The current study is envisaged to be beneficial to trainers of new graduates/new hirers and undergraduates to advance their prospects. Companies can also study the possibility of offering further training,

assistance, and advice ways to manage the probation periods. Any measure introduced should be beneficial to both the new employees during probation and the organisations that are going to employ them. However, organisations should also be cautious as it is their duty to employ new workers who are responsible. As such the hiring managers and HR department should conduct a preliminary investigation before anyone is employed so that there is fewer problems later.

The current study had only limited access to respondents from various establishments because of Covid-19 and the confidential nature of the information provided by the worker. Hence, it is crucial for future investigations to examine the connection of organisational obligations with other job connected behaviour that effect organisational functioning. It was also important to take into account and appreciate the work by new graduates in organisations who were employed and were serving the probationary period. In line with that, an interview session can be conducted with those who staff who were extended the probation period to enhance the significance contribution for the study. When reflecting on the organisational assurance outcomes based on this investigation, Pence (1996) mentions that a decrease in assurance is the outcome of ineffective help schemes, that have been unsuccessful in supporting the outstanding schemes developed by new graduates during the probation period. Pence (1996) also stated that in order to elicit an undertaking from new graduates on probation, the management and executives have to enhance the administrative assistance schemes like the strategies and processes, rules and regulation, communication schemes, instruction and incentive schemes, and other programs that can inspire the extent of commitment of the probation period staff to the organisation. More research needs to be done in the future to investigate different facets of organisational concepts that affect the organisational undertakings, as well as recognising issues that affect the organisational undertaking and also the upshots to the organisation overall. It is important for companies to recognise and reward probationary period staff so as to inspire them to perform better.

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