

How Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Institution Employee Perceptions towards their Work Environment

Mohd Fakardian Che Rus¹, Dr Wong Huey Siew²

¹Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Open University Malaysia,

²Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Open University Malaysia

Email: fakardian@oum.edu.my, wonghueysiew@oum.edu.my

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i7/22326>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v14-i7/22326

Published Date: 27 July 2024

Abstract

This research investigated how employees at an Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution in Malaysia perceive their work environment. The focus was on three aspects: feeling in control of their work (job autonomy), having the skills to do their jobs well (job competency), and feeling invested in their careers (career commitment). The study used surveys sent through Google Forms to gather data from 69 out of 100 employees (69% response rate). The results showed that employees generally had a positive view of their work environment (average score of 3.90 out of 5) and felt satisfied with their jobs (average score of 3.95 out of 5). An analysis was done to see if these positive perceptions were linked to the actual work environment. The results found a strong, positive connection (correlation coefficient of .896) between employee perceptions and the work environment itself, with a very high level of significance ($p < .001$). This suggests that a positive work environment at this ODL institution contributes to employee satisfaction.

Keywords: Perception, Work Environment, Job Satisfaction, Open and Distance Learning.

Background

As Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions like Open University Malaysia (OUM), Wawasan Open University (WOU), Asia E-University (AEU), University Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR), offering flexible education to busy adults, their success hinges not just on teaching methods, but also on fostering a positive work environment for their staff. This study delves into employee perceptions within these ODL institutions, examining how they view their work environment and job satisfaction. By understanding these factors, we can gain valuable insights into what keeps ODL staff engaged and contributes to the overall educational landscape.

Problem Statement

This study aims to investigate employee perceptions of the work environment within Malaysian Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. Research suggests a positive work environment fosters creativity, productivity, and employee morale (Zaman et al., 2014), while a negative one leads to decreased effectiveness and communication (Arbor et al., 2014). Despite the growing importance of ODL institutions, limited research explores employee perceptions in this context. ODL employees often face unique challenges, including weekend work, handling diverse adult learners, and managing multiple deadlines. Given the impact of work environment on employee satisfaction and institutional success, this study seeks to address this gap in knowledge. By examining employee perceptions in Malaysian ODL institutions, the research aims to provide actionable recommendations for improving the work environment and ultimately, the effectiveness of these educational organizations.

Research Objectives

This research focuses on systematically examining and analysing how employees perceive the work environment in Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. Specifically, the study aims to:

1. Assess employees' perceptions of the work environment in ODL institutions
2. Examine the employees' perceptions of their job satisfaction level
3. To determine the relationship between job satisfaction and work environment in ODL Institution

Research questions/Hypotheses

Specifically, this study is to answer the following research questions:

1. What is employees' perception of the work environment?
2. What is the level of job satisfaction among ODL Institution employees?
3. What is the relationship between job satisfaction and work environment in ODL Institution?

Meanwhile, the hypothesis for this study is:

HN0 : There is no significant relationship between Work Environment and Job Satisfaction.

HN1 : There is significant relationship between Work Environment and Job Satisfaction.

Contributions of the Research

This research on employee perceptions in Open Distance Learning (ODL) holds value for everyone in the educational landscape. By understanding what shapes employee views of their work environment, we can develop strategies to improve employee well-being, job satisfaction, and overall performance. Satisfied employees are more motivated and productive, ultimately leading to a more effective institution and better educational outcomes for students. The benefits extend beyond employees and students. Policymakers can leverage these insights to make informed decisions, and ODL institutions themselves can foster a more innovative and adaptable workforce. Furthermore, this research fills a critical gap in academic literature, contributing to the ongoing effort to create positive work environments in institutions dedicated to remote and flexible learning. Ultimately, this research has the potential to drive positive change across the board, benefiting employees, students, policymakers, and the entire educational community.

Literature Review

Since Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions operate in a unique environment, it's crucial to understand how employees perceive their work environment. This environment directly impacts employee well-being, job satisfaction, and ultimately, the success of the institution itself. A positive work environment isn't just about individual satisfaction; it fuels employee motivation, commitment, and productivity, leading to a more effective ODL institution. Furthermore, as ODL institutions strive to deliver quality education remotely, fostering a supportive work environment is essential for cultivating innovation and adaptability among their staff.

This literature review serves as a springboard for delving deeper into this topic. By summarizing existing research, it contributes to the ongoing discussion about the connection between workplace dynamics and education. This knowledge can inform decision-making, policy development, and future research efforts aimed at improving the professional experiences of employees within the ever-changing world of open and distance learning.

A growing body of research by scholars across various institutions (Mohd Rokeman et al., 2023; Patel & Chandra, 2022; Marius et al., 2022; Chika et al., 2022; Eric et al., 2022; Richard, 2022; I. Bakir & Seyda, 2022; Daka et al., 2018; Mukuka-Hagane & Daka, 2018) highlights the importance of job satisfaction in educational settings. These studies demonstrate that a positive work environment fosters employee motivation, which in turn leads to improved teacher effectiveness and successful completion of tasks (Mohd Rokeman et al., 2023; Patel & Chandra, 2022).

Job satisfaction is described as the positive emotions and rewarding experiences employees receive from their work, ultimately increasing their perceived value of the position (Syamsir & Hidayat, 2020). Positive feelings and enjoyment of the job contribute to employee satisfaction. However, in educational settings, factors like excessive workloads, stress, student behaviour issues, co-worker conflict, lack of administrative support, and inconsistent student assignments can lead to job dissatisfaction among teachers (reference the most recent source first). An employee's cognitive evaluation of their work environment, or job satisfaction, is a major factor influencing retention (Syamsir & Hidayat, 2020). Satisfaction, characterized by feelings of pleasure, contentment, and positive emotions, is influenced by motivation and a supportive work environment (Bell & Sheridan, 2020). High job satisfaction within an organization leads to positive outcomes in terms of output and performance (Zaffar, 2018).

Irwandy & Rahmawati (2022) investigated employee perceptions of work environment and motivation during COVID-19 at Semen Padang Hospital, along with the impact on employee performance. While descriptive analysis revealed generally positive employee perceptions, SEM analysis showed a significant, positive influence of work environment on performance, with work motivation not having a significant effect.

Peyton & Zigarmi (2021) found that a positive work environment is more strongly linked to a healthy form of passion (harmonious passion) in employees, and moderately linked to an obsessive form (contradictory to expectations). Harmonious passion then leads to positive work intentions, while the link between obsessive passion and work intentions was mixed. This suggests that a positive work environment fosters a healthy type of passion, which in turn motivates employees (Peyton & Zigarmi, 2021).

Supporting this notion, other studies have shown that positive work environment factors like good working conditions, recreational facilities, and a sense of fun contribute to job satisfaction (Jain & Kaur, 2014). Organizations that recognize the importance of a positive

work environment are more likely to have satisfied employees (Raziq & Maulabakhsha, 2015). Furthermore, research suggests that employee satisfaction and performance lead to higher productivity (Sukdeo, 2017).

Employee job crafting behaviours and their commitment to the organization are significantly influenced by job autonomy and the overall work environment (Nie et al., 2023; Ahakwa et al., 2021; Jenkins & Neal, 2023). These studies highlight that job autonomy and a sense of purpose in one's work (work meaning) positively impact employee crafting behaviours, organizational commitment, and positive social interactions within the workplace. Furthermore, Go et al., (2022) explore the influence of a smart work environment on employee innovation and the various aspects of job autonomy within this context. Collectively, these findings emphasize the critical role job autonomy and work environment play in shaping employee behaviours and overall organizational outcomes.

Several studies have found significant positive influences of work environment and job competency on employee job satisfaction and performance. Specifically, Pranitasari and Julian (2022) highlight a substantial effect of competence on job involvement, while Lee et al. (2022) found a positive correlation between job competency and job satisfaction. Furthermore, both Pranitasari et al. and Kharisma and Rosia (2022) emphasize the influence of the work environment on job satisfaction. Interestingly, Pranitasari and Julian and Kharisma and Rosia (2022) also demonstrate the mediating role of job satisfaction in the relationship between work environment, competence, and performance.

Goswami (2022) highlights the importance of human capital in organizations, emphasizing essential skills like critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity. The study explores the connections between competence, work commitment, and organizational culture within the Regional VIII Education Office Branch Office in Mentawai Islands Regency. Their findings suggest a link between low work commitment and low competence, leading to decreased performance and a less positive organizational culture. This emphasizes the crucial interplay between these three factors, underlining the need for dedicated and skilled individuals to foster a positive work environment (Goswami, 2022).

Inegbedion et al. (2020) investigated the relationship between perceived workload balance and employee job satisfaction across various organizations in Nigeria. Using structural equation modeling and a sample of 764 employees from multinational organizations and private universities, the study found that factors such as comparing workload with colleagues and aligning job roles with competencies significantly influence both employee perceptions of workload balance and job satisfaction. Interestingly, the study also revealed that the size of the organization plays a role, with employees in smaller organizations perceiving a better work-life balance and consequently reporting higher job satisfaction.

Motivation, a complex construct, plays a pivotal role in shaping employee behaviour and performance. In the unique context of ODL institutions, several factors have been identified as influencing employee motivation. When employees in ODL institutions experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness, their intrinsic motivation is likely to increase (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For instance, studies have shown that providing ODL employees with flexibility in work arrangements and opportunities for professional development can enhance their motivation and job satisfaction (Chen & Huang, 2022).

This study's foundation lies in Herzberg et al.'s (1959) two-factor theory, also known as the motivation-hygiene theory. This theory proposes that separate sets of factors influence job satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The researchers utilized this framework to explore the relationships between these factors and overall employee job satisfaction.

According to the two-factor theory, two main categories of factors impact employee satisfaction: motivators (intrinsic factors) and hygiene factors (extrinsic factors). Motivational factors, such as job content, recognition, responsibility, and growth opportunities, contribute directly to job satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959). In contrast, hygiene factors, including working conditions, job security, salary, and benefits, primarily address job dissatisfaction. The core hypothesis of the theory is that hygiene factors are necessary to prevent dissatisfaction but do not directly lead to satisfaction. On the other hand, motivational factors are essential for increasing intrinsic job well-being and employee satisfaction (Herzberg et al., 1959).

Methodology

This research employs a quantitative approach, surveying 100 randomly selected employees across various departments within an Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution (citation needed for sampling method).

The study instrument is a modified questionnaire based on Paul E. Spector's Job Satisfaction Survey (Spector, year). It gathers demographic information and uses a five-point Likert scale to assess positive statements related to job autonomy, job competency, and career commitment (Spector, year). The questionnaire was modified to include 21 questions: 16 statements focusing on the employee work environment (job autonomy, job competency, and career commitment) and 5 statements on job satisfaction. It was then distributed to the 100 participants through Google Forms.

The survey yielded 69 responses (response rate of 69%). Data was downloaded into Microsoft Excel and analyzed using SPSS 22 software. Descriptive statistics, including frequency distribution, percentages, and weighted means, were used to evaluate employee perceptions of the work environment (focusing on job autonomy, job competency, and career commitment) and overall job satisfaction.

Spearman's rank-order correlation coefficient was employed to assess the relationship between the work environment and job satisfaction. Data analysis involved checking completed questionnaires for accurate data entry, followed by in-depth analysis using IBM SPSS Statistics 22. This analysis included descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, and calculation of the Spearman correlation coefficient.

The results will be presented in tables, displaying frequencies, means, and percentages for both dependent and independent variables. Additionally, overall means for work environment and job satisfaction will be reported.

Finding and Discussion

This study assessed employee perceptions of their work environment and job satisfaction. To measure work environment, a weighted mean was calculated based on employees' responses to statements regarding job autonomy, job competency, and career commitment. Job satisfaction was measured using a separate set of statements. The Spearman rank-order correlation coefficient was then employed to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between work environment and job satisfaction.

This study successfully addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the employee from ODL Institution's perception of their work environment? Specifically, what are their perception of the following:
 - a. job autonomy
 - b. job competency
 - c. career commitment
2. What is the level of job satisfaction of ODL Institution employees?
3. What is the relationship between job satisfaction and work environment in ODL Institution?

This study hypothesized that:

H₀: There is no significant relationship between Work Environment and Job Satisfaction.

H₁: There is a significant relationship between Work Environment and Job Satisfaction.

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation and Variance for Work Environment and Job Satisfaction

Variables	No. of respondents	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Job Autonomy	69	2.57	5.00	4.0169	.54262	.294
Job Competency	69	2.60	5.00	4.0565	.57637	.332
Career Commitment	69	1.00	5.00	3.3913	.88415	.782
Job Satisfaction	69	1.40	5.00	3.9464	.78301	.613
Work Environment	69	2.10	5.00	3.8083	.61354	.376
Valid N (listwise)	69					

Legends: 4.21-5.00 - Very good /Very satisfied; 3.41-4.20 - Good/satisfied; 2.61-3.40 - Somewhat good/Somewhat satisfied; 1.81-2.60 - Bad/Dissatisfied; 1.00-1.80 - Very bad/ Very dissatisfied

Employee Perceptions and Job Satisfaction:

Table 1 indicates that employees generally perceive their work environment positively (M = 3.8083), suggesting satisfaction with their jobs at the ODL Institution. Among the three dimensions measured, job competency received the highest mean score (M = 4.0565), followed by job autonomy (M = 4.0169). Career commitment had the lowest mean score (M = 3.3913), suggesting this aspect may require further attention. Overall job satisfaction also yielded a positive mean score (M = 3.9464), indicating a high degree of satisfaction among ODL Institution employees.

Addressing Research Questions:

These findings directly address the research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** Employee perceptions of the work environment were positive, with an overall mean score of 3.90.
- **Research Question 2:** Employees reported high job satisfaction, with an overall mean score of 3.95.

Table 2

Correlation Between Work Environment and Job Satisfaction

			Job Satisfaction	Work Environment
Spearman's rho	JobSatisfaction	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.896**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	69	69
	WorkEnvironment	Correlation Coefficient	.896**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	69	69

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Relationship Between Work Environment and Job Satisfaction (Research Question 3):

Table 2 reveals a significant positive correlation ($r = .896$, $N = 69$, $p < .001$) between work environment and job satisfaction in the ODL institution. This indicates that employees who perceive a more positive work environment also report higher levels of job satisfaction. Based on this finding, the null hypothesis (H_0) stating no significant relationship between work environment and job satisfaction is rejected. Conversely, the alternative hypothesis (H_1), proposing a significant relationship between these two variables, is supported.

Table 3:
Cronbach's Alpha for Variables

Variables	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	No of Items
Job satisfaction	.912	.913	5
Job Autonomy	.784	.778	7
Job Competency	.790	.795	5
Career Commitment	.736	.744	4

Internal Consistency (Reliability):

Table 3 presents the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for the study's measures. The dependent variable, job satisfaction, demonstrated strong internal consistency ($\alpha = .912$). This suggests a high level of coherence among the items used to measure this construct.

The independent variables also displayed acceptable reliability. Job competency ($\alpha = .790$ with 5 questions) and job autonomy ($\alpha = .784$ with 7 questions) both achieved acceptable alpha values, indicating that the items within each measure are positively correlated and relevant to the overall construct. Career commitment, with a score of $\alpha = .736$ (4 questions), also falls within an acceptable range for reliability.

In summary, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients for all measures in this study suggest a high degree of internal consistency, indicating that the questions within each variable are interrelated and effectively measure the intended constructs.

Discussion and Implications

Employee Perceptions of the Work Environment:

This study examined employee perceptions of the work environment at an Open Distance Learning (ODL) Institution, focusing on job autonomy, job competency, and career commitment.

- **Job Autonomy:** Employees reported a positive perception of job autonomy, indicating that the ODL Institution grants them freedom in performing tasks and choosing work methods. This aligns with Kubicek et al. (2017) and Ozkoc (2016), who define job autonomy as the level of discretion employees have in their work execution. However, it is important to acknowledge that excessive autonomy can lead to counterproductive behaviour (source needed).
- **Job Competency:** Employees also held a positive view of their job competency. Job competency refers to the skills and abilities needed to perform job duties effectively. This suggests the ODL Institution effectively evaluates candidate and employee competency, potentially contributing to job satisfaction as supported by Weigelt et al. (2019). While Adam and Kamase (2019) suggest job satisfaction may not be impacted by all aspects of competency, ongoing training programs can further enhance employee skills and development.
- **Career Commitment:** Although employees expressed moderate satisfaction with career commitment, this area warrants further investigation by the ODL Institution. Research by Herachwati & Rachman (2018) suggests a link between organizational commitment

and career commitment, where employees with high organizational commitment are more likely to stay with the organization and pursue their career path within it. A strong sense of company attachment can motivate employees to continue working there. The ODL Institution should explore additional factors that foster organizational commitment beyond job satisfaction. This finding is partially aligned with Zhang & Chen (2019) who explored the relationship between professional calling, career commitment, and job satisfaction in knowledge-based employees within a Chinese context. Their research suggests career calling plays a significant role in job satisfaction mediated by career commitment. Future studies could explore how to stimulate work enthusiasm among knowledge-based employees by fostering a sense of career calling.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of job autonomy and job competency in fostering a positive work environment at the ODL Institution. However, the need for further exploration of career commitment factors to enhance employee retention and satisfaction is also emphasized.

Employee Job Satisfaction:

Consistent with the positive perceptions of the work environment, employees at the ODL Institution reported a high level of job satisfaction (overall mean = 3.95). This finding aligns with prior research on job satisfaction among non-academic staff (Dompelage et al., 2019), which identified factors like working conditions, job security, autonomy, relationships with colleagues and superiors, advancement opportunities, and compensation as key determinants of satisfaction in this employee group.

It is important to consider the potential influence of both Herzberg's motivators and hygiene factors on employee satisfaction at the ODL Institution. Herzberg's two-factor theory (Herzberg et al., 1959) proposes that job satisfaction and dissatisfaction are influenced by separate sets of factors. While motivators (e.g., job content, recognition, advancement) directly contribute to satisfaction, hygiene factors (e.g., working conditions, salary, security) primarily address dissatisfaction. Future research could explore the specific contributions of these factors to job satisfaction within the ODL Institution context.

Relationship Between Work Environment and Job Satisfaction:

This study found a significant positive correlation ($r = .896$, $N = 69$, $p < .001$) between work environment and job satisfaction at the ODL Institution. This indicates that employees who perceive a more positive work environment also report higher levels of job satisfaction. This finding aligns with previous research by Raziq and Maulabakhsha (2015) who identified a positive relationship between these two variables.

In conclusion, these findings emphasize the importance of a positive work environment for maximizing employee job satisfaction within the ODL Institution and potentially in similar organizational settings.

Limitations of the Study**Limitations:**

Several limitations are important to consider when interpreting the study's findings (Bryman, 2015). These limitations include:

- **Sample Size:** The study relied on a relatively small sample size ($N = 69$) from a single ODL Institution. This limits the generalizability of the findings to other ODL Institutions.

- **Data Collection:** The voluntary nature of the survey participation may have introduced bias, as those who chose not to participate could have differed systematically from those who did.
- **Measurement:** The use of a Likert scale survey may have resulted in social desirability bias, where participants may have responded in a way they perceived as socially acceptable rather than reflecting their true feelings (Alwin, 2014).

Future research could address these limitations by employing a larger, more representative sample across multiple ODL Institutions. Additionally, utilizing a combination of survey and interview methods could provide a richer understanding of employee perceptions.

Conclusion

This study found that employees at the ODL Institution perceive their work environment positively and that a positive work environment is significantly correlated with job satisfaction. These findings align with previous research highlighting the importance of the work environment for employee satisfaction (e.g., Raziq & Maulabakhsha, 2015).

Based on these results, several evidence-based strategies can be implemented to cultivate a positive work environment in ODL Institutions:

- **Communication and Transparency:** Clear and frequent communication regarding institutional goals, policies, and updates is crucial (Bryman, 2015). Encouraging employee feedback can further enhance transparency and employee engagement.
- **Professional Development and Recognition:** Providing opportunities for professional development and recognizing employee achievements are essential for fostering job satisfaction (Dompelage et al., 2019).
- **Work-Life Balance:** Supporting a healthy work-life balance is another key factor in employee satisfaction (Raziq & Maulabakhsha, 2015).
- **Empowerment and Collaboration:** Empowering employees with autonomy and fostering a collaborative and inclusive work culture can significantly contribute to a positive work environment (Kubicek et al., 2017).
- **Continuous Improvement:** Establishing a feedback loop for continuous improvement allows for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of workplace practices to best meet employee needs.
- **Enhance Motivation:** By uncovering the factors that contribute to a positive work environment in ODL institutions, this study offers practical recommendations for improving employee engagement, motivation, and productivity.

By implementing these strategies, ODL Institutions can create a more positive work environment that fosters employee satisfaction and potentially reduces turnover.

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