

The Power of Personal Reputation: Unveiling the Key Influences on Professional Centennials in Malaysia's Service Industry

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Abstract

Malaysia's decline in the Global Talent Competitiveness Index (GTCI) underscores a need to address intangible factors in talent management. This study examines how political skill, work-life balance (WLB), and organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB) influence personal reputation among professional Centennials in Malaysia's service industry, with trust as a potential mediator. Using signaling theory, data was collected from 201 respondents through an online survey and analyzed via Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Results show that political skill, WLB, and OCB positively enhance personal reputation, while trust does not mediate these relationships. Political skill emerged as the most influential factor. The findings offer insights for practitioners aiming to develop competitive talent strategies centered on personal reputation.

Keywords: Personal Reputation, Political Skill, Work-Life Balance, Organizational Citizenship Behaviour, Trust

Introduction

Malaysia's talent competitiveness has declined from 26th in 2020 to 42nd in 2023 (GTCI Report, 2023). Despite efforts to improve skills and education, little emphasis is placed on personal reputation, which is a critical factor for career progression, stakeholder trust, and retention. This study responds to that gap by investigating the roles of political skill, WLB, and OCB in shaping personal reputation among professional Centennials in the service sector, utilizing signaling theory to conceptualize these constructs as reputational signals.

Literature Review

Malaysia's talent competitiveness has declined in recent years, falling from 26th in 2020 to 42nd in 2023 (GTCI Report, 2023). While the Global Talent Competitiveness Index emphasizes formal mechanisms such as education, skills training, and workforce policies, intangible elements like personal reputation remain underexamined. In service-oriented economies, personal reputation contributes to perceptions of credibility, trustworthiness, and

professional value, which are essential for career progression, stakeholder confidence, and talent retention (Gruber, 2021). Despite its relevance, there is limited empirical research addressing personal reputation as a key factor in national talent strategies.

Personal reputation is a socially constructed judgment formed by public observations of an individual's actions, personality, human capital, and social involvement (Gök, 2022). Positive behaviors, strong interpersonal traits, and participation in professional and political networks enhance visibility and signal trust. In the service sector, reputation shapes client perceptions and directly influences organizational outcomes (Harvey and Mitchell, 2015). However, the process of reputation development is complex due to information asymmetries and shifting generational expectations (Rindova et al., 2010). Centennials, defined as individuals born between 1995 and 2012 (Maloni et al., 2019), represent a growing segment of the workforce whose personal and professional identities are closely tied to how they are perceived.

This study adopts signaling theory to explain how personal reputation is developed and interpreted. According to Spence (1973), signals are behaviors or attributes that convey information about an individual's quality to others. In this context, Centennials act as signalers through their political skill, work-life balance, and organizational citizenship behaviour, while colleagues and stakeholders act as receivers who evaluate these signals. Reputation itself functions as a signal that reduces informational gaps and supports judgments of competence and reliability (Zinko et al., 2015).

Political skill, defined as a form of social intelligence and interpersonal influence, is strongly linked to professional reputation (Ferris et al., 2007; Blickle et al., 2020). Individuals who demonstrate networking ability, social awareness, and authenticity are more likely to be viewed as competent and trustworthy (Yang and Treadway, 2018). WLB has also been associated with enhanced personal reputation, as it reflects self-regulation, reliability, and commitment to sustainable performance (Premarajan et al., 2022). Employees with a good balance between work and personal life tend to gain positive evaluations from colleagues and supervisors (Jaharuddin and Zainol, 2019).

OCB is another antecedent that shapes personal reputation. Defined as voluntary actions beyond formal job responsibilities, OCB includes acts of altruism, courtesy, and conscientiousness (Organ, 1988). When observed by others, these behaviors build positive impressions and reinforce professional credibility (Teng et al., 2020; Berman and Silver, 2022). In service settings, where work performance is often judged through interpersonal interactions, OCB contributes positively to how an individual is perceived (Emilisa and Lunarindiah, 2018).

Trust plays a mediating role in the relationship between these variables and personal reputation. It is formed through consistent demonstrations of reliability, integrity, and social responsibility (Nygard et al., 2019). Politically skilled individuals are more likely to build trust by adapting to social cues and displaying competence (Lvina et al., 2017). Similarly, supportive work-life cultures foster trust among employees and management (Agarwal et al., 2018), while OCB strengthens interpersonal trust through cooperative behaviour (Deluga, 1995). Trust, therefore, enhances the reputational outcomes of political skill, WLB, and OCB by increasing perceived credibility and ethical standing (Tyler, 2003).

The focus on professional Centennials in Malaysia's service sector is timely, given their increasing presence and the organizational gaps in addressing their career needs (Barhate et al., 2021). Understanding how they develop and sustain personal reputation contributes to advancing both academic knowledge and practical talent management strategies that support national competitiveness.

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional design to investigate the effects of political skill, WLB, OCB, and trust on personal reputation among Centennials working in Malaysia's service sector. Data were collected through a structured bilingual (English and Bahasa Malaysia) online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. To enhance response rates, five enumerators facilitated the data collection process, following recommendations by Gupta et al. (2022).

The survey instrument incorporated validated six-point and seven-point Likert scales to measure the independent variables (political skill, WLB, OCB), mediating variable (trust), and dependent variable (personal reputation) based on established constructs (Maurer, 1998; Likert, 1931). Linguistic validity was ensured through Brislin's (1970) back-translation procedure, while a pre-test involving ten professional Centennials confirmed the clarity and contextual relevance of the items. Content validity was further established through expert review.

The study targeted Centennials aged 20 to 28 (Maloni et al., 2019) employed across nine sub-sectors of Malaysia's service industry (MIDA, 2021). Respondents were required to hold at least a diploma (Dyrud, 2022; Yunus, 2017) and occupy executive-level roles to ensure relevance to the organizational context. These methodological procedures aligned with the conceptual framework and ensured the rigor and contextual fit of the study.

Results

The demographic profile of the respondents shows that the majority were female (73.6 percent), aged between 25 and 28 years (68.2 percent), single (83.1 percent), and of Malay ethnicity (85.1 percent). Most held a Bachelor's degree (71.6 percent) and were employed in the business services (36.8 percent), healthcare (30.3 percent), and education (24.4 percent) sectors. The respondents primarily had one to four years of work experience (57.7 percent) and were located in West and South Peninsular Malaysia. These early-career Centennials were selected based on literature suggesting that personal reputation begins developing from the job application stage (Magnusen et al., 2018).

In terms of measurement model assessment, item loadings were evaluated using SmartPLS 4. Several items from political skill and OCB constructs were removed to meet the minimum average variance extracted (AVE) threshold of 0.5, following guidelines by Memon et al. (2017). Discriminant validity was confirmed through the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT), where all values were below 0.90 (Gold et al., 2001), and bootstrapping further supported the model's validity.

The structural model analysis showed that political skill had the strongest positive influence on personal reputation ($\beta = 0.415$, $p < .001$), followed by WLB ($\beta = 0.162$, $p = .013$) and OCB ($\beta = 0.151$, $p = .022$). All three variables also positively affected trust. Trust itself had a modest positive effect on personal reputation ($\beta = 0.118$, $p = .049$). However, the indirect effects of trust as a mediator were not statistically significant, as the confidence intervals included zero, indicating no mediation.

Predictive power was assessed using PLSpredict (Shmueli et al., 2019). The root mean square error (RMSE) values for most indicators were lower than those of the linear model benchmark, indicating high predictive performance and confirming the model's explanatory strength.

Discussion

The study confirms that political skill, WLB, and OCB each have significant positive effects on personal reputation, supporting previous findings on their relevance to career outcomes (Fidan and Koç, 2020). The high proportion of female respondents (73.6 percent) may explain stronger expressions of social astuteness and relational behaviour, which are central to reputation building.

Trust is positively associated with political skill, WLB, and OCB, in line with its role in promoting ethical conduct and cooperation (Tasa and Bahmani, 2023). However, trust did not mediate their effects on personal reputation. It showed a negative mediating effect between political skill and reputation, no mediation for WLB, and a weakening effect on the OCB–reputation link. These results may reflect the individualistic and ambition-driven nature of early-career Centennials, who tend to rely less on relational cues such as trust (Sriprom et al., 2019).

IPMA findings identify political skill as the strongest predictor of personal reputation, reaffirming its role in interpersonal influence (Fidan and Koç, 2020). Political skill, WLB, and OCB are effective behavioural signals of personal reputation, while trust does not function as a reliable signal in this context.

The study advances signaling theory by contextualizing how these cues operate among Centennials in Malaysia's service sector. It also highlights political skill as a practical focus for career training and leadership development programs aimed at improving workplace readiness.

The study is limited to Centennials aged 20 to 28 in the domestic service sector and uses a cross-sectional design. Future studies should adopt longitudinal approaches, consider broader samples, and explore digital reputation cues relevant to this cohort's online behaviour.

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