Analyzing Employee Perceptions of Workplace Ethics: Implications for Organizational Integrity

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Abstract
Purpose: The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to analyze employees' perceptions of workplace ethics within the organizational context, and (2) to examine the factors that influence these perceptions, including employment sector, type of organization, gender, age and years of working experience (job tenure). **Design/methodology/approach:** This study employed a quantitative research design. Data from 146 respondents were analyzed using SPSS, applying descriptive statistics and regression analysis to examine patterns and relationships among the variables. **Findings:** The results show that employees generally perceive most unethical behaviors as unacceptable, with charging personal entertainment to expenses and pretending to be sick rated highest in severity, while making personal phone calls at work is the most tolerated. The findings also show that among demographic and organizational factors, job tenure significantly influences employee ethical perceptions. **Research limitations/implications:** The study highlights critical implications for organizational integrity, emphasizing that understanding employees' ethical perceptions helps bridge gaps between formal codes and actual practices. Organizations should tailor ethics training and policies to employee experience levels, ensuring clarity on both minor and major ethical issues. In Malaysia's multicultural and multi-sectoral context, these findings underscore the need for targeted interventions and further research on how experience, culture, and organizational factors shape ethical decision-making. **Originality/value:** This study offers a novel contribution by positioning employee perception of workplace ethics as a critical driver of organizational integrity, an area often overlooked in ethics research. It

uniquely demonstrates that job tenure significantly shapes employee ethical awareness and decision-making, revealing how experience influences the internalization of ethical norms beyond technical competence.

Keywords: Workplace Ethics, Employee Perception, Job Tenure

Introduction
Ethics in the workplace is a cornerstone of organizational success, fostering trust, accountability, and integrity among employees (Ughulu, 2024). A strong ethical foundation enhances organizational reputation, reduces misconduct, and promotes sustainable performance (Tziner & Persoff, 2024; Roy et al., 2024). However, ethical perceptions and behaviors are not uniform across employees; they vary significantly based on several factors such as years of working experience, organizational culture, and individual values (Dane & Sonenshein, 2015). These variations can lead to inconsistencies in ethical decision-making, which may undermine organizational integrity and erode trust (Treviño et al., 2006). Understanding how employees perceive and respond to ethical dilemmas particularly in relation to job tenure is crucial for organizations to design effective ethics programs, address ethical challenges, and promote a consistent ethical culture.

In Malaysia, workplace ethics has gained increasing attention due to heightened emphasis on corporate governance, transparency, and accountability. High-profile scandals such as the 1MDB case and other ethical breaches including the fake halal meat cartel and misuse of authority cases have underscored the urgent need for organizations to strengthen ethical frameworks and ensure compliance at all levels (Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008). Malaysia's multicultural workforce, comprising diverse ethnic, generational, and professional backgrounds, presents unique challenges in maintaining a uniform ethical culture (Lyons & Kuron, 2017). These complexities highlight the importance of examining how demographic and experiential factors influence ethical perceptions, as such insights can guide organizations in implementing targeted interventions to uphold integrity and ethical governance.

The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to analyze employees' perceptions of workplace ethics within the organizational context, and (2) to examine the factors that influence these perceptions, including employment sector, type of organization, age, gender, and years of working experience (job tenure). Understanding these relationships is essential for identifying how employees interpret ethical standards and the determinants that shape ethical attitudes and behaviors in the workplace.

Literature Review
Ethical behavior in organizations has been extensively studied, with research highlighting the influence of individual, organizational, and situational factors on ethical decision-making (Jones, 1991; Trevino, 1986). Workplace ethics is essential to organisational integrity because it guarantees that employee behaviour is consistent with basic moral norms, reducing the likelihood of misconduct and ethical violations (Trevino & Nelson, 2021). An ethical work environment fosters institutional trust and legitimacy, which are required for transparent governance and the protection of organisational reputation (Kaptein, 2011). A strong ethical atmosphere enhances the consistency of organisational ideals and practiced behaviours, transforming integrity into a lived norm rather than a symbolic assertion (Schneider et al., 2013). Ethics also serves as an internal self-regulation mechanism, instilling accountability,

fairness, and honesty and minimising opportunistic behaviour within organisations (Andrews et al., 2011). Ultimately, workplace ethics promotes long-term integrity by increasing moral resilience and enabling ethical decision-making across time, particularly during times of crisis or uncertainty (Sison et al., 2018).

Workplace Ethics
Workplace ethics refers to the system of moral principles, organizational values, and normative standards that guide employee behavior, managerial decisions, and workplace interactions within an organizational setting (Venkatadurai et al., 2014; Cropanzano et al., 2003; Liu et al., 2004; Treviño, 1990). It incorporates core ethical dimensions such as honesty, integrity, fairness, respect, accountability, and transparency in professional conduct (Brown & Treviño, 2006; Kaptein, 2008). These ethical principles extend beyond legal compliance by shaping judgment and action in ethically ambiguous or "*gray*" areas that influence organizational reputation and stakeholder trust (Treviño et al., 2006; Kaptein, 2011). Ethical behavior in the workplace ensures that employees act responsibly toward colleagues and customers, while aligning their actions with organizational values and broader societal expectations through mechanisms of ethical social learning and norm internalization (Bandura, 1986; Brown et al., 2005).

Workplace ethics is not only a conceptual construct, but a practical organizational imperative that underpins leadership credibility, sustained organizational effectiveness, and organizational success in globalized and competitive business environments (Schwartz, 2016; Eisenbeiss, 2012). Organizations that institutionalize strong ethical cultures experience higher employee morale, stronger stakeholder relationships, and improved organizational sustainability (Kaptein, 2008; Treviño & Nelson, 2021). Research further demonstrates that ethical culture and climate are associated with sustainable organizational growth, improved relational coordination, and long-term organizational performance (Hansen et al., 2011; Mayer et al., 2010).

Conversely, unethical organizational practices significantly increase the risk of organizational scandals, governance breakdowns, financial losses, and erosion of institutional trust (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Greve et al., 2010; Adejumo & Ogburie, 2025). Sustained unethical conduct may also lead to lasting reputational damage and diminished public confidence, undermining organizational legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Treviño et al., 2006; Shahab et al., 2025).

Workplace Ethics in Malaysia Context
In the Malaysian context, workplace ethics is influenced by the country's unique cultural and societal values. Malaysia is a multicultural society with diverse ethnic groups, including Malays, Chinese, Indians, and others, each with their own cultural norms and values. These cultural differences can influence how employees perceive and respond to ethical dilemmas. For example, the concept of *'face-saving'* and respect for authority, which are deeply rooted in Malaysian culture, may affect employees' willingness to report unethical behavior or challenge unethical practices (Abdullah & Threadgold, 2008). Additionally, Malaysia's rapid economic development and globalization have introduced new ethical challenges, such as corruption, favoritism, and misuse of company resources, which require organizations to adapt their ethical frameworks to address these issues (Zahari et al., 2022). Generational differences also play a significant role in shaping ethical perceptions in Malaysia. Younger

employees, who are often more exposed to global values and digital technologies, may have different ethical priorities compared to older employees, who are more likely to adhere to traditional values and organizational norms (Daradkeh, 2023; Lasthuizen & Badar, 2023). These generational differences, combined with variations in years of working experience, create a complex landscape for workplace ethics in Malaysia.

Influence of Culture in Workplace Ethics
Maintaining a consistent ethical culture in organizations is a significant challenge, particularly in a diverse and dynamic workforce like Malaysia's. Employees with different levels of working experience, industries, ages, genders and employment sectors often perceive ethical dilemmas differently, leading to inconsistencies in ethical decision-making and behavior. For example, experienced employees may have stricter ethical standards due to their exposure to organizational norms and policies, while less experienced employees may lack the same level of understanding or commitment to ethical principles (Craft, 2018). These differences can create ethical conflicts, reduce trust among employees, and undermine the organization's integrity.

In Malaysia, specific ethical issues such as misuse of company resources, favoritism, and dishonesty are prevalent and are often perceived differently by employees based on their years of working experience. For instance, younger or less experienced employees may view minor ethical violations, such as personal use of company resources, as acceptable, while more experienced employees may perceive these actions as serious ethical breaches (Victor & Cullen, 1988). These variations in ethical perceptions can make it difficult for organizations to address ethical concerns effectively and ensure that all employees adhere to the same ethical standards. Furthermore, Malaysia's unique cultural and societal values, combined with generational differences, add another layer of complexity to workplace ethics (Abdul Malek & Jaguli, 2018). Younger employees, influenced by global values and digital technologies, may prioritize personal values over organizational norms, while older employees may be more aligned with traditional values and ethical standards (Lyons & Kuron, 2017). Without a clear understanding of these differences, organizations may struggle to design effective ethics programs and policies that address the needs of employees at different stages of their careers. To address these challenges, it is crucial to examine how employees' ethical perceptions differ according to their years of work experience, industry, age, gender, and employment sector; identify specific ethical issues perceived differently across these groups; and develop strategies to ensure that ethical standards are consistently maintained across all experience levels within Malaysian organizations.

Factor Influencing Employee Perception of Workplace Ethics
Employees' perceptions of workplace ethics can be shaped by multiple demographic and organizational factors. Employment sector and type of organization play a critical role because organizational culture and ethical climate differ across industries and structures; for example, public sector organizations often emphasize compliance and accountability, while private firms may prioritize performance and profitability, influencing ethical norms and tolerance for certain behaviors (Lee, 2020; Roy et al., 2024). Age and gender also significantly affect ethical reasoning (Lasthuizen & Badar, 2023). Studies show that older employees and women generally exhibit stronger ethical judgments compared to younger employees and men, reflecting differences in moral development and socialization (Peterson et al., 2001;

Kristinsson et al., 2024).). Gendered perspectives often lead women to approach ethical dilemmas with relational and care-based reasoning, while men tend to apply rule-based frameworks (Gilligan, 1982; Peterson et al., 2001). Years of working experience (job tenure) further influence ethical perceptions by providing employees with repeated exposure to organizational norms and ethical decision-making processes, fostering what scholars term *"ethical expertise"* (Dane & Sonenshein, 2015). This accumulated experience often enhances moral reasoning and reduces ambiguity in interpreting ethical standards, provided the organizational climate reinforces principled behavior (Roy et al., 2024). However, job tenure effects can be complex; while experience often enhances ethical awareness (Vadera & Pathki, 2021), some studies suggest that prolonged exposure to organizational pressures may reduce principled reasoning over time (Wang & Hannah, 2025). Collectively, these factors underscore the need for organizations to design ethics programs that account for demographic diversity and organizational context to promote a consistent ethical culture. Based on the preceding literature review, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: *The employment sector significantly influences employees' perceptions of workplace ethics*.
H2: *The type of organization significantly influences employees' perceptions of workplace ethics.*
H3: *Gender significantly influences employees' perceptions of workplace ethics*.
H4: *Age significantly influences employees' perceptions of workplace ethics.*
H5: *Job tenure significantly influences employees' perceptions of workplace ethics.*

Methods
This study adopted a quantitative, questionnaire-based research design to explore employees' perceptions of ethics and attitudes within the workplace. Utilizing a structured questionnaire facilitated the systematic collection of data on ethical perceptions and behaviors across diverse sectors and experience levels. The survey was administered to employees from both public and private organizations in Malaysia, including office staff and academicians from various institutions. The sampling strategy aimed to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives on workplace ethics, reflecting Malaysia's multicultural and multi-sectoral workforce.

The measurement instrument was adapted from the Ethics Environment Questionnaire (EEQ) developed by McDaniel (1997). The EEQ was chosen because it is a validated instrument widely used to assess ethical climates and perceptions in organizations. Its structured format ensures reliability and comparability with previous studies. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Totally Acceptable, 2 = Fairly Acceptable, 3 = Don't Know, 4 = Not Very Acceptable, 5 = Totally Unacceptable), which allows for nuanced evaluation of ethical attitudes.

The construct of workplace ethics was assessed using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Totally Acceptable, 2 = Fairly Acceptable, 3 = Don't Know, 4 = Not Very Acceptable, 5 = Totally Unacceptable). Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 22.0. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum) summarized responses for each item, and Cronbach's alpha was calculated to evaluate the reliability in terms of internal consistency

of the scales. A regression analysis technique was performed to test the hypotheses of the study.

Findings
Data from 146 respondents were analyzed using SPSS. The demographic profile revealed that most respondents were employed in the private sector (76.0%), with a smaller proportion from the public sector (24.0%). A majority of respondents were female (61.6%), while males accounted for 38.4%. Regarding age distribution, the largest group was above 50 years (35.9%), followed by those aged 41–50 years (25.5%) and 20–30 years (25.5%). Respondents primarily worked in services (43.2%), education (31.5%), management and administration (13.7%), and banking and finance (11.6%). In terms of work experience, more than half (51.4%) reported over 15 years of experience, while 26.7% had less than five years.

Reliability analysis of the constructs measuring perceptions of workplace ethics produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.742, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency. To examine employees' perceptions of workplace ethics, descriptive statistics (mean values) were calculated to assess the perceived acceptability of ethical and non-ethical behaviors within organizational contexts. Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for items Q1–Q9, which assess the acceptability of various workplace behaviors.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Employee Perception of Workplace Ethics

No	Items	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
Q1	Making personal phone calls from work	2.95	1.330	1	5
Q2.	Posting personal mail from work	3.42	1.338	1	5
Q3.	Taking pens and pencils from work	3.64	1.372	1	5
Q4.	Using the internet for personal use during working hours	3.58	1.264	1	5
Q5.	Using company petrol for personal mileage	4.63	0.788	1	5
Q6.	Charging personal entertainment to expenses	4.74	0.646	1	5
Q7.	Pretending to be sick to take the day off	4.65	0.681	1	5
Q8.	Minor fiddling of travel expenses	4.46	0.858	1	5
Q9.	Favouring family or friends when recruiting or awarding contracts	4.38	1.019	1	5

The results indicate that, on average, employees view most of these behaviors as unacceptable except *"Making personal phone calls from work"* is slightly below the mid-point. The result shows that the highest unacceptable behaviors was *"Charging personal entertainment to expenses"* (mean = 4.78) and "*Pretending to be sick to take the day off*" (mean = 4.65) followed by "*Using company petrol for personal mileage*" (mean = 1.34). The result also shows that "*Making personal phone calls from work*" (mean = 2.95) as the most tolerated although still generally unacceptable. The standard deviations suggest some variation in responses, but overall, the data points to a strong ethical stance among employees regarding these behaviors.

Result of Regression Analysis
A linear regression analysis was conducted to determine whether employees' perceptions of workplace ethics were influenced by employment sector, type of organization, gender, age,

and job tenure. The results indicated that only job tenure had a statistically significant effect on perceptions of ethics (β = 0.306, p = 0.001), supporting Hypothesis H5. The model explained 10.5% of the variance in employee perceptions (R^2 = 0.105), suggesting that job tenure positively influences how employees perceive workplace ethics. Table 2 presents the regression results.

Table 2
Result of Regression Analysis of Employee Perception of Ethics

	Variables	Regression Weight (β)	SE	F^2	R^2	t-value	Sig.	Result
H1	Employment Sector →PE	0.026	0.125			0.301	0.764	*Not Supported*
H2	Type of Organisation →PE	0.002	0.060	3.152	0.105	0.023	0.982	*Not Supported*
H3	Gender →PE	0.003	0.106			0.033	0.974	*Not Supported*
H4	Age →PE	0.053	0.016			0.605	0.546	*Not Supported*
H5	Job Tenure →PE	0.306	0.044			3.286	0.001	**Supported**

Note: PE=Perception of Workplace Ethics

Discussion and Conclusion
The descriptive statistics reveal that certain behaviors, such as "*making personal phone calls from work*" and "*posting personal mail from work,*" are perceived as less unacceptable compared to more serious infractions like "*charging personal entertainment to expenses*" or "*using company petrol for personal mileage.*" This indicates that in the organization employee still facing ethical dilemma despite the presence of a clear code of conduct, perhaps because formal rules cannot anticipate every nuanced situation in daily work. Research on ethical climate and behavioral ethics shows that codes provide broad principles but leave "*gray areas*" where interpretation depends on organizational norms, leadership signals, and peer behavior (Treviño et al., 2006; Stevens, 2008). Activities such as making personal phone calls during work hours exemplify this ambiguity: while technically a misuse of company resources, employees may perceive it as acceptable if local norms tolerate minor personal use or if enforcement is inconsistent (Peterson, 2002). Furthermore, bounded ethicality and ethical fading explain how individuals rationalize small deviations as harmless, especially when policies lack specificity or leaders model leniency (Kotzian et al., 2021). Thus, ethical dilemmas persist because codes operate within complex cultural and situational contexts, requiring organizations to complement written standards with clear communication, scenario-based guidance, and strong ethical climates to reduce ambiguity (Roy et al., 2024).

Serious infractions such as "*charging personal entertainment to company expenses*" or "*using organizational resources like fuel for personal mileage*" are widely regarded as severe ethical breaches because they involve intentional misuse of company assets for personal gain, violating core principles of honesty, integrity, and fiduciary responsibility. Research on workplace deviance classifies these behaviors as organizational deviance, referring to acts that harm the organization by misappropriating resources (Peterson, 2002). Unlike minor

infractions, these actions signal deliberate dishonesty and erode trust, creating financial and reputational risks for the organization (Treviño et al., 2006). Ethical codes and governance frameworks emphasize zero tolerance for such practices because they undermine fairness and accountability, which are foundational to ethical culture (Stevens, 2008). Empirical studies show that employees perceive these behaviors as highly unacceptable due to their clear violation of legal and ethical norms, contrasting sharply with ambiguous behaviors like personal calls (Kotzian et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2024). Therefore, if committed, organizations may treat these infractions as organizational serious misconduct warranting disciplinary action to maintain ethical standards and protect integrity (Roy et al., 2024).

The findings also indicate that years of work experience significantly influence employees' ethical perceptions align with research on ethical expertise and organizational behavior (Dane & Sonenshein, 2015). Experience in the workplace does not merely enhance technical proficiency; it also fosters the development of ethical judgment through repeated exposure to organizational norms, dilemmas, and decision-making processes (Dane & Sonenshein, 2015). Longer tenure provides employees with opportunities to internalize codes of conduct, observe leadership modeling, and engage in reflective practices that strengthen moral reasoning and ethical competence (Roy et al., 2024). Empirical studies confirm that work experience is a strong predictor of ethical decision-making, as individuals with greater exposure to professional contexts demonstrate improved ability to apply moral principles in complex situations (Carrera & Van Der Kolk, 2021; Setiany et al., 2022). This progression reflects the concept of "*ethical expertise*," where accumulated experience enables employees to navigate ambiguous scenarios more effectively and uphold organizational values (Dane & Sonenshein, 2015). Consequently, tenure serves as a critical factor in shaping not only technical capability but also the capacity for ethical workplace behavior. Previous research (Roszkowska & Melé, 2021; Elango et al., 2010) also suggests that more experienced employees are likely to have internalized organizational norms and ethical standards, while less experienced employees may be more influenced by personal values or situational factors. Although the present study did not conduct subgroup analysis by years of experience, the observed variation supports the notion that experience may play a role in shaping ethical perceptions.

Practical Implications
The findings of this study have significant implications for organizational integrity, which is the foundation of trust, accountability, and ethical governance within any institution. By understanding employees' perceptions of workplace ethics and the factors that influence these perceptions, organizations can identify gaps between formal codes of conduct and actual ethical practices. Such insights enable leaders to design targeted interventions such as ethics training, transparent communication, and reinforcement of ethical norms that strengthen the ethical climate and reduce ambiguity in decision-making. When employees consistently interpret and practice ethical standards, organizations are better positioned to prevent misconduct, safeguard resources, and maintain credibility with stakeholders. Ultimately, fostering a strong ethical culture not only mitigates risks associated with unethical behavior but also enhances organizational reputation, employee engagement, and long-term sustainability.

This study provides a significant contribution to the advancement of organizational integrity by illustrating how employee perceptions of workplace ethics can serve as the foundation for ethical governance and sustainability. By identifying demographic and organizational characteristics that influence ethical views, the study provides leaders with practical information for designing targeted interventions to increase ethical awareness and reduce misconduct. Integrating these insights into ethical audits allows for continual monitoring and development of ethical procedures, fostering transparency and accountability. Such methods not only improve compliance, but also foster trust among stakeholders, bolstering the organization's reputation and long-term viability. Finally, this study closes the gap between academic understanding of ethics and practical techniques for developing a strong ethical culture by emphasizing employee views as a major driver of integrity and good governance.

Another practical implication is in terms of the design of ethics training and policy development. Given the observed variation in perceptions of ethical behavior, organizations should consider tailoring ethics training programs to address the specific needs and challenges faced by employees at different stages of their careers. For example, training for less experienced employees could focus on raising awareness of the importance of adhering to organizational norms and the potential consequences of even minor ethical violations. For more experienced employees, training could emphasize the importance of modeling ethical behavior and mentoring less experienced colleagues. Clear policies that address both minor and major ethical issues, and that are communicated effectively to all employees, are essential for promoting a consistent ethical culture.

This study contributes to the limited body of research on workplace ethics in Malaysia by providing empirical evidence on employees' perceptions of workplace ethics. The findings underscore the complexity of ethical decision-making in a multicultural and multi-sectoral workforce, and highlight the need for further research that examines the interplay between experience, culture, and ethical perceptions. Future studies could build on this work by conducting more detailed subgroup analyses and exploring the impact of organizational interventions on ethical behavior.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research
This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size of the study is relatively small restricts the statistical power and limits the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Second, the research relied on self-reported data, which may introduce social desirability bias and affect the accuracy of responses regarding ethical perceptions. Third, the sample was drawn from a specific organizational and cultural context, which may not reflect the diversity of ethical norms across industries or countries. Additionally, while demographic factors such as years of working experience were examined, other influential variables such as organizational ethical climate, leadership style, and personality traits were not included, despite their documented impact on ethical decision-making. Finally, the cross-sectional design limits causal inference, as longitudinal data would provide stronger evidence of how ethical perceptions evolve over time.

Future research should address these limitations by employing larger and more diverse samples to enhance external validity and allow for cross-cultural comparisons. Multi-method approaches, combining surveys with behavioral observations or experimental

designs, are recommended to reduce self-report bias. Researchers should also incorporate additional predictors such as ethical climate, ethical leadership, leadership behavior, and organizational justice to develop a more comprehensive model of ethical decision-making. Longitudinal studies would provide insights into how tenure and exposure to organizational norms influence ethical perceptions over time. Finally, qualitative research could complement quantitative findings by exploring how employees interpret ethical codes and navigate ambiguous scenarios in real-world contexts.

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