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Modeling the Changing Work Culture Using Islamic Work Values among the Malaysian Workforces

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian workforce is experiencing a generational shift, with Millennials and Generation Z constituting the majority as Baby Boomers and Generation X retire. This generational disparity often results in differing work attitudes, creating challenges for collaboration and organizational harmony. Islamic values such as Amanah (trust), Itqan (diligence), Ibadah (work as worship), Ihsan (kindness), and respect offer a potential framework to address these challenges. Existing studies explore generational differences in work culture and outcomes but lack an integrative model incorporating Islamic values. This study proposes a framework to moderate generational differences and improve organizational outcomes through these values. By aligning diverse work attitudes with Islamic principles, the model aims to enhance collaboration, commitment, and productivity. The research addresses gaps in understanding generational behaviors in Asian contexts, enriching literature and offering practical guidelines for organizations to leverage workforce diversity effectively and achieve strategic goals.

1. Introduction

The current Malaysian workforce mainly comprises Millennials and Generation Z (Zahari & Puteh, 2023). Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) now form the majority of the Malaysian workforce. These generations bring unique perspectives, skills, and expectations to the workplace, shaped by their upbringing in a digital and globalized world. They value flexibility, work-life balance, and opportunities for personal and professional growth (Waworuntu, et. al., 2022). Baby Boomers and Generation X are leaving the workforce since most have reached retirement age. Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) are gradually retiring, leading to a significant demographic shift in the workforce. This transition results in the loss of experienced employees who have long been the backbone of many organizations (Chand, 2024). Their departure creates a vacuum that younger generations must fill, often without the same level of experience or institutional knowledge. They are known to have different attitudes toward work. Baby Boomers and Generation X typically have a more traditional approach to work, valuing loyalty, stability,

and a strong work ethic (Ruff, 2022). They often prioritize job security and long-term career progression within a single organization. In contrast, Millennials and Generation Z tend to seek meaningful work, rapid career advancement, and a healthy work-life balance (Brown, 2023). They are more likely to change jobs frequently in pursuit of better opportunities and personal fulfillment. Most leaders are from the older generations, Baby Boomers and Generation X, and this situation creates a more significant gap in the workforce. Leadership positions in many Malaysian organizations are predominantly held by Baby Boomers and Generation X. These leaders may have different management styles and expectations compared to their younger counterparts. This generational divide can lead to misunderstandings and misalignments in organizational goals and practices, exacerbating the gap between leaders and younger employees. The gap sometimes makes collaboration between the two groups difficult, resulting in discontentment among the younger generations, and the way out is to leave the organization.

From the Islamic management perspective, Islamic values such as Amanah, Itqan, Ibadah, Ihsan, and Respect can be used to address the changing workforce (Adnan, et. al., 2021). However, studies investigating the use of these values in addressing the issue of incompatibility among different generations' work cultures are limited. Realizing the need to model the integration of Islamic values into work culture among the Malaysian workforce, the present work is proposed. By aligning work practices with Islamic principles, companies can enhance employee engagement and commitment. Employees who feel their values are respected and integrated into the workplace are more likely to be motivated and loyal. Moreover, by integrating Islamic work values can help bridge generational gaps, fostering a more cohesive and harmonious work environment. This can lead to improved teamwork and collaboration across different age groups.

2. Literature Review

Four generations mostly occupy the present workplace: Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), Millennials (born between 1981 and 1997) (Pew Research Center, 2017) and Generation Z (born in the mid-1990s and later) (Jiri, 2016).

2.1 *Work Culture and Attitudes*

Employee attitudes will determine the organization's work culture (Cherian et al., 2021). Furthermore, leadership style is also pertinent in influencing employees' behavior (Hajjali et al., 2022). Rules and regulations are put in place to regulate employees' behavior (Möhlmann et al., 2021). Management practices, rewards and recognition, and work environment significantly determine employee attitudes (Amjad et al., 2021). Researchers commonly addressed these work culture aspects over a decade ago to ensure the organization would experience high productivity and success.

An abundance of studies has been done regarding the work culture and attitudes of different generations of the workforce in the organization. The following discussion is about the work culture and attitudes of different generations.

2.2 *Work Culture and Attitudes According to Different Generations*

Baby Boomers are characterized by hard work, personal gratification, and continuous growth (Lissitsa & Laor, 2021). They appreciate team orientation and have relationship-building skills (Wagner, 2023). They prefer challenging work, develop strong loyalty, respect the organizational hierarchy, and are willing to wait their turn for career advancement (Pasko et al., 2021). They practice lifetime employment and are less likely to change jobs (Niesel et al., 2022). Due to financial or personal reasons, they usually go for delayed retirement as they continue to bear a heavy workload and work long hours. Baby Boomers are reported to have lower levels of stress and burnout and greater intention to leave than Gen X and Y (Stevanin, et al., 2018).

Generation X, also called Gen Xers, represents smaller groups than Baby Boomers and Millennials. They experienced the development of computers and the introduction of cellular phones. In terms of work, Gen Xers appreciate teamwork, autonomy, independence, flexibility, and work-life balance (Gadomska-Lila, 2020). They focus on socio-emotional enablement at work (Smaliukiene & Bekesiene, 2020). They have less loyalty to their organizations than Baby Boomers but tend to stay with the organizations when they find that they fit well with those organizations (Weerarathne et al., 2023). They are currently in middle and senior leadership positions in various organizations. Gen Xers need supervisor support for better performance (Widiarani & Hartijasti, 2019).

Millennials, also known as Gen Y, are well-educated, tech-savvy, and digital natives since they grew up with technology (Dixit, 2023). They are happy, confident, and positive (Badri et al., 2022). They are also said to be more community service-oriented than other generations and more willing to volunteer (Trujillo, 2020). The bad sides of Gen Y are that they possess individualistic traits, greater self-esteem, and a minor need for social approval (Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2020). They have a poor work ethic and a high entitlement level, contributing to frequently changing jobs. Gen Y is less resilient but more cohesive (Stevanin et al., 2018).

The existing research found that Gen Y has high job entitlement, optimism, civic-mindedness, work-life balance, impatience, multitasking, and team-oriented (DeVaney, 2015). Another research found that they can be described as laziness, lack of productivity (Caraher, 2015), and lack of work commitment (Çelik et al., 2021). They prefer hands-on roles and jobs that allow them to make an enormous impact. They can accept and efficiently work with others, accept diverse cultures, and are more tolerant of different races and ethnicities (Tsai, 2017). They prefer promotion, teamwork, training, and education as their source of motivation (Widiarani & Hartijasti, 2019).

Generation Z is known as Gen Z, Digital Generation, Gen WII, iGen, and Gen Tech. Gen Z determines its work values as it enters the workplace. Gen Z prefers Intrinsic work values that include learning and taking pride in one's work (Rani & Samuel, 2016) and social relationships (Smaliukiene & Bekesiene, 2020). Generation Z is sensible and responsible when it comes to their safety needs, which include their physical space as well as their digital space (Khatri & Dixit, 2016). Generation Z uses multiple technological devices, social media outlets, and software programs daily (Rickes, 2016; Voorveld).

Like Gen Y, Gen Z is also good at multitasking (Wiedmer, 2015). This generation prefers face-to-face supervision, wants to learn from its managers, and enjoys a teamwork atmosphere (Tulgan, 2013). This generation is also said to have an escapist mentality in that Gen Z individuals escape the pressures of reality by playing video games and remain continuously tethered online. These create challenges for managers to manage newer generations so that they remain focused on their assigned jobs.

Although gender differences increase job performance because of knowledge and experience diversity, they also create tension among team members from different generations, including the ability to communicate and transfer knowledge (Becker et al., 2020). Generational differences also contribute to multicultural conflict, affecting mood and performance and reducing productivity (Trisasanti et al., 2020). Employees in older generations are more dedicated, engrossed in, and vigorous at work than newer ones (Martínez-Buelvas & Jaramillo-Naranjo, 2019).

Most studies conducted in various contexts around the globe discovered mixed results on the role of generational differences in influencing work outcomes, including motivation (Heyns & Kerr, 2018; Poisat et al., 2018), job engagement (Akhavan Sarraf et al., 2017), organizational commitment, job performance (de Waal et al., 2017; Lourenco & Cronan, 2017; Ochieng & Price, 2010), and productivity. These findings create an avenue for other researchers to investigate the differences in values, behaviors, and job outcomes among different generations of employees.

2.3 Islamic Work Values and their Importance in the Workplace

The following discussion concerns Islamic work values relevant to the current workplace. Amanah refers to the ability or trait to assume responsibility (Kassim et al., 2020). Job assignment is a responsibility that must be shouldered by employees regardless of their job position, type of employment, and, of course,

generational differences (Fan et al., 2024). Regardless of the generations they belong to, employees are expected to perform their roles and responsibilities according to their job scope if their job does not violate the principles of Islam.

Itqan refers to the trait of being earnest at work (Zaman et al., 2023). Those with high levels of itqan will work hard to ensure they accomplish the task assigned to them as best they can without compromising their work (Ahmed & Nahar, 2024). Different generations have different attitudes toward jobs. Older generations take their job seriously, while newer generations are less likely to be committed to their jobs except for personal interests (Nabahani & Riyanto, 2020). However, with the integration of the Islamic value of itqan into work, all employees, regardless of their generation, are expected to take their jobs seriously for the organizational benefits.

Ibadah or prayer refers to the willingness to assume that the employee's work is one type of ibadah to God (Sulphrey, 2023). When a Muslim performs a prayer, he will do it the best he can so that God will accept his prayer. Similarly, when a person assumes his work is ibadah, he performs the job perfectly, expecting God to reward his hard work generously in this world and the hereafter (Abd Rahman et al., 2022). The problem many organizations face regarding employee attitudes is a lack of commitment, leading to many adverse work outcomes, such as theft, bullying, procrastination, bribery, and others. By injecting the spirit of 'work as ibadah,' employees are expected to be more committed to their jobs.

Ihsan refers to the trait of being good to others (Mokhtar et al., 2020). When someone sees others needing help, he will help without expecting any return from his good deed. This kindness refers to Ihsan. Ihsan is important because no one is perfect, and we rely on others to perform our jobs (Mokhtar et al., 2020). Most workplace tasks require collaboration among team members. Sometimes, this requirement is not clearly stated in the job description. As Muslims, it is our responsibility to help our colleagues, especially those who experience difficulties in performing their job roles, regardless of the generations they belong to.

Respect refers to respecting others, especially those older and in higher positions (Malti et al., 2020). This value is important for creating harmony and avoiding conflict in the workplace, especially during stressful situations (Yang, 2020). Having 'respect' in the workplace will help employees choose the best way to interact, air their views, choose the right words to use, preserve each other's faces, be subtle in discussing sensitive issues, etc. Although it seems superficial, the value of respect, when practiced by all employees regardless of their generation, will maintain harmony in the workplace.

3. The Gap in Research

Since different generations of employees have unique values, behaviors, and expected outcomes, it is crucial to determine the right interventions the management can use to leverage their potential for the organization's benefit. This paper includes Islamic values, such as Amanah, Itqan, Ibadah, Ihsan, and Respect, to examine their role in moderating the direct effect of generational differences in work culture and their work outcome. Therefore, this paper is proposed: first, to inquire why there is a change in work culture among the generations of the workforce; second, to identify the consequences resulting from the changing work culture among different generations of the workforce; and third, to propose the potential solutions to address the negative consequences of changing work culture among different generations.

Many studies have been conducted regarding work culture, employee attitudes, and generational differences at work; however, these studies did not consider combining all factors in one cohesive framework. Future studies are expected to integrate Islamic values as moderators in addressing the problems derived from having different generations in the workplace that affect work culture and attitudes.

4. Implications of the Study

The proposed model integrates Islamic values to moderate the effect of having different generations of workforce at the workplace. It was proposed based on the findings of previous studies and is expected to serve as a reference for future research exploring this topic further. Academics and postgraduate students

can use the model to establish the nomological networks of generational concepts, especially in the context of human resource management.

Existing studies on different generations of the workforce are based on specific contexts, mainly in Western countries. In Asian countries, for example, employees' attitudes are subject to their cultural backgrounds. This might cause disparities regarding what is known and what is not regarding generational differences. Not much is known regarding the attitudes and behaviors of different workforce generations, especially the newest generation. Therefore, the study's findings will enrich the literature on personality, behaviors, work inclination, values, and others.

Regarding managerial implications, the current research is expected to generate a comprehensive model that provides guidelines for organizations to ensure the achievement of organizational goals. Although numerous aspects must be considered when conducting this research, such as types of organizations, employees' job positions, work culture, etc., organizations can develop the best strategies for optimizing the current differing workforce performance. Based on the study's findings, organizations can adopt appropriate strategies to address the existing generational gap.

5. Conclusion

The generational shift within the Malaysian workforce poses significant challenges to organizational collaboration and harmony due to varying work attitudes across generations. The proposed integration of Islamic values such as Amanah, Itqan, Ibadah, Ihsan, and respect offers a promising framework to bridge these differences and foster a more cohesive work environment. Organizations can promote enhanced collaboration, commitment, and productivity by aligning diverse generational attitudes with these values. This study contributes to filling the existing gaps in research by providing an integrative model tailored to Malaysia's unique cultural and religious context. The findings not only enrich the literature on workforce diversity in Asian contexts but also offer practical insights for organizations to manage generational disparities effectively, ensuring the achievement of strategic goals and optimizing workforce potential.

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