RESOURCES, WORK ENGAGEMENT AND TURNOVER INTENTION AMONG CALL CENTRE AGENTS: A PROPOSED FRAMEWORK

Choo Ling Suan\textsuperscript{a}, Siti Nur Hidayah Ibrahim\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia
Email: clsuan@uum.edu.my

\textsuperscript{b}School of Business Management, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia
Email: hidayahibrahim12@gmail.com

Abstract

Strong customer relationships are key to sustaining business success. Call centres, whether outsourced or insourced, play an increasingly important role in customer relationship management. They are responsible for building rapport with customers, selling services and providing support. At the centre of any call centre are its call agents, who act as the interface between a company and its customers. It is widely acknowledged that the role of a call centre agent is demanding, which raises the issue of high turnover among call agents. This paper proposes a model that links the mediating role of work engagement between resources and turnover intention. It includes supporting literature for the proposed model in order to contextualise the study.

Keywords: Turnover intention, Work engagement, Resources, Call centre

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Malaysia has seen a mushrooming of call centres. The growth in the sector is supported by better technology. Modern call centres are equipped with sophisticated computer technology that allows call agents to interact with their clients' customers to help them solve problems, answer queries or sell new services or products (Russell, 2008). A survey conducted by Ruyter, Wetzels, and Feinberg (2001) revealed that call centres are the most favoured channel for customers to access customer-related information.

Within a call centre, the task of servicing client's customers rests with the call centre agents. For many companies, they have become the principal interface with customers. It is widely acknowledged that the call centre agent job is stressful, agents' tasks are repetitive but they execute complex work processes and handle confidential customer information (Holman, 2003; Suri & Rizvi, 2008). Furthermore, agents are expected to provide great service to satisfy customers, but at the same time the work environment is unpleasant as they work in a noisy environment, face time pressures and are constantly monitored by their superior. In such stressful conditions, high turnover among call centre agents is not surprising (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2003; de Ruyter, Wetzels, & Feinberg, 2001). In some centres, staff turnover rate ranges from 30 – 45 percent (Khan, 2014; Reynolds, 2005).

A high staff turnover rate in a call centre has various negative consequences. Turnover increases call centre costs, more staff need to be hired and trained. It disrupts operations by reducing the overall levels of product and procedural knowledge and employee skills. It forces the call centre to reschedule manpower rosters, adding to employee stress and disrupting their home life. Concurring with this view, Nelson and Winter (1982) found that turnover negatively influences operational performance as organisations lose their valuable employees who have considerable job experience. Furthermore, turnover demoralises other employees who remain in the organisation (Staw, 1980; Steers & Mowday, 1981). Not only have they lost their colleagues, but also they have to take on additional tasks. These negative outcomes point to the need to reduce turnover in call centres.
Arnold and Feldman (1982) asserted turnover intentions are developed prior to employees leaving an organisation. Hence, to deal with the issue of turnover it is crucial to reduce the turnover intention. According to Malik, Bashir, Khan, and Malik (2013), turnover intention can be defined as an individual’s psychological willingness to leave their current job and discontinue working for the organisation. Hence, it is sensible to assume that minimising turnover intention is the key to combating the issue of turnover.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that attitudinal variables, such as work engagement, are negatively associated with turnover intentions (Memon, Salleh, & Baharom, 2016; Shuck, Twyford, Reio, & Shuck, 2014; Upasna, Sumita, Stacy, & Shivganesh, 2012). According to Bakker, Albrecht, and Leiter (2010), engaged employees are highly energetic, self-efficacious individuals and, therefore, are able to exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Hence, it is likely that engaged employees are less likely to have turnover intention. In a survey conducted among 979 Indian managerial employees working in six service-sector organisations, Upasna et al. (2012) found that work engagement correlates negatively with intention to quit. Likewise, a study among registered nurses in South America by Gabel Shemueli, Dolan, Suárez Ceretti, and Nuñez del Prado (2015) found that work engagement partially mediates the relationship between social support and turnover intention. While in Malaysia, a more recent study by Memon et al. (2016), conducted among 409 oil and gas professionals, showed that greater work engagement reduces voluntary turnover. Overall, the previous findings revealed the prominence to promote work engagement among frontline workers as a means to reduce turnover intention. However, those studies were conducted using a sample of professional workers. Studies among front line employees, such as call centre agents, are lacking. Given the urgency of the turnover issue in call centres, a study to investigate the relationship between work engagement and turnover intention is timely. In addition, identifying the means to enhance work engagement would also benefit the development of call centre industry in the country.

Drawing on the job demands–resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008), two types of resources can enhance work engagement, job and personal. It is assumed that job resources, in the form of supervisory support, and personal resources, in the form of self-efficacy, enhance work engagement, which in turn reduces turnover intention among call centre agents.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Work Engagement and Turnover Intention**

A range of definitions have been provided over the years for the term turnover intention. Oehley (2007) defined turnover intention as a voluntary choice and decision of an employee to leave a company. Similarly, Calisir, Gumussoy, and Iskin (2011) described turnover intention as employee considerations to seek other employment because of their dissatisfaction with the current job. Likewise, Frimousse, Swalhi, and Wahidi (2012) described turnover intention as a step-by-step process, starting with looking at the job market and then followed by deciding whether to quit or stay with the organisation. Based on the definitions given by previous scholars, and in line with Michaels and Spector (1982), this study defines turnover intention as individuals’ feelings on how seriously they consider quitting their job, whether they want to quit or are actually planning to quit.

The concept of work engagement is described as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). In this context, vigour refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience at work, and a willingness to try hard and persist in the face difficulties (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Dedication describes a person who is involved in his or her work, enthusiastic and proud (Schaufeli et al., 2002), while absorption denotes an employee’s intense focus on the task at hand (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

According to Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, and Taris (2008) engaged employees are likely to look upon their
work as challenging rather than demanding and stressful. Consequently, engaged employees are likely to hold their employer in high regard and are less likely to leave the organisation.

Empirically, work engagement has been demonstrated to have a negative and significant relationship with turnover intention in various contexts (e.g. Gabel Shemueli et al., 2015; Memon et al., 2016; Shuck et al., 2014). Likewise, in a recent meta-analysis, Bailey, Madden, Alfes, and Fletcher (2015) concluded that there was a strong negative relationship between work engagement and turnover intention. Hence, it is proposed that:

Proposition 1: Work engagement has a negative and significant relationship with call agent’s turnover intention.

Resources and Work Engagement

Derived from the tenets of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), existing studies have shown that resources are functional in motivating work engagement. Specifically, the JD-R model proposed that resources facilitate employee task completion (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which in turn motivates positive attitudes at work, such as energy, dedication, and immersion, all of which characterise work engagement (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011).

Many studies have attempted to identify predictors of work engagement. According to Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, and Schaufeli (2009), job resources and personal resources are the most crucial determinants. Job resources include coaching and training (Choo & Nasurdin, 2014; Xanthopoulou, Baker, Heuven, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2008), social support (Choo & Nasurdin, 2016; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Otman & Nasurdin, 2012; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Rhenen, 2009), autonomy (Hallberg, Johansson, & Schaufeli, 2007; Terje & Mehmetoglu, 2011), and job control (Britt, 2003; Parker, Jimmieson, & Amiot, 2010; Weigl, Hornung, Parker, Petru, Glaser, & Angerer, 2010). Personal resources comprise self-efficacy (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2009; Luthans & Peterson, 2002; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009), organisational-based self-esteem (Mauno, Kinnunen, & Ruokolainen, 2007; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007), self-esteem (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007), hope (Karatepe, 2014), and optimism (Medlin & Jr, 2009).

Supervisor Support and Work Engagement

The key job resource, supervisor support, was described by Susskind, Macmar, and Borchgrevink (2007) as the provision of work-related help by the supervisor to their employees in performing their job. In the context of a call centre, support from the supervisor is essential to help call agents overcome the challenges that arise in their work. For instance, it is common for call centre agents to face excessive demands from customers who expect them to go beyond their level of authority. Hence, the information and assistance from a supervisor helps call centre agents provide a quick response time and shorter waiting time to customers—they help reduce agents’ stress. Also, call centre agents may have to deal with verbally abusive customers, and the empathy shown by a supervisor helps eliminate the negative feelings. Cheng, Lu, Chang, and Johnstone (2012) explained that when subordinates perceive high levels of supervisory support, they tend to have a good relationship with their supervisor, which indirectly affects their level of engagement in the organisation.

In the local Malaysian context, a study by Othman and Nasurdin (2012) among Malaysian nurses found a positive relationship between supervisory support and work engagement. The study results were in line with an earlier study of teachers in Finland by Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, and Xanthopoulou (2007). Based on this discussion, it can be further assumed that employees who perceive high levels of
supervisory support from their present supervisor tend to display greater work engagement. Since, engaged employees are likely to have more positive outlook upon their work, they are less likely to leave have turnover intention. Hence, it can be proposed that:

Proposition 2: Work engagement mediates the relationship between supervisor support and turnover intention.

Self-efficacy Support and Work Engagement

The primary personal resource, self-efficacy, is a person’s perception of his or her ability to successfully perform in a variety of different situations (Bandura, 1995). This implies that employees who hold a self-efficacy belief are more able to complete a task assigned to them. In a call centre setting, call agents who are confident about their ability to complete the job also experience less stress when handling customer enquiries. Hence, call centre agents that have greater self-efficacy are likely to be more motivated, energetic and positively connected with their work activities, all of which reflect the attributes of work engagement.

An existing study by Salanova, Bakker, and Llorens (2006) demonstrated that employees with high self-efficacy also experience high levels of energy at work. It is therefore reasonable to assume that call centre agents with strong self-efficacy are motivated in their workplace and therefore bring more energy to their work. Supporting this argument are the results of a Spanish study, by Llorens, Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2007), of 110 university students that showed that high levels of engagement positively correlate with students self-efficacy. A more recent study by Li, Wang, Gao, and You (2015) among 352 primary and middle school teachers also concurred with the findings from Llorens et al. (2007). Given that call centre agents with self-efficacy would have more mental resilience at work, it can be further assumed that they are less likely to have turnover intention. Hence, it is proposed that

Proposition 3: Work engagement mediates the relationship between self-efficacy and turnover intention.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework

Drawing on this discussion, a conceptual framework was proposed, illustrated in Figure 1. It depicts supervisor support and self-efficacy having a positive and significant relationship with work engagement, which in turn reduces turnover intention.
CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

A review of prior literature indicates that two forms of JD-R resources, job and personal, are instrumental in enhancing work engagement. The proposed research framework further posits that engaged employees, whose characteristics include vigour, dedication and satisfaction at work, are less likely to have turnover intentions. Furthermore, the research framework proposes that work engagement mediates the relationship between resources and turnover intention.

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