

## ROLE CLARITY, SUPERVISORY SUPPORT, PEER SUPPORT, AND WORK ENGAGEMENT OF CUSTOMER-CONTACT EMPLOYEES IN HOTELS: A FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

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*In light of competitive pressures, organizations particularly service providers, need to unleash the talents of their employees in order to accomplish peak performance. Recent efforts have highlighted the importance of work engagement which focuses on human strengths and optimal functioning. Despite its potential beneficial outcomes, research on the prevalence and antecedents of work engagement has remained scarce. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to develop a model linking role clarity, supervisory support, and peer support as predictors of work engagement. A review of the literature to support the proposed model among customer-contact employees within the Malaysian hotel industry is provided.*

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**Keywords:** *Work Engagement, Role clarity, Supervisory support, Peer support, Customer-contact employees, Malaysia*

JEL Classification: *L83, M1, O1*

### INTRODUCTION

The service sector has continued to be a key player in promoting the growth of the Malaysian economy. This can be seen from the country's GDP records which showed a marked increase in the contribution made by the service sector from 46.1 percent in 2005 to approximately 58.3 percent in 2011 (Ministry of Finance, 2011). By 2020, the service sector is expected to contribute as much as 70 percent of the nation's GDP (Ministry of Information Communications and Culture, 2011). Within the service sector, the tourism industry is particularly significant in terms of



providing employment opportunities to the nation's workforce and generating national income. For instance, in 2009, the tourism industry employed about 14 percent of the total workforce and generated a total of RM36.9 billion to Malaysia's Gross National Income (GNI) (Ministry of Information Communications and Culture, 2011). The growth of the tourism industry can be attributed to the increasing trend in the number of tourist arrivals to Malaysia. For instance, the number of tourist arrivals to Malaysia soared from 7.4 million in 1990 to 16.4 million in 2005 and 24.6 million in 2010 (Tourism Malaysia, 2011b). It is also envisaged that by 2020, the tourism industry will be able to contribute as much as RM103.6 billion in GNI, with arrivals of 36 million tourists (Ministry of Information Communications and Culture, 2011). Given the significant contribution made by this sector, tourism has been listed as one of the National Key Economic Areas (NKEA) under the 10<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan. During the five year period of the 10<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan (2011-2015), the government aims to improve the country's position to be within the top ten in terms of global tourism receipts and to increase the sector's contribution by 2.1 times, contributing a total of RM 115 billion in receipts and creating approximately 2 million jobs (Economic Planning Unit, 2010). To accomplish this goal, one of the key strategies would be to enhance the quality of tourism products and services.

Within the tourism industry, hotels represent key service providers (Baum & Mudambi, 1999; Hayes & Ninemeier, 2007; Ministry of Information Communications and Culture, 2011). In Malaysia, the remarkable increase in tourist arrivals over the years has resulted in the rapid development and construction of hotels, thereby, increasing the supply of rooms for accommodation. Specifically, the number of hotels in Malaysia has risen from 2269 units in year 2005 to 2367 in year 2010. Similarly, the number of room supply has increased from 155, 256 units in 2005 to 168,497 units in 2010 (Tourism Malaysia, 2011a) . One option in which hotels can continue to support the growth of the tourism industry in terms of attracting new customers or retaining existing ones is through the provision of superior service quality. As noted by Bienstock, DeMoranville, and Smith (2003), employees particularly those at the frontline who make direct contact with the customers, represent the lifeblood of a service organization. This line of thought is especially true for hotels which are labor-intensive (Baum & Mudambi, 1999; Hayes & Ninemeier, 2007). According to Lee, Nam, Park, and Lee (2006), if customers' perceived the level of service provided by service providers exceeded their expectation, they are bound to be satisfied, and in turn, lead to retention. On the other hand, when customers' experience during

the service encounter are judged to be unfavorable, they are likely to feel dissatisfied, leading to poor perceptions of service quality (Markovic & Raspor, 2010; Yoo & Park, 2007).

In the context of hotels, some researchers (such as: Baum & Mudambi, 1999; Hayes & Ninemeier, 2007) asserted that a customer's decision to stay or not to stay in the hotel during their next visit depends on their satisfaction with the quality of service they received. Since frontline customer-contact employees represent the organization during service delivery, their attitudes and behaviors play a vital role in influencing customers' evaluation of service quality and subsequent satisfaction (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Bettencourt, Gwinner, & Meuter, 2001; Hartline & Ferrell, 1996; Lee, et al., 2006; Schneider & Bowen, 1985; Yang, 2010). One such favorable attitude is work engagement. In fact, it has been widely acknowledged that work engagement among service employees is one of the mechanisms in stimulating beneficial workplace behaviors such as work performance (Armier & Buckley, 2009; Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008), organizational citizenship behavior (Armier & Buckley, 2009; Halbesleben, Harvey, & Bolino, 2009; Meredith & Oriel, 2010), and extra-role service behavior (Carolina, Vicente, Jose', Jose', & Russell, 2008; Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005). Employees who are engaged in their work are likely to be more energetic, more dedicated, and more absorbed in their jobs (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). The findings by Salanova et al. (2005) provided empirical support for the positive relationship between work engagement and service delivery quality, which in turn, lead to greater customer loyalty. Likewise, Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli (2009) found that when employees' attention are focused on their jobs, they are likely to perform well in their service encounter, which in turn, result in higher customer satisfaction. For hotels, such favorable responses by customers are likely to generate better profit margin.

In recent years, numerous researches have been conducted on the predictors of work engagement. However, these studies were mostly centered on developed countries such as the United States (Britt, 2003; May, Gilson, & Harter, 2004), Netherlands (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007), Germany (Weigl, Hornung, Parker, Petru, Glaser, & Angerer, 2010), Spain (Salanova, et al., 2005), Finland (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Mauno, Kinnunen, & Ruokolainen, 2007), Greece (Xanthopoulou, et al., 2009), Norway (Martinussen, Richardsen, & Burke, 2007), and Australia (Parker, Jimmieson, & Amiot, 2010). These studies were conducted within

specific service industries such as insurance, healthcare, airline, and education. The predictor variables focused on two types of resources: job resources and personal resources. Job resources examined were confined to those at the organizational level (e.g. supervisory coaching), interpersonal level (e.g. social support from supervisors and colleagues), and task level (e.g. autonomy and job control). The personal resources investigated include self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience. On the other hand, studies on the work engagement construct among employees in developing countries have been limited except for the work of a few scholars (e.g. Armir & Buckley, 2009; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2009; Siu, Lu, Brough, Lu, Bakker, Kalliath, O'Driscoll, Phillips, Chen, Lo, Sit, & Shi, 2010). However, the job resources that were examined in these studies were restricted to only those at the organizational level, interpersonal level, and task level. Specifically, Karatepe and Olugbade (2009) investigated the relationship between job resources (supervisor support) and personal resources (self-efficacy and trait competitiveness) and work engagement among a sample of hotel frontline employees in Nigeria. Armir and Buckley (2009), however, examined the role of work engagement in mediating the relationship between trust in leader (i.e. school principal) and work outcomes (in-role performance, OCB, and learning goal orientation) among teachers in Pakistan. Likewise, Siu et al. (2010) studied the mediating role of work engagement in the relationship between several job resources (organizational policies, supervisor support, peer support, job autonomy, and family support) and work-family enrichment among employees in China's healthcare industry. In the case of Malaysia, Abdul Hamid and Yahya (2011) conducted an empirical study on the relationship between person-job fit and person-organization fit and work engagement among a sample of engineers working in semiconductor companies in Malaysia. They concluded that there is a significant relationship between both forms of fit (person-job and person-organization) and employees' work engagement. Nevertheless, despite the growing attention given to work engagement, research in this area is still in its infancy in Malaysia (Abdul Hamid & Yahya, 2011). Given the fact that: customer-contact employees are crucial in delivering superior service quality to hotels' customers (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996), there has been a lack of studies on work engagement within the hospitality industry (Karatepe & Olugbade, 2009), and the growing need to attract more tourists to Malaysia, an understanding of the predictors of work engagement among customer-contact hotel employees is relevant. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to review the literature

and ultimately propose a model linking job resources and work engagement.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Work engagement**

There are many views concerning work engagement. Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) viewed work engagement as a motivational construct. They defined work engagement as a “positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption”. According to Schaufeli and Bakker (2004), vigor refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one’s work, and persistence in the face of difficulties. Dedication relates to one’s sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Absorption is characterized as being fully concentrated, and happily engrossed in one’s work whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Schaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova (2006) argued that work engagement is not a momentary and specific state but rather a persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state of mind. Work engagement is different from workaholism in the sense that the former relates to positive psychological aspects of an individual whereas the latter implies a negative phenomenon with dysfunctional consequences. Specifically, engaged worker viewed work as fun unlike their workaholic counterparts who are obsessed (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Although some scholars (e.g., May, et al., 2004; Robinson, Perryman, & Hayday, 2004) argued that there has been some overlap between work engagement and other motivational constructs such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job involvement, an array of research findings have shown that work engagement is a multidimensional and distinct construct comprising of vigor, dedication, and absorption (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Koyuncu, Burke, & Fiksenbaum, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004).

### **Resources as antecedents of work engagement**

According to the Conservation of Resource theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 2002), resources are those objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of other resources. Hobfoll (2001) proposed that when

resources are acquired, those resources will be invested to obtain additional resources. For example, when people developed skills at work, those skills are often invested in job performance in order to acquire other resources such as rewards and work status. In addition, COR theory suggested that employees will invest their resources in ways that will maximize their returns and in a manner that is most fitting with the specific resource invested. For instance, Hobfoll (2001) posited that resources that an individual gained from their job (i.e. job resources) are often reinvested in their workplace. Based on the COR theoretical underpinning, researchers in positive work psychology proposed that job resources will be positively related to work engagement. In particular, Bakker and Demerouti (2007) argued that job resources may be located at four levels: organizational level (e.g. pay, career opportunities, job security), interpersonal level (e.g. supervisor and co-worker support, team climate), organization of work level (e.g. role clarity and participation in decision-making ), and task level (e.g. skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy, and performance feedback). When individuals possess high level of job resources, they are likely to become more energetic, dedicated, and passionate about their work, all of which characterized high work engagement.

### **Customer-contact employees' job resources as the key antecedent of work engagement**

Job resources have been defined as those physical, social, psychological, or organizational aspects of the job that are instrumental in achieving work goals, able to reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs, and able to promote personal growth, learning, and development (Bakker, Hakanen, Demerouti, & Xanthopoulou, 2007). According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007), job resources are not only necessary to deal with job demands, but they are also important in their own right due to their motivational potential. As intrinsic motivators, job resources help meet human needs and enhance the individual's growth and development. Likewise, as extrinsic motivators, job resources assist employees in meeting their work goals. As boundary spanners who perform on the "front stage" of the organization, the possession of greater job resources is deemed valuable in improving service delivery. In line with the suggestion made by Bakker et al. (2010) the motivational effect of job resources are bound to make frontline, customer-contact employees become more energetic, resilient, dedicated, and absorbed in their task activities. Such favorable attributes

will ultimately result in beneficial behavioral outcomes leading to greater service performance. Findings from previous studies (Britt, 2003; Hakanen, et al., 2006; Karatepe & Olugbade, 2009; Martinussen, et al., 2007; Mauno, et al., 2007; Parker, et al., 2010; Salanova, et al., 2005; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Weigl, et al., 2010; Xanthopoulou, et al., 2007, 2009) demonstrated that job resources located at the four levels: organizational level (i.e. training, technology, supervisory coaching); interpersonal level (i.e. social support from supervisor and colleagues); task level (i.e. performance feedback, job control, autonomy) and the organization of work level (i.e. role clarity) were able to foster employee work engagement. Hence, our first proposition is presented as follows:

***Proposition 1: Job resources of the customer-contact employees will be positively related to their work engagement.***

As boundary spanners who have to deal with the needs and wishes of customers promptly, resources at the organization of work level (role clarity) and interpersonal level (supervisory support and peer support) would be considered important in fostering work engagement.

## **Role clarity and work engagement**

Role clarity refers to the extent to which an employee receives and understands information required to perform his/her job (Kelly & Richard, 1980). Role clarity is perceived by frontline employees as having a positive effect on their job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and job performance (de Ruyter, Wetzels, & Feinberg, 2001). On the other hand, when workers lack role clarity, they tend to experience negative feelings such as job tension and dissatisfaction (Kahn, Donald, Robert, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Kelly & Richard, 1980). In service settings, role clarity provides an opportunity for customer-contact employees to act quickly to serve their customer during the service encounter without having to refer to their superiors for advice. Such prompt response is likely to delight customers leading to greater satisfaction. Terje, Göran, and Sander (2011) added that when there is a lack of role clarity among customer-contact employees, negative outcomes are likely to occur such as the concerned employee may mislead customers by providing incorrect information, which leads to poor service quality experiences for the customers. Therefore, when customer-contact employees are clear on what they are supposed to do in their job, they are more likely to adopt a favorable attitude towards work in terms of exhibiting greater perseverance in handling job challenges and displaying higher dedication in serving their customers. In light of the above discussion, we posit that:

***Proposition 1a: There will be a positive relationship between role clarity and work engagement.***

### **Supervisory support and work engagement**

Supervisory support is defined as the positive work interaction between a supervisor and his/her subordinate (Bhanthumnavian, 2003). According to Bhanthumnavian (2003), in the workplace, support from the supervisor can come in three forms: emotional support (i.e. showing empathy, acceptance, and care); informative support (i.e. giving feedback or guidance in work), and material support (i.e. preparing budget, aids, resources, and tangible assistance that are related to work to improve the subordinate's motivation, performance, and effectiveness). Previous studies provided empirical evidence on the effect of supervisory support on a person's attitude and behavior. For instance, Bakker et al. (2007) found that supervisor support is positively related to work engagement. In a recent study, Ugur and Emin (2010) discovered that supervisory support was positively related to job satisfaction and affective commitment but negatively related to turnover intentions. In the context of the service industry where customer-contact employees are likely to experience work pressures as a result of their interactions with customers who display varied emotions and behaviors (Karatepe, Yavas, & Babakus, 2007), supervisory support in terms of emotion, information, and materials, may act as a buffering mechanism in reducing their stress level. This is especially true for hotel employees since they are normally underpaid, have to typically work long hours, have to endure irregular schedules, and heavy workloads (Hayes & Ninemeier, 2007; Karatepe, et al., 2007). At the same time, supervisory support serves to motivate employees to perform better. For instance, proper feedback from one's supervisor would increase the likelihood of being successful in achieving future work goals, leading to higher engagement. Therefore, when customer-contact employees perceived themselves to be recipients of their supervisor's support, they are more likely to develop a favorable work attitude by displaying resilience, dedication, and becoming engrossed in their work, all of which are bound to enhance service performance. Hence, it is proposed that:

***Proposition 1b: There will be a positive relationship between supervisory support and work engagement.***



## Peer support and work engagement

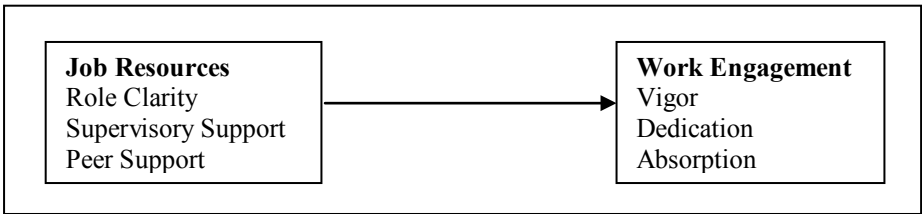
House (1981) defined peer support as the degree to which employees perceived that they have received affective participation, empathy, liking or respect from their peers or colleagues. Past studies have shown that peer support can positively affect a person's work attitudes (He, Lai, & Lu, 2011; Xanthopoulou, Baker, Heuven, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2008). Being labor-intensive, workers in service organizations do not work independently (Ma & Qu, 2011). The delivery of quality services to customers will be dependent upon the collaborative efforts of the work teams especially those at the frontline. Support an employee receives from other members of the team (i.e. peer support) can be either instrumental, emotional, and informational (House, 1981). For instance, instrumental support from colleagues can help to get the work accomplished in time, and may alleviate the effect of work overload on strain (Van der Doef & Maes, 1999). Greater emotional support received from their peers in the form of respect, affective participation, and liking, would help reduce their feelings of pressure associated with their job demands. Meanwhile, informational support from peers which include feedback, formal and informal knowledge related to work that are being shared, are useful in assisting the particular worker perform his/her job effectively and efficiently. Therefore, when customer-contact employees perceive themselves to be recipients of their peers' support, they will be more likely to develop a favorable work attitude as a form of reciprocation through greater work engagement. Xanthopoulou et al. (2008) provided empirical evidence for the positive influence of peer support on work engagement. In their study within the airline industry, Xanthopoulou et al. (2008) discovered that flight attendants who experienced greater peer support were more engaged in their work. Accordingly, the following proposition is offered:

***Proposition 1c: There will be a positive relationship between peer support and work engagement.***

## PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL

Based on the preceding discussion, and in relation to the COR theory, our proposed research framework is depicted in Figure 1 whereby three forms of job resources (role clarity, supervisory support, and peer support) are posited to predict work engagement.

**Figure 1** Proposed Research Model



## **CONCLUSION**

In the highly competitive hotel industry, superior service becomes one of the most critical elements for gaining a sustainable competitive advantage in the marketplace (Markovic & Raspor, 2010). One feasible way for hotels to achieve superior service quality is to ensure that their customer-contact employees are highly engaged in their work. Work engagement is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in work. Since hotels are labor-intensive, employees especially those customer-contact personnel play a significant role in ensuring superior service delivery. Engaged employees are bound to display a positive outlook toward their job and more willing to devote their time and effort in serving their customers, all of which, will lead to higher perceived service quality and ultimately greater customer satisfaction. A review of past literature provided support for the positive relationships between job resources and work engagement. Hence, a conceptual research model has been developed linking job resources (comprising of role clarity, supervisory support, and peer support) as potential predictors of work engagement.

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