SUPPORTING AND SUSTAINING WELL-BEING IN THE WORKPLACE

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Insights from a Developing Economy

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emerald PUBLISHING

United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India
Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2020

Reprints and permissions service
Contact: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83982-695-5 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-83982-692-4 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-83982-694-8 (Epub)

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ISO 14001

ISOQAR certified Management System, awarded to Emerald for adherence to Environmental standard ISO 14001:2004.

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To our family members, who have been patient while we write …

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Writing a book can be a lonely journey. Apropos to this, we have taken an approach as a team to write this book together and what an amazing journey it has been! At a time when the world is facing a global pandemic, we found that this book could not have been written at a better time. While writing the book, we realized that, like any human endeavours, sustaining a particular effort is more easily said than done. Essentially, we hope this book helps readers cope with our ever complicated world and provide comforts to those that are battling with their wellbeing. While our readers may live and work in different countries, we certainly share a common philosophy: *Our aim to protect and enhance our well-being*.

This project is fully supported by Equitable Society Research Cluster (ESRC), University of Malaya, under award grant number **SG005A-18SBS**.

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CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Developing countries are nations with great dreams – driven by their vision to tread the same path as their developed counterparts. These nations call out to their citizens to embrace this dream and to hold on to hopes of growth, development, and prosperity. Citizens believe in this aspiration. They yearn for a better future for themselves and their children. Besides materialistic needs, they crave to fulfil their psychological needs. They hope for a better quality of life. To achieve these dreams, the economic drivers of the nation sow the seeds of work, effort, and productivity into the minds of the citizens. 'We can only move forward and become a developed nation if we work hard', they say. Citizens hold on to this word of wisdom. They march on in their quest for a better future, for themselves and their children!

Malaysia, as a developing nation, holds on to similar hopes of becoming a developed nation. She is driven to expand herself into a high-income nation, backed by accelerated growth. Malaysia's quest for development can be observed through the nation's key growth eras. The New Economic Policy (1971–1990) was the initial plan implemented to eliminate absolute poverty, as well as, economic function profiling by race. The pursuit for development was propelled through the introduction of Vision 2020 during the tabling of the Sixth Malaysian Plan. Over the years, Vision 2020 was improvised through the proposal of higher growth rates to address challenges which accompanied the financial crisis of 2007–2010. Moving forward, the National Transformation 2050 (TN50) was announced during the tabling of the 2017 Budget. The implementation of TN50 was judicious; it signified the government's pledge to transform Malaysia into a developed nation. The central purpose of this strategy was to accelerate Malaysia's mission to be among the leading nations in the world in terms of fiscal enhancement, citizen well-being, and modernisation. Essentially, Malaysia's growth strategies attempted to embrace comprehensive development that fosters sustainable individuals and societal well-being (OECD, 2016).

This ambition has been reinforced through repeated calls for every individual to exert greater work efforts, and to contribute to the nation's development. Even recently, Tun Mahathir, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, reiterated the need for everyone to work hard to help Malaysia realise its ambition of growing into a developed nation by 2030 (Kaos, 2020). In view of similar pleas to work harder, employees in Malaysia tend to equate long working hours to being hard working. Employees are willing to invest their time for work, with hopes of experiencing accelerated career progression. In addition, employees in a collectivist culture like Malaysia are willing to exert greater work efforts to protect their family's well-being (Spector et al., 2007). Hence, most people form an optimistic frame of mind about work, harbouring the hope of improving their quality of life and well-being. They strongly believe that hard work and fulfilment of their employer's demands would result in material progression, such as higher salaries which can be used to develop a cosy nest of fund or to elevate family status and quality of life. They believe that they can move into better homes, provide better education for their children, support their leisurely pursuits, such as hobbies, shopping, or travelling, and be able to enjoy a laid-back life during their retirement.

Sadly, these are views of employees perceived from rose-tinted glasses. The relationship among nation development, mounting demand for work effort, and employee well-being is not as straightforward as it seems. The journey to become a developed nation has brought about dramatic transformation in the workplace. As work consumes a substantial fraction of the employees' life, it is natural for the shifting work landscape to have a significant impact on employees' health and well-being (Kalliath & Kalliath, 2012). As people entertain hopes on the elevated quality of life, and enhanced well-being, many are not prepared for the accompanying dark side of development. They fail to recognise that growth is often accompanied by underlying negative implications. Competition increases. Organisational survival kicks in, and consistent with those line of change, organisations and supervisors are giving more focus to employee performance, at the expense of employee wellbeing (Guest, 2017). Hence, work demand increases (Parris, Vickers, & Wilkes, 2008; Zivcicová, Bulková, & Masárová, 2017). Employers choose to make their employees work longer hours so as to fulfil organisational goals. In their endeavour to accomplish these, employers tend to ignore employees' call for better work-life balance (WLB) by positioning this necessity at the lowest end of their priority (Mukherjee, 2019; The Edge, 2017). As work becomes part and parcel of the lives of the employees, the boundary between work and life also becomes increasingly blurred. Employees' well-being at work, thus, begins to seep in and overflows on other life domains (Ilies, Aw, & Pluut, 2015) like home and family. The rising work pressure causes a steep ascent in the stress level of employees. Silently, work pressure creeps in and sinks its' claw into unsuspecting, vulnerable employees – leading to the decline in employees' well-being.

Developing nations can bury their hopes of moving forward if their human resources, in the form of manpower, or employees, are not well taken care of. This means that they need to focus on the country's workforce, and to examine the well-being of their organisations and the people employed so as to ensure that the people's well-being is being nurtured and protected. Sadly, many prior works point to a skewed focus of employees' well-being in developed countries, hence, little is relatively discovered in developing countries, such as Malaysia. Employees' well-being refers to the employees' sentiments and reflections about their work life, and how these sentiments and reflections influence their lives in general (Ilies et al., 2015). According to the 2018 Global Talent Trends Survey, one in two employees would like their employers to give more attention to employees' well-being (Kohll, 2018). The focus should encompass physical, mental, emotional, and fiscal wellness (Kohll, 2018). Succinctly, employees' well-being and organisational performance share an intimate relationship. The economics of well-being is clear-cut. Physically healthy employees are productive employees. Happy employees are productive employees. Psychologically robust employees are also productive employees. Consequently, productive employees result in enhanced job performance, and organisational performance. Hence, employees' well-being should be placed on a pedestal, and treated as an important indicator of success. It is almost impossible for organisations to flourish if employees' well-being was pushed to the side.

Even though meaningful advancement is noted in terms of design, implementation, and assessment of interventions which aim to enhance employees' well-being, many areas remain inadequately explored. One such area is the consequence of the conservation of resources (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014) in promoting employees' well-being. This is especially so in the context of developing countries, such as Malaysia. Building upon the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), this book elucidates the underlying process of the individual and organisational resources' conservation and their consequences on employees' well-being.

The COR theory was built on the notion of motivation. The fundamental idea of the COR theory is that people are driven to obtain new resources while also maintaining and shielding their existing resources which they value (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, Halbesleben, Neveu, & Westman, 2018). Resources are described as things that help people to achieve goals (Halbesleben et al., 2014). There is no single view on the definition of resource value, however, the work of Hobfoll (1989) provides a clear description of resources and value. In short, resources that facilitate goal attainment is perceived as having greater value. It was conjectured to have four parts – personal, material, energy, and condition. All these resources were deemed to be essential for goal attainment. While some resources are universally valued, the value of other resources may depend on the context of the fit between individuals, resource, and ecological circumstances (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll, 1989).

The underlying ideology of the conservation and acquisition of resources is based on four pillars: (1) primacy of resource loss, (2) resource investment, (3) gain paradox, and (4) desperation principle (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The primacy of resource loss emphasises that resource loss is more prominent than resource gain (Halbesleben et al., 2014). The scale of influence of resource loss is much greater than resource gain, especially in terms of the velocity of the effect, and the duration the effect remains evident (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Basically, resource loss creates an impression in people's mind that they failed to survive (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The second principle highlights the pertinence of resource investment (Halbesleben et al., 2014). This principle delineates the need for people to invest their resources with the purpose of shielding themselves against future resource loss, to recuperate from losses, and to obtain resources (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Poor judgement in terms of investment of resources leads to elevated levels of strain (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

The next principle focuses on the gain paradox which stresses that resource gain is especially prominent in the situation of resource loss. In situations where resource loss is relatively high, resource gain becomes more pertinent (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

The final principle of the COR theory is the desperation principle. People are said to enter a defensive mode so as to protect themselves when their resource reservoir is outstretched or depleted (Hobfoll et al., 2018). In facing such adversity, people may attempt to conserve their resources or seek alternative survival strategies so as to allow them to reassess their position, and to tide over the impact of the stressors. In extreme cases, people may react aggressively, or irrationally (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Earlier models on stress had conjectured that people attempt to minimise the loss of resources when faced with stress (Hobfoll, 1989). The COR theory goes beyond this conceptualisation; it attempts to better understand the mental and behavioural processes of people when they are not threatened with stress, and how this helps them cope when stress comes knocking on the door (Hobfoll, 1989). The 'COR theory posits that stress occurs (a) when central or key resources are threatened with loss, (b) when central or key resources are lost, or (c) when there is a failure to gain central or key resources following significant effort' (Hobfoll et al., 2018, p. 104). At work, these situations are usually triggered by work-related stressors which deplete the employees' psychological resources. The scarcity of resources aggravates the adverse implication of stress. On the contrary, individuals are better equipped to face the adversity of stress when they have developed resource surpluses (Hobfoll, 1989).

There is a call for a shift in mindset to allocate greater attention towards the need to better comprehend the process through which people conserve resources (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Building on this interest, our book is written with employees' well-being in mind. The foundation of this book is set on the notion that employees' well-being must be treated as a core business in all organisations, particularly in terms of interventions that can be embraced to enhance employees' well-being. Building on the COR theory, we argue that the employees' well-being prospers through the support and sustenance of personal and organisational resources. The five chapters in this book provide insights into various individual and organisational interventions that play a pertinent role in building the employees' reservoir of resources, which in turn, develop the foundation for enhanced and sustainable well-being.

Chapter 1 is 'Depression – A Silent Killer'; it clarifies the reality of workplace depression in the Malaysian work environment. The chapter attempts to shatter the taboo surrounding depression at the workplace, and to create a more receptive mindset in extending the needed support to address this as an illness. Various organisational mitigation efforts that can be employed to prevent or minimise cases of workplace depression are recommended through the conservation of employees' psychological resources. These were reviewed and presented as benchmark examples.

Chapter 2 is 'Feeling Stress At Work, Behaving Badly At Home'; it acknowledges that both work and home life are profoundly intertwined. As mentioned earlier, most people perceive work as the means for a better life and for improving the well-being of the family. Building on the COR theory, this chapter provides a discourse looking at the intra-individual (spillover) effect, the inter-individual (crossover) effect, and the transmission of positive and negative experiences between the work and the home life. The discourse fills the void of current literature by looking at how individuals thrive in their experiences at work, and how those experiences transfer into their lives at home. Essentially, the roles given to the individuals at work may have a significant impact on their roles at home. The chapter focuses on dual earner couples with an emphasis on the changes of patriarchal roles in the Malaysian context. It is possible that men and women are taking different aspects of the family into consideration, and this could lead to independent strain reactions on their family roles. The chapter then elucidates the variations that individuals' experiences at work, and their distinctive patterns in their social interactions at home.

To better manage the challenges aligned with workplace depression and interwoven implications of work and home life experiences, Chapter 3 – 'Relax: Just be Mindful!' – looks at being mindful. The chapter commences with a review of the impact of the state of mindlessness on individual functioning. The implication of this state is narrowed down to the context of organisation and the pertinence of mindfulness at work is highlighted. The chapter further deciphers mindfulness from various lenses, highlighting the positive implication of mindfulness on employees' well-being and performance. Mindfulness was finally depicted as an essential personal resource that helps employees to focus on the present, to forget the past, and to accept the future.

Chapter 4 is 'Shape the Hero in You and Others'. It explores the role of the intra-individual resources in managing employees' well-being. It identifies the importance and the use of 24 character strengths introduced by Peterson and Seligman (2004). The chapter emphasises the role of these character strengths in creating the best fit between core individual strengths and their ability to successfully manage their optimal functioning at work. The chapter highlights strategies that can be used in organisations to manage individuals