



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION ON DIVERSITY AT THE
WORKPLACE**

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EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION ON DIVERSITY AT THE WORKPLACE

SHARON JUN ANAK NGABANG

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Statement of Originality

The work described in this Final Year Project, entitled
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is to the best of the author’s knowledge that of the author except
where due reference is made.

(26th April 2010)



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ABSTRACT

EMPLOYEES' PERCEPTION ON DIVERSITY AT THE WORKPLACE

Sharon Jun Anak Ngabang

This research was conducted to study the perception of employees on diversity issues in the workplace. Qualitative method was used and there were four informants whom are the employees in an organization in Kuching, Sarawak. Data was collected using in-depth interview and analyzed using Content analysis method. This research had uncovered some of the work activities and the social events. Through these activities and events, factors that led to its success or failure were discovered. Most of the findings correlated with previous research and some are new findings. The most significant findings was that there was a possibility of a relationship between complex work activity, knowledge sharing and success in a diverse workplace as well as the relationship between lack of knowledge on other's culture, disagreement and disharmony in diverse workplace. This study contributes to theory and practices in the field of Human Resource Development.

ABSTRAK

PERSEPSI PEKERJA TERHADAP KEPELBAGAIAN DI TEMPAT KERJA

Sharon Jun Anak Ngabang

Kajian ini telah dilaksanakan bagi tujuan mengkaji persepsi pekerja mengenai isu kepelbagaian di tempat kerja. Kaedah kualitatif telah digunakan dan terdapat empat informan yang terdiri daripada pekerja di sebuah organisasi di Kuching, Sarawak. Data telah dikumpulkan menggunakan kaedah Temuramah Secara Mendalam dan dianalisa menggunakan kaedah Analisa Isi. Kajian ini telah menerokai beberapa aktiviti kerja serta social di tempat kerja yang berkaitan dengan kepelbagaian. Selain itu, kajian ini juga telah menerokai beberapa faktor yang mempengaruhi kejayaan atau kegagalan sesebuah aktiviti kerja atau social di dalam konteks tempat kerja yang mempunyai kepelbagaian kaum. Kebanyakan dapatan yang diperolehi disokong oleh kajian lepas sementara beberapa dapatan adalah dapatan baru. Terdapat dua dapatan kajian yang sangat penting iaitu kemungkinan wujudnya hubungan di antara kerumitan kerja, perkongsian ilmu dan kejayaan di dalam konteks kepelbagaian di tempat kerja, dan hubungan di antara kurangnya pengetahuan terhadap kaum lain, percanggahan pendapat dan keadaan tidak aman di tempat kerja yang mempunyai kepelbagaian kaum. Selain daripada itu, implikasi kajian ini terhadap teori and amalan-amalan yang berkaitan dengan Pembangunan Sumber Mamusia turut dibincangkan.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter will introduce the background of the study, problem statement, general and specific objectives, the basic research questions and the definition of terms used in this study.

1.1 Background of the Study

Our country, Malaysia is one of the fast-growing nations in South East Asia. We are now moving forward to fulfill our Vision-2020 that has been introduced by our former Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Bin Mohammad back in the year 1991. According to Selvarajah and Meyer (2008), Malaysia is a multi-racial country of about 23.27 million people (*Census*, 2001 as cited in Selvarajah and Meyer, 2008) consisting of the indigenous Bumiputras (65.1 percent), Chinese (26 percent), Indians (7.7 percent) and others (1.2 percent). According to Ibrahim (2008), in one of the states in Malaysia, which is Sarawak, there are more than 30 ethnic groups (e.g. Iban, Land Dayak, Than, Kayan, Kenyah, Melanau, Bukitan, Kanowit). As a multi-cultural

country, Malaysia has a lot of advantages if the cultures and ethnicity of the citizens are in unison with its vision. History has shown that the failure to respect others' culture, religion and ethnicity brings down even the most tolerable nation.

As history showed us, many civilizations were at war as the effect of diversity issue especially those concerning religion. For example, the series of The Crusades between the Christians and the Muslims from 1095 b.c till 1272 b.c and the shocking World Trade Centre attacks back in 11th September 2001 have lead to a massive destruction. It is important for us to learn from these histories. In Malaysia itself, 13th May 1969 has stamped its darkest history after independence that witnessed a tragic result as a result of racial violent between the Malays and the Chinese. Nowadays, diversity issue has becoming more and more important in our lives. Countries that have diverse citizens are especially concern with this issue. It is the fact that this issue is essential to be kept in control because of its strong influence towards the development or a destruction of a country.

Diversity in human demographic context can be in many forms such as age, nationality, gender, ethnicity and even religion. Malaysians live in an ethnic-diverse environment. We have Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Dayak, Kadazan and other minorities throughout the country. The failure to understand and respect the opposite gender, other peoples' ethnicity and religion will lead to a negative impact. We need to change our perception towards diversity and see it as a bridge that unites the nations.

The multi-cultural people of our country offer its economic-related sectors an advantage in which it provides a diverse human resource. It is believed that having a diverse human resource can help to generate organizations' economic status. However, in order to achieve that, organizations must have a perfect strategy to manage their diverse workforce. In Malaysia and specifically in Sarawak, there are

some organizations that have proven to be successful because of the way they handled their diverse employees. Employees on the other hand may have different perception on this matter and what really lies beneath the success of an organization is still rather vague especially on the factors that may or may not affect the outcome of an activity and events containing employees of diverse backgrounds. Therefore, this study aims to find out these factors as well as exploring personal work and social-related activities that happens in the workplace related to ethnic diversity.

Diversity issue is significant to our future here in Malaysia particularly because we are a multicultural country. The efforts to make people understand and most importantly respect other people should be done by everyone. Organizations particularly should adopt a diverse environment as an effort to promote diversity itself. If an organization adopts diversity concept, it can educate its employees about different ethnic and religion that exist in their country. Eventually, they will learn to appreciate and respect each other. Thus, may encourage unity among the employees in work activities and social events that take place in the work setting.

The existence of ethnic diversity and all its elements such as differences in perceptions and conduct in work activities and social events in the workplace cannot be ignored. The social skills and perception that each individual have towards their counterparts may be different from one another. These differences has been long discovered and explained by theories such as Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner in 1979. These differences in terms of perception may have a do in determining the outcome of diversified-group interaction and problem-solving activity in the workplace.

Therefore, seeing that this issue is particularly important in Malaysia, the author has performed a study on the issue of diversity focusing on ethnic diversity in an

organization in Kuching, Sarawak entitled “Employees’ Perception on Diversity at the Workplace”.

1.2 Problem Statement

Diversity is one of the important elements that define an organization and in which it requires the employees and managers to work together as a family. All organizations want to have a sense of unity among its employees and the management. Unity creates a good relationship among the members of the organization. Thus, helps in increasing work satisfaction that surely leads to a positive productivity. As a result, the organization grasps success.

As a multicultural nation, Malaysia is very much concern with diversity issues especially those regarding ethnicity. We cannot deny the fact that we are living in a diverse environment. In addition with industrialization and globalization, Malaysians are becoming more diverse not only in marriages but also in their workplace. The sixth Malaysian Prime Minister, Yang Amat Berhormat Dato’ Seri Mohd. Najib Bin Tun Abdul Razak also wants Malaysian to stand together, think and act as one people under the 1Malaysia concept.

According to Muhamad and Agus (1993), the nation’s capacity to face the challenges of industrialization and globalization of business towards the 21st. century depends heavily on its human resources. They added that firms may have the capital, technical and human resources, but it is human resources that will help organization face the challenges of business globalization. Therefore, it is important that organization knows how to manage their employees. It is more crucial if they have diverse human resources.

The issue of workforce diversity has been on the limelight years ago and has becoming more popular in the 21st century. There have been many contemporary studies on the issue of diversity done in and outside of Malaysia. There are some researchers that have touched on the issue of demographic diversity (Ely and Thomas, 2001; Emerald, 2002; Subhash C. Kundu, 2003; Azrina Binti Bunsu, 2009) and the relationship between ethnically diverse workforce and organizations' performance (Pitts and Jarry, 2005; Marimuthu, 2008). These studies have proven that diversity benefits organizations.

According to Marimuthu (2008), demographic diversity contributes positively towards organizational performance as well as firms' financial performance. In other words, by having a diverse workforce, organization will have a higher chance to increase their economic status.

It may occur to us as to how diversity can bring about unity and also destruction to an organization. There have been a lot of activities done by big organizations to encourage people to understand diversity. A talk in Paris entitled "UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity" back in year 2001 stated that "Diversity is the root of development, understood not simply in terms of economic growth, but also as a means to achieve a more satisfactory intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual existence."

Another related conference by Council on Education for Public Health in the year 2005 was about the efforts to achieve gender and ethnic or racial diversity among Public Health Faculties and Student Bodies, "knowledge on diversity is essential prior to complex problems of an increasingly global community and must deal effectively with multicultural perspectives of increasingly diverse populations at home and around the world". So, diversity is known to be essential part of our lives that we need to take care of.

Most of the research studied on diversity in general, gender and minorities and cultural diversity. However, there is still lack of research that specifically touches on ethnic diversity. So, this research is important to find out about ethnic diversity in organization. Apart from that, there are more studies on diversity done in the Western countries than in Asian countries, specifically in Malaysia. The research on work-related activities pertaining ethnic diversity are mostly studied on small-group and there are still lack of research on social-related events within an organization. This limits the knowledge on the outcomes of diversity in other types of work-related activities and social-related events in the workforce.

Though there are research on work activities and social events within an organization, there is no known study that specifically touches on that topic that focuses on employees' perception on ethnic diversity in organization in Sarawak. Therefore, this study was done to uncover the perception of employees in an organization in Sarawak who is concern with its workforce diversity. Some of the factors that influence work activities and social events' outcome perceived by the ethnically-diverse workforce in the chosen organization are also discovered through this research.

1.3 Research Objectives

This study has the intention to explore the perception of employees regarding activities pertaining ethnic diversity in the workplace. The specific objectives are as follow.

- i) To uncover some successful work activities related to ethnic diversity in the workplace
- ii) To uncover some failed work activities related to ethnic diversity in the workplace
- iii) To uncover some successful social events related to ethnic diversity in the workplace
- iv) To uncover some failed social events related to ethnic diversity in the workplace
- v) To find out employees' perception on factors that contributes to the success of an activity or an event in the ethnically diversified workplace.
- vi) To find out employees' perception on factors that contributes to the failure of an activity or an event in the ethnically diversified workplace.

1.4 Research Questions

In order to achieve the above objectives, the following research questions have been developed. Questions regarding employees' work activities and social events are as follow:

- What are the work-related success activities related to ethnic diversity in the workplace experienced by the employees?
- What are the work-related failure activities related to ethnic diversity in the workplace experienced by the employees?
- What are the social-related success events related to ethnic diversity in the workplace experienced by the employees?
- What are the social-related failure events related to ethnic diversity in the workplace experienced by the employees?

Additional questions regarding employees' perception on the factors that makes the activity or event successful or fail are as follow:

- Based on the work-related success activities related to ethnic diversity in the workplace experienced by the employees, what are their perceptions on the factors that contribute to its success?
- Based on the work-related failure activities related to ethnic diversity in the workplace experienced by the employees, what are their perceptions on the factors that contribute to its failure?
- Based on the social-related success events related to ethnic diversity in the workplace experienced by the employees, what are their perceptions on the factors that contribute to its success?
- Based on the social-related failure events related to ethnic diversity in the workplace experienced by the employees, what are their perceptions on the factors that contribute to its failure?

1.5 Definition of terms

In the context of this study, there are six terms that has been defined which are diversity, work activity, social event, success, failed and factor.

Diversity

General/Conceptual:

'Diversity refers to any mixture of items characterized by differences and similarities'
(Thomas, 1996)

'Diversity is the variation of social and cultural identities among people existing together in a defined employment or market setting ...'

(Cox, 2001 as cited in Marimuthu, 2008)

Operational:

Employees are varies in terms of ethnicity. The type of ethnicity can be that of ethnics that can generally found in Malaysia such as Malay, Chinese, Indians, Ibans, and Land Dayaks as well as ethnics from other country such as White and African-American people from United States of America, Bicolano and Ibanag people from Philippine, Javanese and Sundanese people from Indonesia, as well as Irish and Italians from United Kingdom.

Work activity

General/Conceptual:

Any event, exposure, activity, etc., occurring within the work environment resulting in something (www.ask.com, 2009)

Operational:

Any tasks under an employees' job description and activities required for him/her to perform the job. It also refers to an activity that he/she required to do as someone who holds certain position in the organization even though it not written under his/her job description but are work-related. For example, group project, training session or being in a committee for organization-related activities or events.

Social events

General/Conceptual:

An occurrence or happening, usually significant to the performance of a function, operation, or task (www.its.bldrdoc.gov, 2009)

Operational:

Spontaneous or arranged happenings among the employees and/or the management initiated by any party in the workplace that is related with social or networking purpose.

Success

General/Conceptual:

The achievement of something desired, planned or attempted (www.ask.com, 2009)

Operational:

Desirable/ Intended/ A favorable outcome to the employee based on their own personal perception in regards to working with people from different ethnic.

Failed

General/Conceptual:

Not successful (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2005).

Operational:

Undesirable/ Unintended/ A disappoint outcome to the employee based on their own personal perception in regards to working with people from different ethnic. The term also sometimes refers as the word "failure" in this study.

Factor

General/Conceptual.

One of several things that cause or influence something (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2005).

Operational:

Things that influence or determine the success or failure of a work/social activity in an ethnically-diverse workforce. For example, first impression and communication skill.

1.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter introduces the topic, background and objectives of the study. Apart from that, it explains the statement of problem and defines the important terms used in this study.