



Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development

**Antecedents and Consequences of Boredom at Workplace among
Academicians of Private Higher Education Institutions in Sarawak**

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Antecedents and Consequences of Boredom at Workplace among
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CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews literature on boredom at workplace and other selected constructs relevant to this research. It could be divided into five main sections. The first section begins with a brief chronology and importance of PHEIs followed by implications of boredom at workplace from the human resource perspective. The second section pointed the underpinning theory used to support this proposal with reviews of past studies to respective theory. The third section highlights gaps in the literature including an illustration of the theoretical framework of this research. The fourth section discusses hypotheses that are built based on former studies of related constructs. Lastly, a short summary concludes this chapter.

2.2 Chronology of PHEIs in Malaysia

Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) was formed on 27 March 2004 and it regulates the higher education system and management within the country. Each department under the ministry are assigned for policies coordination, funding and activities that promote excellence higher education while the divisions monitor the quality of the education offered. Generally, MOHE monitor the movement of public and private higher educational institutions in the way that Malaysia turns to be the educational hub in Asia.

However, public higher education institutions are not able to cater the large pool of students within and outside of the country. Hence, the government took the initiative to introduce the Private Higher Educational Institutional Act (PHEIA). PHEIA enables the private sector to sell their higher educations to meet the market demand under the jurisdiction of MOHE. The latest report by the Department of Statistic Malaysia in year 2014 revealed that there were 500 private higher education institutions (PHEIs) to cater 675,135 students in Malaysia. The number of students is expected to continuously grow and reach 1.2 million in year 2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015). Apart from students, the numbers of adult learners are growing due to career development purposes. Notably, the PHEIA had led the private higher education institution to mushroom in Malaysia.

2.3 The importance of PHEIs in Malaysia

Globalisation gives raise to K-Economy (Knight, 2002) which is known as knowledge-based economy. Knowledge has become the important commodity to exchange throughout the world for national development. With unique knowledge, an organization can remain competitive in the fast changing market. Hence, there is a need to respond among public and private higher education institutions in that direction.

PHEIs are important in few ways. Firstly, public higher educations are slow in responding to the market demands. MOHE regulates the operations of public higher education institution and they are an giant complex organisation taking care of different interest from their stakeholders. Hence, they are more rigid and less flexible in resources allocation

(Wilkinson & Yussof, 2005) and bureaucracy procedure (Mintzberg, 1996). In contrast, private higher education institutions are fast in responding to the market demands due to their flexibility and sensitivity to the current trend in the society.

Secondly, public higher education institutions are more selective in terms of student recruitments. To date, Malaysia has more than 900,000 students hunting for their higher education. This causes overcrowding and some left with disappointment. This led them to enter private education institution (Oketch, 2004). Notably, not all students have the opportunity to get into public higher education institution. In that case, established private education institutions will gain more preference as being perceived of possessing higher quality than others.

On top of that, Lee (2004) where they found graduates from private higher education are able to get job easily with good pay. The high employment rate of graduates symbolised that private higher education are playing their role well in the country as they are able to produce quality graduates. They are not compromising in term of the quality of courses offered as it had been closely monitored by Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE). Besides, the rapid growth of private higher education is closely related to the drop in ranking among few top institution in Malaysia (Supplement, 2010). With the great progression, private higher education are an icon for knowledge business whereby it offers another channel for students to further their studies in Malaysia.

Fourthly, higher education is the key success to achieve better life where via education, skilled workers are produced to help the growth of a nation. In such realities, education is a

stepping stone in which leads the majority of students trying to achieve excellent result for brighter future.

Lastly, students possess mammoth opportunities to gain knowledge through globalisation. The influx of the international students to study in Malaysia has indirectly plays an important role in contributing to the nation income. For instance, it was reported that in year 2007, the higher education sector had contributed RM 1.5 billion to the government income (Muda, 2007). In recent report by Department of Statistic Malaysia (2015), the contribution has reached RM7.47 billion. Indirectly, higher education has started to play important role in generating income to the country.

In this globalisation era, organizations with skilled and knowledgeable human resources remain competitive in the market. Knowledge is a driven force that increases the growth of an organization as well as their opportunities in global market and vice versa (Tilak, 2001). Countries such as China, Korea and Japan placed higher education an important role in determining their economic plan (Martin, 2009). In Malaysia context, the government recognised the importance of developing human capital via higher education in the Tenth Malaysian Plan (2014). Therefore, academicians remain the critical point to produce competence and skilful human capital for the nation.

2.4 Boredom at workplace: Introduction, Antecedents and Consequences from Human Resource Perspectives

2.4.1 Definition of boredom

What is boredom? How does boredom affect an individual? Does boredom come with function? These simple questions had evoked quite a number of researches in the attempt to provide the answers. There are positive and negative views on boredom. At negative side, boredom serve no function, disrupting on-going activity, lead poor behaviour, and generally poor in logic, rationality and other cognitive processes (Mandler, 1984). While at positive side, some argue boredom do serve purpose and enable individual to adjust to fit the demands of the environment. Generally, boredom reflects individual's current status either being engaged or disengaged which determine their performance towards goal (Lench & Levine, 2005). Obviously, current status refers to the well being.

In the work of organizational development, it is crucial to identify the antecedents that hinder an organization from progressing. In this present study, boredom is a negative silent well being that bound to every individual regardless profession when the desire to stay engaged with current goals are weaken. In other words, boredom indicate that the current goal is no longer stimulating. It leads one to pursuit a temporary relief strategy for refreshment. From human resource development perspective, boredom is an negative experience in cognition, affection and behavioural that obstructing individual from allocating meaning to current activity resulting poor working performance (Barbelet, 1999).

The experience of boredom is series of negative influence of affection, cognition and lastly behavioral (Russell , 2003). The affection component refers to the experience of unpleasant and passiveness (Warr, 1990), cognitive component refers to characteristic of the work which include lacking of challenges and stimuli (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) while behavioral such as engaging in distractions rather than the tasks at hand (Reijseger et al., 2013), lapse in attention (Cheyne *et al.*, 2006), daydreaming (Damrad-Frye & Laird, 1989; Fisher, 1998), slow passage of time, and slow and monotonous speech (Johnstone & Scherer, 2000).

Therefore, boredom at workplace can be describe as the feeling of bored incurred by employees towards their job and working environment. Loukidou, Loan-Clarke, & Daniels (2009) relate it to the employees' experience of under-challenged (unpleasant) and under-stimulated (low activation). Reijseger *et al.*, (2013) illustrate boredom as inability to concentrate and Pekrun *et al.*, (2010) associated it with absent of value in doing jobs. Obviously, it is the state of “disconnection” of an individual in terms of cognition, emotion and physical strength who is lack of interest, passion and attention towards a job under non-stimulating working environment (Teng *et al.*, 2016).

2.4.2 Antecedents of Boredom

Prior to any negative outcomes, it is wise to understand the roots of such consequences. According to Schaufeli & Salanova (2014), boredom arises due to work characteristics, mental unloaded, personality trait and absence of meaning. Despite scarce findings, (Fisher,1993; Mercer-Lynn, Bar, & Eastwood, 2014) categorized the antecedents at

individual and work level. Accordingly, Table 2.1 explicates the precursor events of boredom at workplace.

Table 2.1: Potential Antecedents of Boredom at Workplace

Antecedents

- Monotonous and repetitive work (Work level).
 - Mental unloaded (Work Level).
 - Absence of meaning (Work Level).
 - Personality traits (Individual Level).
-

a) Monotonous and repetitive work

The issue of boredom at workplace was first started by analysis of the blue collar employees in executing their daily repetition tasks. Job characteristic was found as a main determinant of boredom at workplace. Job characteristics such as monotony and work overload (Shackleton, 1981) are at the top of the list reason for boredom to exist at workplace. The finding is consistent as reported by Schaufeli & Salanova (2014) whereby the most straightforward cause for boredom is the monotonous and short-cycle repetitive works such as mechanical assembly and monitoring jobs.

In this present study, workload is selected as one of the variables fall under job demands. Academicians are specialist in their field and are being assigned to teach the same subject throughout the years. In worst scenario, throughout the entire employment. The repetitive tasks is synonym to routinization. Academicians are expected to deliver the same lecture across semester. In addition, academicians are facing heavy workload in the aspects of administration, publication, students supervision and examination. In such circumstances, it leads to the feeling of none challenging tasks because employees are performing the

same task every time despite the positive effect such as promote creativity through routinization (Parker and Ohly, 2006). In consensus, regardless of any occupation, employees that feel their jobs are monotonous tend to experience boredom (MacDonald & MacIntyre, 1997).

b) Mental unloaded

Many past studies were done on blue collar employees in respect to boredom at workplace due to the monotonous / repetitive task job characteristic. However, there are numbers of research that found boredom could be a serious problem among white collar employees too. For instance, Mann (2007) found that white collar employees in Britain with higher education qualification plus the technology implementation have made them over qualified in executing the task. A third of them are found bored for most of the day. Simply, highly educated employees accepting lower rank of jobs (Leonhardt, 2009). Empowered with knowledge and assisted by technology could make their routine job become much more easier. Initially, it may lead to great increment of productivity. Across time, they may work mindlessly as there is shortfall of stimulating agent to keep employees mentally loaded. Finally, employees feel bored with their job.

c) Personality Traits

Eventhough monotonous jobs lead to boredom at workplace, not every employee who work in monotonous mode will experience boredom (Shackleton, 1981). It is somehow reported that individual's perception towards the job will affect boredom reaction by

employees instead of monotonous job alone (Hills & Perkins, 1985). Simply, boredom is determined by employees' elucidation against the job in term of how well the employees take up the challenge and find interest in their jobs. For instance, when an individual's skill exceeds his or her job requirement, it will lead to non-challenging working environment (Kass *et al.*, 2001), or when a task exceeds an individual's ability to cope, it will lead to a behaviour withdrawal (Fisher, 1993). Hence, it can be seen that characteristics of an employee is the key to activate boredom.

This is fully supported by O'Hanlon (1981) where extroverts have a lower level of boredom at workplace as compared to introvert. In another separate study of boredom in the higher education context done by Mann & Robinson (2009), 211 university students were requested to fill up questionnaire about their boredom level during lecture. The result revealed that 30% of students are bored in most or all of lectures while 59% are bored in half of the lectures. They concluded that individual personality trait is the most important catalyst in leading boredom. However, it's not conclusive that individuals who score high level of boredom proneness are always bored while low level of boredom proneness are never bored. Ashkanasy & Daus (2002) argued that some employees may perform better in adverse situation which is contrary to the past researches. Similar job with similar requirement may generate different level of boredom among individuals (Farmer & Sundberg, 1986). Thus, it all depends to the personality trait.

d) Absence of meaning

Meaning is essential in social processes and lacking of it in life prompts boredom (Frankl, 1984; Barbalet, 2000). Boredom appears to be that current activity no longer stimulating and it propels the need to engaged with new goal (Bench & Lench, 2013). In the same condition, boredom at workplace prevail when employees find lacking of meaning in their task. This is the fundamental event for an individual to start experiencing boredom when there is no immediate actions taken for remedy (Barbalet, 1999). This is further supported by Gemmill & Oakley (1992) where they emphasized that the usage of technology in today's knowledge intensive working environment may easily shade off the true meaning of the work itself and accelerate boredom. In this situation, absence of meaning in task is found to be one of the antecedent events for boredom to occur at workplace.

2.4.3 Consequences of Boredom

Boredom at workplace has been recognized as part of the contributors to the negative outcomes for employees and organizations (Fisher, 1993). Below are the outcomes.

a) Health illness

The implication of boredom on employees' health can be divided into two parts namely physical and psychological. Firstly, physical health. There is evidence to show that employees who work monotonously for a long period of time will experience cardiovascular diseases and other stress related health problems (Fisher, 1993). In the

similar vein, Caplan *et al.*, (1975) conducted a study by using 23 different occupations in the United State to represent a wide range of monotonous jobs. Questionnaires were administered as well as physiological data among 2,010 men were collected. They found out that these employees believe that they do suffer from moderate illnesses such as cardiovascular diseases, gastrointestinal problems, ulcer and respiratory infection due to their jobs.

Similarly, Smith *et al.*, (1981) revealed that there is a big gap in health illness in their experiment against 2 groups of employees namely video display terminal (VDT) operators who work monotonously and non-operator control with 250 and 150 respondents respectively. Operators who work monotonously reported to suffer from more visual, musculoskeletal as well as emotional-health problems. Ferguson (1973) also carried out the same experiment on telegraphists in Australia. About 516 telegraphists participated and the research finding also pointed towards health problems. Illnesses such as asthma, bronchitis and hand tremors were reported by Ferguson.

Secondly, psychological health. Such illnesses were proven to arise due to the fact of boredom at workplace. In the study carried out by Colligan (1979), anxiety and stress are the two factors identified to catalyse the rapid spread of psychological illnesses affecting a number of employees in term of disturbance of excitement at workplace. Simply, motivated and excited employees will march on positively with greater anxiety while those struggle with stress will experience depression and neuroticism (Caplan *et al.*, 1975; Kornhauser, 1965). Interestingly apart from physical and psychological health, boredom is also associated with eating disorders (Ganley, 1989).

b) Poor Job Performance

Generally, it was found that boredom leads to reduction in task effectiveness, poor mental abilities in processing knowledge to make decision and physically weak (O'Hanlon, 1981). Many have argued that boredom will not completely diminish one's performance level but will affect one's performance if boredom stays on (Hopkin, 1990). For instance, studies done by Stave (1977) on pilots who are bored show signs of fatigue and increasing moment of inattention. These pilots manage to complete their simulation tasks on time. However boredom has interrupted their focus and concentration. It gives clear implication towards safety issues especially in aviation industry where small mistakes could lead to accident or injuries in any industrial settings (Drory, 1982).

In addition, Pekrun *et al.*, (2010) study also indicated that boredom is associated with attention problems, values reduction in achievement and affects performance. In the similar vein, study by Watt & Hargis (2010) against 110 employees in healthcare industry found out that employees with higher boredom proneness have lower job performances. Dyer-Smith & Wesson (1995) mentioned that boredom is an opposition element to the task and environment. Boredom negatively responded to an individual capability in responding to an event or information. In other words, individual is no longer competent after indulging in bored setting for a long period of time. In extreme situation, individuals may fall asleep (Grose, 1989). In contrary, individual with higher boredom coping skills are better in job performance than those who possess lower boredom coping skills. (Hamilton *et al.*, 1984)

c) Emotional Disturbance

From past literatures, not many researchers recognised the emotion elements as part of the implications to boredom at workplace. In conjunction to investigate emotion against boredom, Dahlen *et al.* (2004) seek 224 college students to complete measure on boredom proneness, anger expression and aggression. Their investigation found out that high boredom proneness individual is more easier to reveal their anger expression, stronger feeling of violent and poor anger control as compared to low boredom proneness individual. The findings are consistent with Rupp & Vodanovich (1997).

In another separate study by Dahlen *et al.* (2005), 316 undergraduate students were requested to respond to the boredom proneness scale and personality inventory. Again, the result showed that individuals with higher boredom proneness possess higher score for anger traits, illustrate lack of honesty, and prone to engage in risky situations. Both findings by Dahlen *et al.* gives a picture that boredom leads to the negative individuals' emotion especially anger and aggression. It also gave room to support the idea proposed by Culp (2006) whereby boredom proneness individual is undersocialized and prefers to act irresponsibly. In the worst case, it leads to sabotage and abuse (Spector *et al.*, 2006).

In short, employees who suffer from boredom at workplace are affected by negative emotion. They are individuals who get angry easily, tend to act violently at workplace and have poor anger control. From wider view, negative emotion is the consequence of boredom. Employees who are bored could hardly find value or meaning in their work. Employees emotion has been distorted upon the feeling of bored being induced into their

work. They transform their boredom in work into their facial expression and anger and thus affect others. This is known as emotion contagion.

Employees with emotion contagion face difficulty in putting up positive attitude and expression which make them look unfriendly and unsociable. Most likely they will experience alienation (Tolor & Siegel, 1989). Continuance of such default causes employees to fall into depression, hopelessness and loneliness as proven by Farmer & Sundberg (1986). However, it is proposed by Heijden *et al.*, (2012) to encourage employees to take temporary relief strategies of boredom to minimize the potential obstructions by emotion contagion such as violent and anger at workplace.

d) High Absenteeism

It has been suggested that boredom is potentially harming the employees' job outcomes such as attendance. Melamed *et al.*, (1995) highlighted that employees' working condition (i.e workload, repetitive work) has a significant relationship to their job output. About 1, 278 blue collar workers have joined in Melamed *et al.* investigation. The research found out that absenteeism is related to the working condition as in the more workload or more frequent the jobs is repeated, the higher the possibility of employees to absent from work. In extension to the findings, Kass *et al.* (2001) added that greater boredom in job promotes greater absenteeism.

e) Poor Wellbeing

To the best of the author's knowledge, researches on the implications of boredom at workplace have never neglect the aspect of employees' wellbeing. It is labeled as the long term reactions by Loukidou *et al.*, (2009). Bruursema *et al.*, (2011) found out that bored employees are more likely to misbehave. Recognizing employees' wellbeing as one of the implications of boredom is vital in understanding the employees reactions such as sabotage and stealing. Runcie (1980) spent 5 months observing how car manufacturing workers deal with their monotonous jobs. In common, Runcie found out that workers will opt for temporary boredom release strategies such as talking, smoking and etc to alleviate boredom at work. Significantly, Runcie also discovered workers with high boredom in long run tend to sabotage the production process, prefer to work in unsafe environment and steal. In a separate study by Charlton & Hertz (1989) against safety guards also found out negative wellbeing in which they regularly break the rules and regulation in coping with boredom. In addition, it is reported that individual with high boredom score are more likely to experience poor mental and physical well being (Sommers & Vodanovich, 2000).

f) Monetary Loss

Rothlin & Werder (2008) found out that around 15% of workforces are actually bored when they are working. All the negative outcomes of boredom are converging to bring implications towards organization (Gemmell & Oakley, 1992) and organizations are proven to suffer from monetary loss by having the bored employees. Malachowski (2005) found out that among 10,000 employees in United States (US), one third of these employees

spent 2 hours for their personal matters during working hours. The total loss of an organization is estimated to be \$750 billion per annum. In a more recent study by Rath & Conchie (2009), the total loss is estimated to be \$250 and \$350 billion a year. Hence, boredom indirectly caused monetary lost towards an organization.

2.5 Underpinning Theory: Job Demands-Resources Theory and Control Value Theory

2.5.1 JD-R Theory

Job Demands - Resources (JD-R) theory by Bakker et al., (2003a) is a flexible theory where it could be tailored to a specific profession particularly in forecasting job burnout (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001a) and work engagement (Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). There are two assumptions in JD-R theory. First, every occupation has its own specific risk factors that relate to change in employees' well-being known as job demands and resources. Such changes are initiated by the disparity of job demands and resources which lead to positive (work engagement) as well as negative antipode (job burnout). For instance, when the level of job demands is higher than job resources, employee is most likely to experience job burnout. In addition, consequences of those changes were also related to absenteeism (Wan *et al.*, 2014), health problem (Harju *et al.*, 2014), organizational commitment and work enjoyment (Bakker, Van Veldhoven, & Xanthopoulou, 2010).

Second, JD-R theory triggers two fairly independent psychological processes namely *health impairment and motivational process* (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Health impairment process is initiated by the chronic job demands such as work overload and emotional demands. It drives employee to utilize high physical and psychological efforts to get jobs done. Continuous exposure to chronic job demand without room for recovery (rest) may exhaust (depletion of energy) the employees and lead to overtaxing resulting exhaustion, psychosomatic, health complaints and repetitive strain injury (RSI) (Bakker *et al.*, 2003b; Hakanen *et al.*, 2006). This is particularly true when employees faced with condition where high job demands and lack of job resources (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007).

Meanwhile, motivational process is initiated through job resources that motivate employees to work enjoyment, engagement and motivation (Bakker *et al.*, 2010). The ingredients for intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are to fulfil basic human needs and to fulfil work goals respectively through job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Intrinsically, employees are motivated with autonomy, competence and relatedness (Bakker, 2011; Nahrgang *et al.*, 2011). Meanwhile, extrinsically employees are motivated through resources provided in the working environment (Meijman & Mulder, 1998). The combinations of the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation promote employees' growth, learning and development (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2010). For instance, working environments with many resources energize the willingness to put efforts and work harder. In that case, task will be completed more successfully and attaining work goals. In general, it is a series of motivational process through job resources that commenced from employees themselves towards working environment which nurture work engagement.

2.5.2 Previous studies on JD-R Theory

A number of western studies had argued that the dual psychological processes in JD-R model not only influence personal behaviour, it also predicts organizational outcomes. One of it was Bakker *et al.*, (2003b) who applied JD-R model to 477 employees in the call centre of a Dutch telecom company. Their results reveal that high job demands (i.e: work pressure, computer problems, emotional demands and changes in tasks) are the most important predictors of health problems which lead employees to sickness absence (duration and long-term absence) meanwhile, high job resources (i.e: social support, supervisory coaching, performance feedback and time control) are the only predictors of work involvement (engagement) which negatively related to turnover intentions.

In similar vein, Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli (2006) also confirmed the existence of both processes in their among 2,038 Finnish teachers. They found out that high job demands will exposed employees to ill health in which mediated by burnout and job resources will lead to organizational commitment mediated by work engagement. Additionally, they erected the concept that job resources is negatively related to burnout and that burnout is inversely related to work engagement and organization commitment.

In another separate study by Bakker, Demerouti & Verbeke (2004) used JD-R model to examine the relationship between job characteristic, burnout and performance. They claimed that job demands (e.g: work pressure and emotional demands) lead to burnout and would predict in-role performance. In contrast, job resources (e.g: autonomy, social support) would predict extra-role performance through their relationship with work

engagement. Their findings support the existence of the dual processes in affecting employees and organization. Taken together, previous findings established clearly that job demands and job resources have influence towards personal behavior through two independent psychological processes which eventually affect organizational outcomes.

Moreover, JD-R model also specifically used to predict employees' absenteeism. In Bakker *et al.*, (2003a) study among 214 nutrition production employees in the Netherlands, they found that high job demands boost longer absence duration through burnout while high job resources foster work engagement and indirectly lower absence spells (frequency). Their outcome shows a unique pattern whereby employees that are stress out shows longer absent duration while employees who unable to achieve job satisfaction and display low organization commitment are more frequently absent.

In addition, Demerouti *et al.*, (2001a) analysed 374 respondents in 21 different jobs from northern part of Germany and found that when job demands are high, employees tends to experienced burnout. Meanwhile, when there is lack of job resources, employees tends to disengaged from their job. More than that, when both high job demands meet with lacking of job resources, employees will develop both burnout and disengagament. Another study among information technology organization in Western United State by Hoonakker, Carayon & Korunka (2013) shows that high job demands promotes turnover intention mediated by burnout while high job resources demoted turnover intention through job satisfaction.

Meanwhile, there are few limited attempt done in eastern countries in examining the applicability of JD-R model with consistent findings as per western. Duraisingam & Dollard, (2006) who believe JD-R model could be administed apart from industrialized nation exploited 194 Indian rural development workers in their investigation. Participants are required to complete questionnaires measuring job demands, job resources, burnout, psychological distress and job satisfaction. Job demands and job resources (i.e; control, rewards) were found to be significantly related to burnout and job satisfaction respectively. On top of that, they erected the significant interaction between job demands and job resources. Lastly, they pointed that greater focus be placed on women and older workers by increasing job resources in the aspect of control and rewards because they are more susceptible to job burnout.

Researchers from China also deploy JD-R model in determining the factors that influence work engagement. Li & Mao (2014) gathered 477 employees from airports in eastern China to take part in their research discussing the moderating effects of proactive personality towards social support and work-family conflict (WFC). The investigation reveals that social support is positively associated on work engagement whereas WFC is negatively related to work engagement. Both affiliation were found to be moderated by proactive personality of the individual. This study contribute new expansion of JD-R model who have neglected the personal characteristic on work engagement.

JD-R model is widely applied across industry inclusive oil production. A study by Lia *et al.*, (2013) using 670 crude oil production workers in China intending to assess the effectiveness of JD-R model in explaining the relationship of job demands and job