

An Investigation On Succession Planning Initiatives And Knowledge Retention: It Only Takes 'Two' To Tango

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge management is of significant interest in the management field. In our digital society that is driven by advanced technological changes, efforts towards knowledge management are becoming highly important as knowledge knows no boundaries. This study is conducted to observe the importance of succession planning initiatives towards knowledge retention. To remain competitive in this digital society, succession planning is a process that cannot be ignored by any organization. It involves the nourishment of talent and thus, its processes affect the organization, financially and operationally. Of 150 questionnaires distributed, 102 were returned and analyzed, yielded a 68% response rate. Based on a deductive method, of the six dimensions of succession planning, there were only two hypotheses supported. It was established that, only top management support and strong organizational culture have significant effect towards knowledge retention. Practical and managerial implications were discussed.

Keywords: Knowledge retention, Succession Planning, Top Management Support, Organizational Culture, SMEs, Malaysia

1. INTRODUCTION (TIMES NEW ROMAN 10 BOLD)

Knowledge management has become a significant interest in the management field (Tangaraja, Mohd Rasdi, Ismail, & Abu Samah, 2015). In our digital society that is driven by advanced technological changes, efforts towards knowledge management are becoming highly important as knowledge knows no boundaries. The theory of knowledge management by Gold and Malhora (2001) argued that to retain the knowledge, knowledge-driven capabilities pertaining to technology, culture and society must be implemented within the organization. Knowledge retention is known as one of the branches of knowledge management.

Within the context of business organization, losing key employees could create a disaster, financially or operationally. The costs of filling up the vacancy, the cost of training and learning new knowledge, the effect on performance and team synergy are amongst the potential issues that might be faced by the organization. Similar effects might also occur when an employee decides to retire. Thus, a proper plan towards retaining knowledge needs to be strategized by the organization to deal with this situation that might occur unexpectedly.

Preserving and acquiring knowledge are two important aspects of talent development within the organization. Most organizations face the risk of losing knowledge that may affect their ability to create and maintain competitive advantages (Martins & Martins, 2011). As a result, the organization started investing and raising concerns about the retention of knowledge.

Previous scholars have contemplated the issue of employee retention, but there is still a lack of research focusing on knowledge retention (Levy, 2011; Wikström, Eriksson, Karamehmedovic & Liff, 2018). Knowledge retention reflects on important and valuable knowledge that is at risk of diminishing or disappearing and on implementing a strategy for retaining it within the organization (Liebowitz, 2009). This is the main focus of the study. This study intends to explore on the level of knowledge retention amongst Small and Medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia and to examine the effects of succession planning initiatives towards knowledge retention.

There are several implications of this study. To the body of knowledge within the context of knowledge retention among SMEs in Malaysia will be informed on the current awareness and practice relating to knowledge retention. For managerial implications, this study will highlight of which succession planning initiatives that include training, top management support, clarifying career path, creating a positive vision, strong organizational culture and technological advancement that would contribute significantly towards knowledge retention. Thus, managers and owners of SMEs in Malaysia could focus on developing those initiatives to foster an effective and successful process of knowledge retention within their organizations.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Knowledge Retention

Implementation of knowledge retention strategy requires the organizations to identify strategically the risk of losing the knowledge (Martins & Meyer, 2012). The main concern about maintaining knowledge is how to maintain valuable knowledge of employees, who are about to leave the organizations because of withdrawal, abandonment or leaving the organization for better opportunities outside the organizations (Vinson, 2018). He added that understanding the risks and issues of knowledge loss would help organizations to better strategize their strategies accordingly. Knowledge retention involves capturing organizational knowledge to be used later. It is a process that focuses on the valuable knowledge that is at risk of disappearing which could affect the performance of the organizations. Levy (2011) highlighted that within academic research, knowledge retention did not receive greater exposure and is not fully covered. As knowledge becomes the main asset of the organization, knowledge retention tends to become the main challenge in many countries around the world.

Succession Planning Initiatives

Managing competent individuals into the organization is a part of succession-planning. Also, it necessitates organizational resources and requires a culture that understands the value of pool of talents (Rothwell, 2010). At a different continuum, succession planning also allows the organization to prepare for future needs to replace employees due to retirement and employees leaving the organization. Pandey and Sharma (2014) have postulated that to remain competitive, succession planning is a process that cannot be ignored by any organization. It involves the nourishment of talent and thus, its processes affect the organization, financially and operationally. It cannot be dealt on an occasional basis as it should be dealt systematically. Thus, there are six succession planning initiatives being observed in this study that include training, management support, clarifying career path, positive vision, strong organizational culture and technological advancement.

Training is an essential element towards employee growth. When organization supports training, research indicated that employees are more motivated to share their knowledge during training (Chiaburu, Van Dam & Hutchins, 2010; Kuvaas & Dysvik, 2010). In today's business environment, where technological changes occur rapidly, training is becoming the prerequisite for every organization to remain competitive in the global market. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H1: Training has a significant effect towards knowledge retention.

Value to be felt and uphold by employees should be initiated from a strong top management support. Thus, top management support plays an important role to make employees feel valuable (Ott, Tolention and Michailova, 2018). Direct supervisors' support, such as coaching and mentoring, can help to increase employee engagement, as employees find personal development opportunities and incentive. Allowing the employee to view and solve things from different perspectives can also create a greater sense of organizational belonging. Well trained managers should know how to act to induce a positive effect on employees' well-being (Molinsky & Margolis 2005). Thus, this study hypothesizes that:

H2: Top management support has a significant effect towards knowledge retention.

Employers that care about employees' growth and provide a path for them to fulfil their personal and organizational goals, create a sense of value among employees (Ott et. al 2018). When employees feel that there is a clear path for them to be promoted, they might want to stay longer which supports knowledge retention in the organization. As clarifying career path gives employees with a continuous mechanism to increase their skill and knowledge that can lead to understand their existing jobs, promotions and transfer to the new or different job position. Thus, it is hypothesized that:

H3: Clarifying career path has a significant effect towards knowledge retention.

This study suggests that creating a vision is important for organizational success. Vision serves several important functions. Besides giving a sense of direction, vision also acts as a motivator (Populova, 2014). Vision is found as the fundamental element to be considered for every organization as vision will provide a better understanding and stands as a guideline for every subordinate to follow. Vision also is a core component in the context of organizational performance. Thus, this study posits that:

H4: Creating a positive vision has a significant influence towards knowledge retention.

Organizational culture is defined as shared values among members of the organization as it reflects the identity of the organization. Through socialization, people learn and observe organizational practices and routine implementation of daily tasks (Ngubane, 2014). These routines of doing work tasks and interactions between the people involved in carrying those tasks shape the culture and work behaviours. Alvesson (2004) highlighted that organizational culture can be used by the organization to control its members. The common and shared values, philosophy and understanding inspire people and generate guidelines. Thus, the following hypothesis is suggested:

H5: Strong organizational culture has a significant effect towards knowledge retention.

According to Paulk (2001), through the combination of personal attention and action, the organization can expand the use of technology tools to encourage employee retention and engagement. He also contended that technological advancement has a significant relationship with employee retention. The use of technology in the organization's operation will help to reduce employee turnover and change the corporate culture with the new processes and tools to monitor and sustain the engagement of its workforce. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H6: Technology advancement has a significant effect towards knowledge retention.

3. METHODOLOGY

Design

This study has taken a deductive approach. Through the analysis of literature, the tentative theory of knowledge management was first established. The framework was then developed and hypotheses were proposed and tested based on the data collected through the distribution of the survey questionnaire. The population of the study consists of managerial staffs of SMEs in Malaysia. First, a list of registered SMEs under the National Entrepreneur Directory was obtained. From this list, 150 companies were randomly chosen and only 102 respondents were returned. According to Hair, Balck, Babin and Anderson (2018), a suggested sample size could be based on the number of independent variables in the model. They have suggested that 15 to 20 observations per independent variable are highly recommended. Based on this suggestion and the six independent variables in this study, the number of sample size should be in between 90 to 120. Thus, having 102 samples is deemed acceptable for further analysis. To recruit the respondents, some of them were approached via a telephone call and then the link to the survey questionnaire was sent to the potential respondents. Second approached was to self-administer the questionnaire to the selected respondents. This study yielded a 68% response rate.

Measures

There are three sections of the questionnaire. Section A consisted of questions relating to demographic questions. Section B consisted of 32 questions pertaining to succession planning initiatives represented by training, management support, clarifying career path, positive vision, strong organizational culture and technological advancement. Section C comprised of 6 questions representing the dependent variable of the study which is knowledge retention. All items in Section B and C were assessed on a Likert Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These questionnaires were adopted from Rothwell (2010), Bessick & Naicker (2013), Ngubane, (2014) and Kumar (2017).

Data analysis

All data has been analysed by using SPSS version 23.0. After data cleaning, missing data, normality and outliers procedures were performed. All constructs were tested for reliability through Cronbach's alpha, α . Descriptive and frequency analysis were performed before the multiple regression analysis to test the hypotheses.

4. RESULTS

Reliability analysis

Table 1 shows the reliability analysis for all variables. It reflects that all variables (dependent and independent variables) used in this study exceeded the minimum of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient value of 0.7. The dependent variable, knowledge retention has a value of 0.873. Between independent variables, the highest Cronbach's Alpha coefficient value is technological advancement ($\alpha=0.929$), followed by clarifying career path ($\alpha=0.922$), positive vision ($\alpha=0.883$), training ($\alpha=0.877$), strong organizational culture ($\alpha=0.861$) and lastly top managerial support ($\alpha=0.858$). In general, all variables possess good and excellent internal consistency given that the range of Cronbach's Alpha are between 0.80-0.90 with two of those exceeding 0.90 (George & Mallery, 2003). Hence, it shows that the instruments measuring these variables are reliable and valid for this study.

Table 1: Reliability Analysis

Variable	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Training	6	0.877
Management Support	4	0.858
Clarifying Career Path	6	0.922
Positive Vision	5	0.883
Strong Organizational Culture	4	0.861
Technological Advancement	7	0.929
Knowledge Retention (DV)	6	0.873

Demographic profile of respondents

Table 2 shows the profile of respondents. It included age, gender, education level, working experience, sector and regions. Majority of respondents between 26-35 years old, represented by 38.2% of the total sample population. This is followed by those aged between 36-45 years old with 24.5% of the sample population. Majority of respondents are female, representing 60.8% of the sample population. About 44.1% of respondents are degree holders. In terms of working experience, the majority of respondents have between 1-5 years of working experience with 45.1% of the sample population. 28.4% of them, have a working experience between 6-10 years. Majority of respondents operating within the services sector and finally, the majority of them with 40.2% residing within the Central Region of the country. This is supportive of the distribution of SMEs in Malaysia in which the majority of SMEs are located in the central region.

Table 2: Respondents Profile

Items	Frequency	Percentage %	
Age (Years Old)	Less than 25	23	22.5
	26-35	39	38.2
	36-45	25	24.5
	46-55	9	8.8
	56-65	5	4.9
	above 65	1	1.0
Gender	Male	40	39.2
	Female	62	60.8
Education	High School	14	13.7
	Certificate/Diploma	36	35.3
	Degree	45	44.1
	Master	3	2.9
	PhD	2	2.0
	Others	2	2.0
Tenureship (Years)	1-5	46	45.1
	6-10	29	28.4
	11-15	14	13.7
	16-20	7	6.9
	> 21	6	5.9
Sector	Manufacturing	32	31.4
	Services	70	68.4
Regions	Northern	27	26.4
	Central	41	40.2
	Southern	17	16.7
	East Coast	17	16.7

Awareness on Knowledge Retention

Table 3 shows the awareness among business operators of SMEs in Malaysia regarding the importance of knowledge retention. Based on the table, it can be concluded that majority of the respondents are well-aware of the issue of knowledge retention affecting their business operations. Due to their size and capabilities, they cannot afford to lose important and valuable knowledge affecting them. Only 1% of the respondents did not do anything regarding the knowledge loss. 54.9% of respondents answered that they have well-managed knowledge retention in their organization. 23.9% reported this initiative is fairly managed and 20.6% claimed their level of knowledge retention is superiorly managed.

When they were asked on the existing approach to knowledge retention, 31.4% of them have implemented a mentor-mentee program as a measure to allow for the transfer of knowledge within the employees. This approach is acknowledged as the best approach to allow for the transfer of knowledge. Whereas, 28.4% of them used interview or sharing session as a method for retaining valuable knowledge towards those who are about to retire or leave the organization. About 16.7% of them have invited those retirees to return back as consultant.

Table 3: Knowledge Retention Practice

Items	Frequency	Percentage %
Superiorly managed	21	20.6
Well managed	56	54.9

LEVEL KNOWLEDGE RETENTION	OF	Fairly managed	24	23.5
		Nothing is done	1	1.0
APPROACH RETAINING KNOWLEDGE	TO	Interview	29	28.4
		Mentor-mentee	32	31.4
		Invitation as consultant	17	16.7
		Archived	15	14.7
		Others	9	8.8

Multiple regressions analysis

Table 4: Result of Multiple Regression

Dependent variable: Knowledge Retention		
Independent variables	Standardised Coefficient (BETA)	Sig
H1: Training	0.085	0.404
H2: Management Support	0.270	0.004
H3: Career Path	-0.095	0.431
H4: Positive Vision	0.122	0.371
H5: Strong Organizational Culture	0.511	0.000
H6: Technological Advancement	0.054	0.551
F value	43.099	
	p = 0.000	
R square	0.731	

Regression analysis is used to test the model or relationship between independent and dependent variables. Table 4 shows the result from the regression analysis. It is reflected that the coefficient of determination's value is $R^2 = 0.731$. The value indicated that 73.1% of knowledge retention can be explained by the independent variables, which are training, management support, clarifying career path, positive vision, strong organizational culture and technological advancement. The other 26.9% of variation can be explained by other variables which are not included in this study. The observation of multicollinearity also indicated that none of the VIF value exceeds 5. Thus, multicollinearity is not an issue in this study (Hair et. al. 1995).

The model shows that there are only two independent variables that contribute or provide significant effect towards knowledge retention. They are strong organizational culture and management support. With every increase of one standard deviation in strong organizational culture and management support, the knowledge retention rises by 0.511 and 0.270 of a standard deviation respectively. It can be deduced that strong organizational culture contributed the greatest impact on knowledge retention since it had the highest beta coefficient value and followed by management support. The higher the level of strong organizational culture and management support, the higher the level of knowledge retention.

As for the significance of each variable towards the dependent variable, it has been analyzed that management support ($\beta=0.270$, $p < 0.01$) and strong organizational culture ($\beta=0.511$, $p < 0.001$) significantly influence knowledge retention. Thus, H2 and H5 are supported. However, for the other independent variables – training, clarifying career path, positive vision and technological advancement, the results indicated insignificant contribution towards knowledge retention. Thus, H1, H3, H4 and H6 are rejected.

5. DISCUSSION

Assessing the level of awareness towards knowledge retention among SMEs in Malaysia reveal that majority of them are aware of the importance of knowledge retention. Majority of respondents perceived that measures towards managing knowledge especially keeping and retaining the most valuable ones are well implemented within their organizations. Looking into the practice of knowledge management, most organizations perceive that mentor-mentee program and interview or sharing session are among the most effective approaches. As Rahman, Moonesar, Hossain and Islam (2018) had concluded that the role of knowledge, in the era of globalization and techno-savvy is phenomenal. Knowledge management is the new value and trend for public management, good governance and also the smart government.

Exactly like an old phrase was saying, it only takes 'two' to tango. Of all six hypotheses tested, only two were found to be significant. They are management support and strong organizational culture. These two were found to have significant effects towards knowledge retention. The most important factor contributes significantly towards knowledge retention was a strong organizational culture. A qualitative study was conducted in Iran involving 23 top management of the Iranian Ministry of Health and Medical Education to examine the role of

organizational culture on succession planning. They found that unprofessional organizational culture can impede numerous efforts towards the successful implementation of knowledge retention (Mehrtak, Farzaneh, Habibzadeh, Kamran, Zandian & Mahdavi, 2017). Vazife and Tavakoli (2015) have also suggested that the successful implementation of knowledge management is depended upon organizational culture being practised within the organization. Top management support, on the other hand, can provide the employees with the feeling of moving forward in the organizational hierarchy by teaching a new skill, providing them with a new job responsibility and adjusting their job roles. Thus, enhancing the sense of belongingness among them toward the organization which will support the process of knowledge sharing to occur more effectively within the organization. For the non-significant relationships, perhaps this study only involved a small sample size and majority of the respondents are still young and have less than 5 years of tenureship at their respective organisations. Perhaps, they are still focusing on developing their knowledge in their respective fields.

Taking into consideration that both factors affecting knowledge retention. it implies several managerial implications. First, to have and create a good succession planning towards knowledge retention, the most important factors are top management support and strong organizational culture. All approaches towards retaining knowledge such as, interviewing or sharing session with retirees or those who are about to leave the organization, mentor-mentee program or invitation as a consultant could only be developed successfully should the organization foster and establish these two factors as their values and practice. Rahman et al. (2018) contended that embedded culture within the organization supports the transfer of knowledge between employees. Secondly, leadership is important to the successful implementation of any succession planning within the organization. Leadership can promote and create the right culture, and safeguard the continuation of talents development (Rahman et al., 2018; Arham, Sulaiman, Kamarudin & Muenjon, 2017; Barginere, Franco & Wallace, 2013)

This study is not without limitations. First, this study did not identify all variables that may have other impacts on the hypothesized relationship between variables. The variables that are used to measure employee responses also may present a social desirability effect. Thus, common method bias should have been assessed to generate better findings. Second, this study only provides a cross-sectional data, a snapshot of a specific point in time. Perhaps the use of longitudinal data might provide more concrete findings towards understanding knowledge retention. Finally, this study only involved a small sample size. Perhaps, this small number of sample size had influenced the non-significant hypotheses proposed in this study.

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