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## **THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS SPIRITUALITY AND WORK ENGAGEMENT ON JOB PERFORMANCE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper conceptualizes the role of work engagement as mediation on the relationship between religious spirituality and job performance of Muslim employees in Malaysia. Religious spirituality involves the belief in the existence of God and the power of prayer as a way of communicating with God in all aspects of life. Religious spirituality encourages individuals to mend the relationship between God and human (hablu minallah) as well as the relationship between human beings (hablu minannas) in order to be able to deal with hardship and obtains long-term satisfaction. The ability of an employee to overcome any hardship will enhance their work engagement and job performance. Thus, in response to the impact of religious spirituality in enhancing work engagement and job performance, this study develop several propositions that demonstrate the significant role of related variables in enhancing job performance. Suggestions for future research and implications of the study for managers are presented. This study recommends management and human resource practitioners to be proactive and formulate preventive strategy against low productivity among Muslim employees by provides training, create an environment that supports wholeness, meaningful work, and feeling of inner satisfaction. However, there is need for empirical studies to test the proposed relationships.

**Keywords:** Job performance, work engagement, religious spirituality

## INTRODUCTION

An extensive study on job performance has been conducted due to its role in contributing to an organizational success in accomplishing its goals and objectives (Siddiqui, 2014; Bonache & Noethen, 2014). Various predictors of job performance also found and studied. For instance, work engagement (Shimazu et al., 2015), job satisfaction (Reio & Kidd, 2006), personality (Fang et al., 2015), and so forth. Anyhow, based on religious context (Islamic perspective in particular), the variables specified earlier are inadequate and less appropriate to be used in examining job performance of Muslim employees. As pointed by several studies that adopt the existing conventional measures on Islamic societies (Karim, Zamzuri & Nor, 2009; Mohd Yusoff, Othman & Othman, 2013) and the failure of factor analysis that they gain due to the different perspectives between Islam and other religion. These studies also failed to obtain a clear structure. For instance, besides certain facets of the Big-Five personality traits that display low internal reliability, in a study conducted in Indonesia, Halim Derksen and van der Staak (2004) found that on Openness to Experience domain, high congruence coefficient is failing generated due to “dogmatic attachment to values”. For aforementioned reasons, this study highlights religious spirituality from Islamic perspectives, as this variable embraces all Islamic values in the workplace.

Stressful situations, high workload, and burnout have a significant impact on employees' health and well-being, their quality of work life, turnover intention, and absenteeism as consequences from their demotivation and dissatisfaction on their job. This circumstance will influences employees to disengage and not properly perform the assigned task. Many studies in the field of motivation have been conducted to address these problems, yet studies that use Islamic religiosity or religious spirituality as a motivation in the workplace is still limited (Othman & Othman, 2013). Whereas, religious spirituality (in Islamic perspective particularly) is crucial to encourages an individual to gain motivation by mending the relationship between God and human as well as the relationship between human beings (*hablu minallah & hablu minannas*) (Alawneh, 1998). Through this relationship, an individual will be motivated although in hardship and have long-lasting satisfaction. As stated in Al-Quran: “Wherever they were, they were covered with ignominy, except when they were protected by either a covenant with Allah or a covenant with men” (Al-Quran 3:112). This verse implies that the way out of all disasters or hardships is to rebuild *hablu minallah* and *hablu minannas*. In brief, through this intrinsic motivation, individuals who have high religious spirituality will see hardships as an opportunity to gain more blessing from God. Simultaneously, they will able to deal with hardships calmly, without complaining, with courage, exert oneself, engage, and perform well.

Religious spirituality in the workplace also highlights the importance to see work as meaningful activities for their worldly and hereafter as well as for beneficial for the societies (Adeoti, Shamsudin, & Wan, 2017). Thus, individuals who have high religious spirituality tend to have positive mental health and psychological well-being (Sharabi, 2012). Following these findings, Sani, Soetjipto, and Maharani (2016) concluded that individuals who experience high levels of psychological well-being are characterized as being happy, engaged, satisfied with their lives, and are thankful to God. To attain mental wellbeing, religious spirituality must be attained as it involves the thought within an individual about the work done by him and the reason behind doing that work.

In Islam, work is seen as an act of worship and the reason behind doing any kinds of work is to attain God's blessing. This belief can help in sustaining engaged employees, which can ultimately result in high job performance (Arora & Bhagat, 2016). Therefore, this study also focuses on the role of religious spirituality (in Islamic view) in enhancing work engagement. This paper includes a theoretical framework of work engagement as a mediator between religious spirituality and job performance. This paper proposes a conceptual model which can be helpful in understanding the impact of religious spirituality on work engagement which can result in high job performance among Muslim employees. Overall, job performance of Muslim employees should be assessed by considering religious or Islamic-related factors. Therefore, this study looked at the influence of religious spirituality in enhancing work engagement and job performance of Muslim employees. The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the literature and management. The findings of this study also expected to encourage management and human resources department to give training to their staff regarding the importance of religious spirituality in handling hardship in the workplace. In fulfilling the objectives of the research, four propositions were proposed and demonstrated in next sub-section.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Job Performance**

Job performance (JP) is defined as the extent of a person on how he or she succeeds in carrying out the assigned job (Amira, 2014). JP also described as a result of flexible working environment, improvement of the employees' quality, and so forth (Ashfaq, Mahmood, and Ahmad, 2013). However, numerous researchers highlighted that performance is not just meant the result, outcome, or consequence of behavior or action (Alhusaini, 2012; McCloy, Campbell, & Cudeck, 1994). Performance is the conduct or action itself which give impacts as the key in differentiating performance on outcomes. In various context, for example in nursing, JP is defined as the extent of employees' effectiveness in accomplishing their tasks or their responsibilities related to direct patient care (AbuAlRub, 2004; Al-Homayan, 2013) that can be observed and measured against some standard (Mrayyan & Al-Faouri, 2008). The conformity to standards while carrying out the task assigned also known as nurses' JP (McConnell, 2003).

In motivating religious employees, Muslim in particular, the previous study found that religious spirituality has a high tendency in motivating religious employees to perform their tasks effectively and demonstrate the best behavior in life. An effective job implementation and practicing best behavior would create high job performance. An effective job implementation and good behavior practices will lead to high job performance. As pointed out by Horvath (2015) that religious spirituality positively influences workplace cognition and behavior which will sustain employees' performance. Nevertheless, most of the study that has been conducted on the relationship between religious spirituality in Islamic perspective and JP are conducted theoretically. Thus, this study attempted to bridge the gap by examining the relationship between religious spirituality in Islamic perspective and JP.

## Religious Spirituality

Religious spirituality is simply defined as “being close to God and feeling religious” (Ayranci & Semercioz, 2011) or described as a relationship with God or a higher power (Mulder, 2015). Spirituality also was known as a solid belief that controls human intuition to express belief in a divine power. Briefly, spirituality is a commitment to keeping religious behaviors, practices (Kutcher et al., 2010), beliefs, expressions (Dy-Liacco et al., 2009), and motivation (Annalakshmi & Abeer, 2011). Religious beliefs shape and define individual's spiritual lives, both religious and spirituality are inseparable.

In Islam, spirituality has a crucial influence on all aspects of Muslims' everyday lives, either in professional or personal life (Syed & Ali, 2010; Ajmal & Irfan, 2014). Religious spirituality in Islamic view is defined as the whole trust to Allah (tawakal) in any circumstances, especially in hardships (Osman-Gani, Hashim & Ismail, 2013). Religious spirituality in Islamic view also seen work as an act of worship and obligation (Sharabi, 2012; Basharat, 2009) with the extent of belief “if you do not see Allah, He sees you”. Either in personal life, social life, or in professional life, Muslim employees who have this belief will be motivated to live their daily life productively, ethically, and effectively (Sulaiman, Ahmad, Sbaih, & Kamil, 2014; Sharabi, 2012; Abeng, 1997; Al-Kilani, 2010). As they realize that Allah always watching them and fears Allah wherever and whenever they lazing, do unethical deeds or something in vain. Supported by Osman-Gani, Hashim, and Ismail (2013) that they found that there is a positive relationship between religiosity, spirituality, and job performance. Previous findings also pointed out that the integration between religious spirituality and profession will encourage the employees to have a good attitude (Baldachino, 2008; Rani, Abidin, & Hamid, 2013; Faribos, 2010).

In measuring religious spirituality of a Muslim, the values of “the relationship with Allah (*hablu minallah*) and relationship with human beings (*hablu minannas*)” must be included in order to reflect the true meaning of Islam (Shukor & Jamal, 2013). In Islam, *hablu minallah* and *hablu minannas* must be balanced in order to gain long-term satisfaction and success (Sharabi, 2012), either in worldly life or Hereafter. Supported by a Hadith that stated that “Whoever is mainly concerned about the Hereafter, Allah will make him feel independent of others and will make him focused and content, and his worldly affairs will fall into place” (HR. Tirmidhi).

Last but not least, religious spirituality in Islam also comprises of *ihsan* (the belief that Allah always watches and record the actions of His servants) that contributes positively to the personality of an individual, work efficiency, work attitude as well as responsibility among co-workers although dealing with difficulties (Rahman & Rahman, 1995). This occurs due to the belief in the existence of God with iman (faith) and taqwa (devotion) in Allah SWT. Thus, this study incorporates religious spirituality in order to highlight its significance that positively influences work outcomes.

## **Work Engagement**

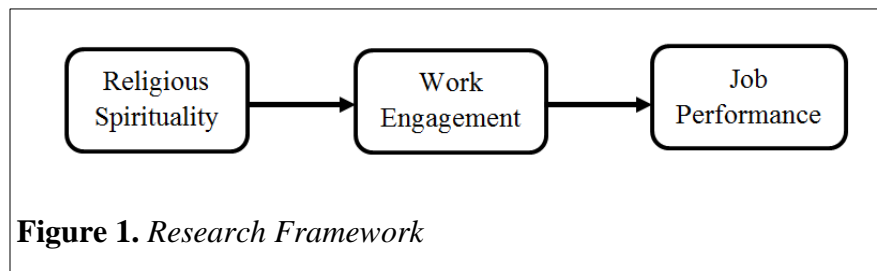
An engaged employee tend to produce higher-quality of work and customer satisfaction, less likely to quit, works innovatively and productively in which leading to organizational success (Amira, 2014). This is due to the influence of his or her positive, affective-motivational state of commitment and work-related welfare (Kim, Kolb, & Kim, 2012). Engaged employees also tend to meet and to exceed their goals (Freeney & Fellenz, 2013) as well as preserving their personal welfare (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Hakanen, 2007). Briefly, engaged employees are individuals who have emotional connections in the workplace that tend to impact individuals' involvement, effort, and behavior while carrying out the task assigned (Christian & Slaughter, 2008).

Kahn (1990) defined work engagement as a simultaneous investment of people behavior, who cognitively concentrated and alert, gets to be physically embroiled in tasks, and emotionally connected to their work and the people around them. Thus, a personal experience of an emotional connection to work (cognitive, emotional, and physical components – also known as vigor, dedication, and absorption) and speculation of personal energy are known as work engagement (Amira, 2014; Schaufeli *et al.*, 2002; Christian & Slaughter, 2008).

While the majority of the study have proposed work engagement as a predictor of various positive behavioral outcomes at the workplace (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010), this study positioned work engagement as the mediating variable which explains and provide deeper meaning on the relationship between religious spirituality and job performance among Muslim employees. This due to if a mediating variable is included in understanding and elucidating the relationship between variables, meaningful results will be found (Jex & Britt, 2008). This study supported by Mahesar, Chaudhry, Ansari, and Nisar (2016); and Hafizi, Koenig, Arbabi, Pakrah, and Saghazadeh (2014) who pointed out the need for additional empirical investigations on the relationship between predictors from Islamic perspective (e.g. Islamic HRM practices, Islamic work ethics, etc.) and job performance due to very little body of knowledge that utilize work engagement as mediation in this scope (Burke & El-Kot, 2010; Ramalu & Rashid, 2017). Hence, this study attempts to fill this gap by incorporating work engagement in our research model as the mediating variable in order to further explain the relationship between religious spirituality and job performance.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Based on above discussions, a conceptual framework is created. The model includes job performance (JP) as the dependent variable, religious spirituality (RS) as the independent variable, and work engagement as mediating variable.



Based on research model above, this study develops 4 propositions:

- 1<sup>st</sup>: There is a significant relationship between RS and JP.
- 2<sup>nd</sup>: There is a significant relationship between work engagement and JP.
- 3<sup>rd</sup>: There is a significant relationship between RS and work engagement.
- 4<sup>th</sup>: There is a significant mediating effect of work engagement on the relationship between RS and JP.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Individuals who have higher religiosity/spirituality (Siddiqui, 2014) are more inclined to engaged and to perform well (Barhem, Younies, & Muhamad, 2009; Osman-Gani, Hashim, & Ismail, 2013). Thus, as an effort in sustaining job performance (JP) of religious employees (Muslim in particular), this study investigates the role of religious spirituality in enhancing work engagement and JP of Muslim employees. Islam is the way of life. This implies that a Muslim must carry out his/her activities in every aspect of life in parallel with the teachings of Islam. Muslims are also expected to demonstrate fortitude and perseverance in the face of hardship. Work life is not always smooth as expected; there are circumstances that sometimes lead to anger, dissatisfaction, feeling underestimated, stress, and even burnout. Thus, in order to deal with hardships, all Muslim are encouraged to mends his/her relationship with Allah (Hablu minallah). As stated in a Hadith "Whoever works for the Hereafter, God will provide for his worldly life; whoever mends his relationship with God, God will improve his relationship with humans". In accomplishing a job, Muslims must Amanah, that is, to perform in trustworthy, honest, and accountable manner. In short, whatever a Muslim does, he or she does it out of sincerity and in order to attain blessings from Allah in this life and in the hereafter (Al-Banna, 1978), in any circumstances.

Overall, managers should strive to find ways on how to develop religious spirituality in their employees. Offering formal and informal training sessions where employees are imbued with these concepts is one potential measure managers can implement. In addition, the organizational culture that reflects Islamic religious values will also promote religious spirituality necessary for employees to perform their job effectively. The findings of this study may encourage future researchers to investigate religious or Islamic work-related concepts such as Islamic JP and Islamic work engagement.

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