Identification of Domains for Malaysian University Staff Happiness Index Development

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Abstract

Without any doubt happiness among staff in any organization is pertinent to ensure continued growth and development. However, not many studies were carried out to determine the domains that will be able to measure the level of happiness among staff in universities. Thus, the aim of this study is to elicit the domains that explain the overall happiness index among university staff. A qualitative method using the Nominal Group Technique was employed to collect data from five clusters in a research university in Malaysia. The findings revealed a number of domains and sub-domains that will assist in the development of a happiness index. It is believed that this study will be useful for universities to examine on the level of happiness index in their respective universities.

Keywords: happiness index, university, staff, nominal group technique

1. Introduction

Globalization and key performance indicators of employees have made many changes to the nature of work as of late much emphasis is placed on the workforce to perform or be dismissed and this has resulted in the phenomenal development of occupational stress (Sang, Teo, & Cooper, 2013). A study by Lundberg and Cooper (2011) had identified that occupational stress has much impact to individual's health, organization and productivity. In line with this, optimizing happiness among staff is among the prerequisites in ensuring the workplace is devoid of stress and chronic health problems (Collins & Gibbs, 2003). Thus, recently the concept of happiness is gaining wider recognition among organizations as it is deemed as the prerequisite in ensuring staff are vibrant and able to produce and render service effectively and efficiently.

A thorough search on the existing literature showed that the earliest research on happiness existed during the time of Plato. Further investigations revealed that towards the end of 18th century, Bentham, who was widely recognized as the pillar of Britain utilitarianism ethics, acknowledged that in general happiness is an evaluation on the experiences people undergo both during times of joy and depressed. Since then, in the 1970s, a Gross National Happiness Index was developed in Bhutan that constituted the elements of good governances, growth in economics, development of culture, and protection of the environment.

In general, there are two concepts that are closely related to the terminology of happiness. The first one looks at happiness as a value while the other one refers to happiness as a psychological descriptive term which oscillates between hypochondriac and serenity. It was identified that one of the hottest topics in the area of psychology during the late 1960s to the mid-1980s is on people's happiness or better known as subjective well-being during that time. Three dimensions were widely used to measure subjective well-being and they are quality of life, mental health and social gerontology (Yang, 2008). Then, with the emergence of economists and sociologists into the arena of human well-being, wider contribution took place in enhancing the dimensions of well-being taking into account the social, economic and psychological perspectives. Thus, human happiness is evaluated in terms of employment, income and so on from the economic perspective; social factors like gender, age, marital status, level of education, values, etc.; and psychological factors such as self-esteem, motivation, attitude, personality, and so on.

Undeniably happiness provides many advantages and contributes to the well-being of individuals. In this context, happiness is perceived as how the individual feels towards something, personality response towards social level

and how people appraise their life holistic ally (Michaelson, Mahony, & Shcifferes, 2012). Besides, happiness too helps people move beyond the small focus on the real life. At the same time, it brings the good perspectives towards any event that happens in their lives. Besides, happiness can bring people towards regular perspectives of needs and desires and bringing the positive side for themselves. This situation helps people think to enhance their contributions to develop their lives. On top of it, Michaelson, Mahony, and Schifferes (2012) also found happiness can drive people towards more economic focus and develop their emotional interest and the desired social values.

Over the years it was identified that institutions of higher learning too are experiencing major changes in terms of higher expectations with a reduced funding from the regular sources. In line with globalization, much is anticipated from universities to produce not only graduates with world-class mentality and ability but also to penetrate into research and publication that has the potential to be commercialized as well as having a great impact on the society as a whole. In addition, those employed in the academia are also entrusted to generate income for their respective universities as a result of insufficient funding from the sponsors and donors, and this has added intense duress to them.

While recognizing that productivity is pertinent for the progress of mankind and universities, on the other hand the aspect of having a good health too should not be neglected. Accordingly, happiness is important in a working organization as this will be an avenue for workforce to promote a desirable quality of life. A study by Dillon and Carr (2007) had proven that happiness in important in addressing behavioral disorder among staff.

Previous studies pertaining to measuring happiness among workforce had identified a number of influencing domains. A research report in 2007 regarding Happiness at Work Index indicated that the ten most influential factors that make people to be happy at work are friendly and supportive colleagues, enjoyable work, good employer, good work/life balance, varied work, belief that the employees are doing something worthwhile, feeling that what the workers do makes a difference, being part of a successful team, recognition for our achievements, and competitive salary. On the other hand, in the same report, it was mentioned employees would feel unhappy at their work place when there is lack of communication from the top, uncompetitive salary, no recognition for achievements, poor employer, little personnel development, ideas being ignored, lack of opportunities for good performers, lack of benefits, work not enjoyable, and not feeling what the employee does make a difference. Similar findings were also obtained from a survey done by The JobsCentral on Work Happiness Indicator 2012 and they identified the five most important domains that influence employees to be happy at work were salary, work-life balance, advancement opportunities, interesting work, and acceptable work demands.

Meanwhile, Sartori and Catlaone (2013) mentioned that having a good infrastructure is important for the increase in productivity. On the other hand, according to Fereidouni, Najdi, and Amiri (2013) good governance in work place is deemed as the significant predictor to increase happiness among staff. Besides, domains such as having good students' management system, support staff empowerment and distribution of research grant opportunities are substantial to improve happiness among staff as stated by Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs (2013). On top of it, according to Marks (2012) good services will lead to happiness while Hirschi (2011) stated that career development is pertinent to staff's happiness at work place. Meanwhile, according to Andrew (2011), workplace happiness constitutes the drivers of workplace leadership, workplace community, workplace enjoyment, workplace enrichment, work relationships, work-life balance, work variety, work teams, work reward, work meaningfulness, work engagement, and work equity

Despite vast studies that had been implemented to study happiness among employees, not many studies had been implemented to measure happiness among university staff. Thus, a study to examine the level of happiness index among university staffs timely since it was identified that the happiness of the human capital will give a big impact towards individual performance and in the end contributes immensely to the sustainability of the university. In fact, according to Yang (2008), in different work settings, the factors that influence employees' happiness index has its own uniqueness and differences and there is a need to investigate into a wider dimension that constitutes the elements of completeness (comprehensively analyzing the various factors that play a role to determine employees' work activities), independence (there is a mutual independence on each of identified constructs), feasibility (investigation on the identified constructs does not take much effort), universality (the constructs should be derived taking into account that it is being used to measure the happiness of the majority so that the index is of representative and applicable), and pointed (adjustments can be made along with the change that occurs in time and space). Hence, the aim of this exploratory study is to unveil the domains that will eventually lead to the development of the overall happiness index among university staff.

2. Methodology

This study was carried out using a qualitative method as the approach was deemed most appropriate to obtain domains that will explain happiness among university staff in Malaysia. A work flow as in Figure 1 using the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) was implemented as the method for data collection. This approach gave the informants the freedom to respond to the questions posed besides sharing their insights and experiences.

A total of 225 informants (using a multi-stage sampling technique) representing five clusters (Management, Academic, Research, Professional & Support staff, and Bintulu) were invited for the NGT and they were divided into 20 groups. Participation in the NGT sessions was voluntary; therefore the number of people present in each group was not the same. The NGT was carried out for three days in the main campus and the Bintulu campus. Every informant was grouped by their position in the university in the NGT process and provided ample space and given freedom for each informant to give answers without feeling worried or pressured. Each NGT session lasted between two to three hours.

Each session was conducted by a moderator (researcher) and assisted by two associates. The moderators were well trained and they had to follow standards provided. Moderators were supplied with a NGT manual kit that showed instruction for implementation and the questions to be asked of the informants. Thus, each group session was conducted using a standardized NGT. The location for the NGT process was conducive for all the informants to give their inputs. Before the start of the NGT session, all informants were required to confirm their functions or positions in their organizations so that they are in the right cluster and right group. The NGT session started with the identification, description and purpose of the exercise by the moderator in each session.

Two major questions were given to the informants for their feedback and they were: (1) what makes you happy to work in this university? and (2) what needs to be changed to make you be happier working in this university?

Domains of happiness for working in universities can be constructed from the responses. The domains were grouped by their positions in the universities. Every domain has been revised or matched with domains in literature review. Through this process, some new domains have been identified as new variations from the existing domains. Thus, the domains have been tested for relevance and adapted or modified from existed domains. All the domains will be duly validated and this process will help in constructing the instrument for the Happiness Index.
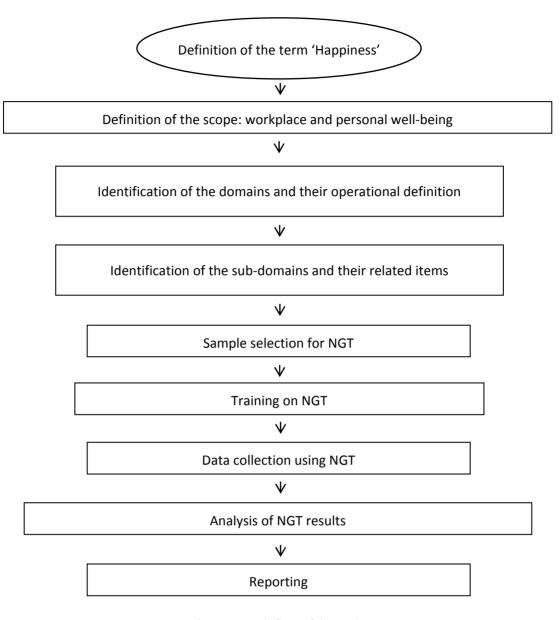
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     │       Definition of the term 'Happiness'  │
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│   Definition of the scope: workplace and personal well-being │
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│   Identification of the domains and their operational definition │
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│          Sample selection for NGT     │
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Figure 1. Work flow of the study

3. Results and Discussion

As had been mentioned earlier, the informants were divided into five main clusters and thus the results of the study will be elaborated using these clusters. It must also be stated here that the information obtained from the informants shall be used as an avenue to determine the overall domains of the happiness index. However, a ranking system was adopted on all the clusters to determine the interim preference of domains among the informants.

The first cluster was the staff from the Management. A total of 40 domains were identified from this cluster as in Tabel 1. The important domains that influenced this group to be happy working were those on "conducive social environment" and "good support from officers" besides "good work spirit". These were further supported by "good infrastructure" and "pleasant environment". These factors helped them to manage the university effectively and this is in parallel with what had been stated by Sartori and Catlaone (2013) and Fereidouni, Najdi, and Amiri (2013). On the other hand, they felt there should be an improvement in some of the domains such as "new work culture", "financial management", "ICT management", "security", "student management" and "image and reputation".

Table 1. Domains identified by the management group

Domains that makes me happy	Domains that need improvement
Group cooperation	Infrastructure facilities
Conducive social environment	Governance
Infrastructure facilities	New work culture
Conducive physical environment	Financial management
Effective leadership	ICT management system
Career development	
Students' positive attitude	Security
Image and reputation	Image and reputation
Networking	Student management
Salary	Recognition evaluation system
Clear vision and policy	Academic freedom
Governance	Staf-student relationship
Recognition	Infostructure facilities
Flexible working hours	Facilities to move in-out of campus
Work-family balance	Leadership
Alma mater	Teaching& Learning facilities
Continuous learning	Human resource
Conducive work environment	Achievement evaluation system
Work culture	Service
Strategic location	Salary and remuneration

The academic staff constituted the second cluster and they derived 57 domains as in Table 2. For this cluster, they felt happy to work in the university due to "image and reputation", "good infrastructure", "salary", "career development" and "conductive social environment" and this supports the findings derived from The JobsCentral on Work Happiness Indicator 2012. However, this group felt that improvements should be made to the "infrastructure facilities", "governance", "student management system", and "productive staff development".

Table 2. Domains identified by the academic group

Domains that makes me happy	Domains that need improvement
Image and reputation	Infrastructure facilities
Infrastructure facilities	Governance
Salary	Student management
	New work culture
Career development	Empowerment of support staff
Conducive social environment	Salary
Conducive physical environment	Image and reputation
Sense of belonging	Conducive social environment
Strategic location	Work balance
Welfare Networking	Achievement evaluation system
Conducive work environment	Welfare
Positive students attitude	Support for teaching-learning
Academic freedom	Communication
Confident academic community	Infostructure facilities
Satisfying in teaching students	Financial management
Research environment	ICT management system
Clear incentive system	Complaints channel
Work-family balance	Centralized data
Governance	Quality of students
Inter-culture exposure	Research management
Flexible working hours	Security and safety
Positive interaction with students	New work culture
Nature of work	Reduce misconduct
Work ethics	Profesionalisme
Effective support staff	Student intake
Effective leadership	
Developing organization	
Sharing of expertise	
Self-development	
Work freedom	

In the third cluster, the group comprised individuals that were involved in research and the total number of domains developed from this cluster was 30. This group was happy with the working environment that was available that assisted them in doing research and this concurred with the findings by Helliwell, Layard, and Sachs (2013). Nevertheless, they hoped that there will be further improvements in the "infrastructure facilities", "evaluation system", "service" and "research grant".

For the staffs that were in the cluster of Professional and support, they derived 42 domains and they felt happy with the "conducive working environment" and "infrastructure facilities" and this is similar with the findings by Sartori and Catlaone (2013). Nonetheless, they stressed on further improvements in "career development", "welfare", "governance", and "new work culture".

The last cluster was the staff from the Bintulu campus that resulted in a total of 79 domains. In this cluster, the Management was happy with the 'conducive physical and social environment' besides 'image and reputation'

and they hoped for further progress in "networking", "infrastructure", "staff commitment", "reward system" and "administrative system". On the other hand, the academicians were happy with the "salary", "work freedom", "career development", "welfare" and "job security". Domains that the academicians would like to see improvements were "evaluation system", "work balance", and "infrastructure". Finally, the support staff in this Bintulu cluster was happy with the "strategic location", "infrastructure", "salary", and "conductive physical and social environment". Domains that require further polishing according to the support staff were "organizational service", "work balance", "leadership", "human resource' and 'maintenance".

4. Conclusion

This study has highlighted some important findings that could be used to measure happiness among university staff. Findings resulted in some common domains that support the robustness of a university to be a research university as it has been frequently mentioned that encourage staff to be happy working in a university. These domains are the mandatory requirements that must exist effectively in a university. These include adequate and modernized physical facilities, work environment and convincing social support (to promote self-development, increase self-confidence and promote positive relationships among colleagues) as well as sound governance, friendliness and fairness. On top of it, the tangible and intangible assets that exist and are embedded in the university system need to be controlled and reflected at all times. Besides, the findings also revealed that the university workforce pay a special emphasis on effective governance system for them. Based on their perception, there is a need for an effective governance system and a proven system in the evenly distribution of workload, and a fair and inclusive assessment of achievement.

The implications of the findings of this study is that even though university staff might be happy working in their respective universities, there is a need to consistently seek the views and participation of staff to further enhance the excellence of the university. This means that the happiness of the university staff is also dependent on their involvement in the establishment of good infrastructure, system recovery, and coordination of evaluation and assessment standards. It is undeniable that most university employees spend half of their life span and half of their day that they are awake in their working environment. Therefore, it is very important that university employees are satisfied working happily in their workplace and to further improve on their level of happiness.

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