

The Mediating Effects of Soft Skills in Enhancing Business Performance During the Pandemic

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Abstract

Malaysia started its lockdown in March 2020. Many businesses were affected by the pandemic. Business leaders have strengthened their organization by focusing on the employees' soft skills. The purpose of this research is to determine the effects of soft skills and the performance of the organization. Studies on soft skills such as interpersonal communications skills had been central to job preparedness. However, in terms of how soft skills could help enhance business performance during the pandemic like the Covid 19 is still very limited. The manufacturing sector would be targeted in this study, as the sector contributes a major portion of the country's gross domestic product. Executives from a successful manufacturing organization has been selected to participate in this research. 3 questionnaires have been employed to analyse the responses. It was found that with the mediating effects of the soft skills such as emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour, employees are more satisfied and that the organization has been considerably well during the pandemic.

Keywords: Critical Situation; Productivity; Workplace Environment

1

Introduction

The corona virus or more popularly known as Covid-19 has created much instability in the business environment. Some business organisations had to change their mode of operations in order to sustain in business. From the conventional method to e-commerce, from dining in to delivered meals. There are some unfortunate business sectors especially the tourism and foreign maids are still closed as at the end of September 2021. They are barely surviving, some even had to retrench their dedicated employees. As the horizon looks bleak for majority of the organisations, business leaders need to think hard to steer their organization from the choppy waters. Business leaders had to face an unprecedented set of situations. They had to make very tough decisions. These decisions requires them to test their leadership and management skills. A study found a large portions of respondents (81 per cent) expected their business to be adversely impacted by the coronavirus and there is an ongoing uncertainties in 2021 (Churchill, 2020). A workplace success often hinges on how well the team works together. Although

technical skills are important, the Covid 19 has highlighted the importance of soft skills in managing through the pandemic. The purpose of the study is to examine the importance of soft skills. In this study, the soft skills analysed would be emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour.

2 Literature Review

March 18, 2020 is the date when the Government of Malaysia had to call for a total lockdown in the country. And ever since that day, the country's economy has been very unstable. Months of the brutal lockdowns and little hopes on Covid-19 test positivity rates supported calls for a shift in our pandemic management and economic recovery strategy. The arbitrary distinctions between "essential" and "non-essential" sectors hurt the Malaysian economy further. What was deemed non-essential to some, was deemed essential to others. Those that were employed in the non-essential sectors were not allowed to operate. As the months passed, the government issued standards of procedures (SOPs) that businesses had to follow if they wish to operate during the

movement control orders. During this period, top management needed to re-strategise their business models and what was good during the pre-Covid days were not usable during the pandemic.

“The shortage of cashflow and inputs and difficulties fulfilling contracts are the most widely reported impacts of the pandemic and its containment measures. The main causes are reduced sales due to a decline in demand. The shortage of cashflow might have been caused by value chain and logistics disruptions, including the inability to deliver, perhaps due to the containment measures such as border closures”(Arfina, 2021). “In addition, over half of the firms have faced worker shortages. The Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) contributed 35% of the Malaysian GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and to 70% of the jobs in the entire market. With the lockdown, the SMEs were severely affected, causing many to face financial struggles. Added to this impact, the manufacturers that contributed to Malaysia’s export income were ordered to stop operations during the two-month lockdown, causing it to contract by 8.3% compared to a negative 1.7% growth in 2019. In April 2020, Malaysia reported a trade deficit of RM3.5 billion, after 169 consecutive months of a trade surplus.”

Soft skills are important to the manufacturing sector (Impact Washington, 2021). “Manufacturing job skills are the range of soft and technical or hard skills required for manufacturing professionals to use to be successful (Indeed, 2021). The manufacturing industry continues to evolve, transitioning from manual assembly lines or practices to more technology-driven automated processes. It’s important for professionals to blend engineering skills, traditional manufacturing skills and soft skills to keep up with this transition. Organisations require soft skills which includes emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour (Lau, 2021).”

2.1 Emotional Intelligence

“An organization is represented as a group of individuals who work together in an organized way for a shared purpose. The current pandemic is urging everyone that mental health must be on the list of one of those purposes as the work environment and the behaviours related to it are determining characteristics that may unleash side-effects in

employees’ well-being (Sadovyy, Sanchez-Gomez, & Bresó, 2021). Emotional intelligence refers to the individual’s ability to recognize, understand, and manage their own and others’ emotions. When the individual can manage their emotions, they will respond much effectively to any given situation vs responding instinctively in a fight, flight, or freeze mode (behaviors led by the reptilian brain). It helps individuals to deal with stress and see clearly, making better decisions in their life. It builds up the individual’s resilience: the ability to bounce back in the face of setbacks (Busto, 2021). “

“Emotional Intelligence is the ability of the individual to manage both their own emotions and understand the emotions of people around them (Mental Health America, 2021). Many of the core competencies for soft skills have a foundation in emotional intelligence skills. Emotional intelligence is a learned ability to identify, experience, understand, and express human emotions in healthy and productive ways. The Genos – previously named as Swinburne University Emotional Intelligence Unit – claimed that five key emotional competencies are applicable to the workplace situation (Palmer & Stough, 2001). First, emotional recognition and expression refers to the ability to identify one’s own feelings and emotional states, and the ability to express those inner feelings to others. Second is understanding the emotions of others which is defined as the ability to identify and understand the emotions of others and those that manifest in response to workplace environments and meetings of staff members. Emotions direct cognition refers to the extent to which emotions and emotional knowledge are incorporated in decision-making or problem-solving situations. Additionally, emotional management relates to the ability to manage positive and negative emotions both within oneself and others. Apart from that, emotional control is described as the ability to control strong emotional states experienced at work such as anger, stress, anxiety, and frustration effectively. Employees with high levels of emotional intelligence would be able to identify how they are feeling, what those feelings indicate, and how those emotions impact their behavior and in turn, the feelings of their colleagues at the workplace. “

High levels of emotional intelligence overlapping strong interpersonal skills especially in the areas of conflict management

and interpersonal communication are crucial skills in the workplace. Employees who can self-regulate their emotions are often able to avoid making impulsive decisions. They are able to think objectively before they act. Operating with empathy and understanding is a critical part of teamwork. If an employee is able to attribute someone's behavior to an underlying emotion will help them manage relationships and make others feel heard. The coronavirus pandemic is a test to an individual's resilience. Employees need to be resilient during the pandemic as not only everyone in the organization is affected but it is the whole world. The five dimensions of competencies especially emotions direct cognition focuses on how individuals assessed the situations at the workplace and using positive assessments to motivate them in managing their current life. Positive emotions strengthen the employee to manage during critical situations (Gable, 2021).

2.2 Organisational Citizenship Behaviour

The pandemic has changed the employment approach to many employees. They have had to work from home for a long period of time. For a majority of Malaysian employees, they have had to work from home for about 18 months. During these 18 months, there are some impact to their behaviour and approaches to work. Working during the pandemic requires displays of contextual behaviours. "Organisational citizenship behaviour has five elements: conscientiousness, sportsmanship, civic virtue, courtesy, and altruism. (Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, 1990). Conscientiousness is exemplified by voluntary behaviour performed by the employees such as punctuality in attendance, appropriate usage of work time, adherence to rules, and being meticulous and careful in performing tasks (Hans, Mubeen, & Humaid, 2015)." These voluntary behaviours require elements such as self-discipline, carefulness, thoroughness, organisation, deliberation which is the tendency to think carefully before acting, and need for achievement. These relates to soft skills needed at the workplace. Altruism shows the voluntary actions performed by individuals by helping others who were absent or are lagging in their work (Hans, Mubeen, & Humaid, 2015). Altruism relates to the wilful sacrifice of their own interests or well-being for the sake of something that is not related to themselves. It is

also often defined as being the selfless concern for the welfare of others. Sportsmanship looks into how well the executives or individuals manage with minor inconveniences, or not always berating the organization (Ahmad, Rasheed, & Jehanzeb, 2012). Sportsmanship mind-set is anticipated to improve the quantity and quality of work. Courtesy refers to the actions performed by the employees such as consulting other employees who may be affected by a decision, or at the very least informing other employees in advance of such actions (Ahmad, Rasheed, & Jehanzeb, 2012). This is very much needed during the pandemic as they are not working in the office but from their homes. Strong interpersonal communication is very much needed during such time. Civic virtue discusses the actions performed by the individuals in keeping up with latest developments in the organization. Virtues required during the pandemic includes; generosity, compassion, honesty, solidarity, fortitude, justice and patience (The Conversation, 2020).

2.3 Business Performance and Job Satisfaction

Many businesses performed badly during the pandemic. The government of Malaysia had to implement the movement control orders to stop the spread of the virus. During such time, many of the businesses had to retrench their staff to reduce their cost. This unfortunately gives a negative impact to the remaining employees in the organization. Negative news affects employees' level of job satisfaction. Many employees could not work as usual, even having to lose work due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Some even had pay cuts as the employer rotated their work schedules. Many employees have difficulty adapting to the demands that all are done at home or better known as Work From Home (Zadrian, Mharchelya, & Ifdil, 2021). Many employees felt that they had to work extra to meet the needs of life to be fulfilled and how the level of work satisfaction of the employees themselves in the face of this COVID-19 pandemic. Employees' feelings of job insecurity, unsure job arrangements and working remotely affects the level of job satisfaction. Employment matters affects employees' physiological needs and security needs (Maslow, 1943). Physiological needs refer to the basic necessities required by an individual to survive which includes food, shelter and clothing.

Security needs refers to the requirements for a safe work environment which includes job security and fair work practices.

Job satisfaction can be best described as any combination of psychological, physiological, or environmental circumstances that cause a person to say that they are satisfied with their job truthfully (Hoppock, 1935). According to Wolf, (1970), job satisfaction was linked to the theory of needs and the monetary remuneration. Employees level of satisfaction is link to the feelings of job security (which is the theory of needs) and jobs are link to the remuneration received. It was claimed that employees' level of job satisfaction is linked to their performance and this would indirectly affect the organisation's performance. It was suggested that a happy employee is a satisfied employee. A satisfied employee would do their best for the organization.

Earlier studies found that emotional intelligence does have a positive and significant relationship with job satisfaction (Psilopanagiati, Anagnostoulos, Mourtou, & Niakas, 2012). However, there is a lack of studies conducted during the pandemic. The purpose of this study is to relate emotional intelligence, organizational citizenship behaviour to job satisfaction and organizational performance.

3 Methodology/Materials

The purpose of this study is to determine the mediating effects of soft skills to the performance of the organization. In this study, the soft skills will be represented by emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour. Job satisfaction is the independent variable while organizational performance is the dependent variable.

3.1 Target and sample

A successful manufacturing organization in Selangor, Malaysia has been chosen for the study. This organization has been in existence for more than 50 years. The organization started from a 2 men team to a team of more than 1000 employees with branches in Penang, Selangor and Melaka. The organization has also adopted the concept of

digitalization. Their latest investment in Melaka is situated in a smart investment centre or known as SIC. The SICs uses the latest advancement in technology in their methods of production. The SICs are in line with the government's effort to move towards Industrial Revolution 4.0 (IR 4.0).

A total of 110 executives in the organization took part in the study. Until to date, the organization has not retrenched any of their employees. 3 sets of questionnaires were distributed to all the executives with the help of the Human Resource personnel. The Genos Emotional Intelligence questionnaire developed by Palmer and Stough (2001) has been used to examine the level of emotional intelligence among the executives in the organization. The scale developed by Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Moorman, & Fetter, (1990) was used to measure organisational citizenship behaviour. The scales measured five elements, namely conscientiousness, sportsmanship, civic virtue, courtesy, and altruism. The level of job satisfaction was measured using the job satisfaction survey developed by Brayfield & Rothe, (1951) which was subsequently modified by Warner, (1973). For business performance, the financial rates which includes sales, profits and market share are used to examine performance.

3.2 Statistical Tools Used and framework

For the purpose of the study, the mediation analysis has been used to examine the effects of soft skills in enhancing business performance. The suggested framework depicts that a parallel multiple mediator relationship may be present because both mediators, emotional intelligence and organisational citizenship behaviour, may be mediating simultaneously. In this parallel multiple mediator model, job satisfaction was modelled to exert its effect on organisational performance through the mediators. This is seen in Figure 1. The pathway through which job satisfaction exerted its influence without going through the mediators was known as the direct effects. In contrast, the pathway in which job satisfaction exerted its influence through any one of the mediators was deemed as the indirect effects.

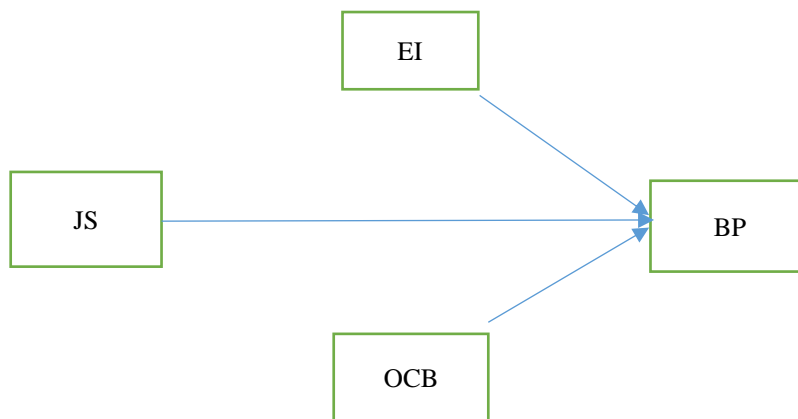


Figure 1 : Theoretical Framework

3.3 Research Questions

The research questions for the study are as follows:

1. What is the relationship between job satisfaction to business performance
2. What is the relationship between emotional intelligence to business performance?
3. What is the relationship between organizational citizenship behaviour to business performance?
4. What is the relationship between job satisfaction and business performance when there is a mediating relationship of emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour?

4 Results and Findings

4.1 Analysis of Respondents

Table 1 shows the demographic

analysis of the respondents from the organisation. A majority of the executives are males and about 60% of them are more than 40 years old. 58.18% of them have worked in the organisation for more than 10 years. This may indicate that the employees are satisfied with the management style. 56 executives are in the production area (Production = 21; the Engineering = 30; Store and Logistics = 6), while 54 are with the administration side (Human Resource = 21; Finance and Accounts = 12; Sales and Marketing = 20). Based on the manpower distribution, it was found that the management focused on 2 departments; ie engineering and sales and marketing. They need the 2 sets of departments to ensure that there is sales and the product meets the quality standard set by the customers.

Table 1: Respondents' Demographics

		Frequency	Percentage	Cumulative Percentage
Gender	Male	70	63.6	63.6
	Female	40	46.40	100.0
Age group	Less than 30 years old	2	1.82	1.82
	More than 31 but less than 35 years old	18	16.36	18.18
	More than 36 but less than 40 years old	30	27.27	45.45
	More than 41 but less than 45 years old	40	36.36	81.81
	More than 46 years old	20	18.19	100.0
Nationality	Malaysian	110	100	100
Marital Status	Single	6	5.46	5.46

	Married	104	94.54	100.0
Department	Human resource and administration	21	19.09	19.09
	Finance and accounts	12	10.91	30.00
	Production	21	19.09	49.09
	Sales and marketing	20	18.18	67.27
	Engineering	30	27.27	94.54
	Store and logistics	6	5.46	100.0
Education Level	Diploma and lower	48	43.64	43.64
	Bachelor's degree	58	52.73	96.37
	Master's degree	2	1.82	98.19
	Professional qualification	2	1.81	100.0
Length of Employment	Less than 2 years	4	3.64	3.64
	More than 2 but less than 5 years	12	10.91	14.55
	More than 5 but less than 10 years	30	27.27	41.82
	More than 10 years	64	58.18	100.0

4.2 Discussion and Analysis

The first research question was to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and business performance. As seen in Table 2, it was found that based on the 5 dimensions of emotional intelligence, only understanding others emotions was not found to have a significant relationship with business performance as $p > 0.05$. From the remaining 4 dimensions of emotional intelligence, emotional recognition and expression was found to have a high t value. A high t value indicates a stronger effect to the outcome variable, in this case, it is business performance. Emotions direct cognition was also found to have a high t value. From the analysis, emotional recognition and expression and emotions direct cognition have been found to have a stronger impact towards business performance. These soft skills look into the individual knowing themselves and are able to solve issues or problems in the organisation. It is noted that 65.7% of the variations in business

performance is related to emotional intelligence. A high percentage showed the importance of the skill in enhancing the performance in the organisation. This is more so during a critical situation like the pandemic.

During the pandemic, employees are expected to be able to understand the situations experienced by the organisation. The soft skills needed during such times includes; conflict resolution, flexibility and problem solving. These soft skills relate to emotions direct cognition, how emotions aids the individual to decide in a more effective way. Soft skills such as teamwork, communication, dependability and adaptability are reflected in emotional management and emotional control. The pandemic has created feelings of uneasiness and panic among many. These feelings affects the emotional stability and employees need to be able to manage and control the extremes of their emotions so that there would be harmony even while working on a virtual concept.

Table 2 : Regression Analysis between Emotional Intelligence and Business Performance

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	0.023	0.331		0.069	0.945
1 ERE	0.320	0.070	0.325	4.565	0.000
1 UOE	0.158	0.082	0.149	1.931	0.056
1 EDC	0.250	0.072	0.263	3.477	0.001

EM	0.164	0.076	0.168	2.155	0.033
EC	0.178	0.069	0.167	2.596	0.011
a. Dependent variable: BP					
Model	R		R Square		
1	0.811a		0.657		

Key : ERE – Emotional Recognition and Expression; UOE – Understanding Others Emotions; EDC – Emotions Direct Cognition; EM – Emotional Management; EC – Emotional Control; BP – Business Performance

Table 3 showed the relationship between organizational citizenship behaviour and business performance. 54.9% of the variations in business performance is related to organizational citizenship behaviour. Altruism was found to be the only dimension significant in the relationship towards business performance. Altruism includes acts of helping colleagues without expecting any rewards; forgoing things that brings personal benefits if they create costs to others; helping colleagues despite their own personal costs or risks; sharing of resources in the face of scarcity and showing concern for someone else's well-

being. All these relates to better teamwork, effective communication, dependability and adaptability, which are soft. Altruism was also found to have a high t value. The high t value signifies the impact to business performance. This showed that altruism enhances the business performance. These skills are much needed during the pandemic. Employees work from home, and they need to balance their work and family life properly. Such times, requires stronger support from each other to manage the organisation through the pandemic.

Table 3 : Regression Analysis between Organisational Citizenship Behaviour and Business Performance

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0.695	0.385		1.807	0.074
CT	-0.102	0.178	-0.083	-0.573	0.568
SP	0.365	0.195	0.320	1.868	0.064
CO	0.170	0.179	0.151	0.951	0.344
AL	0.445	0.066	0.490	6.783	0.000
	R	R square			
	0.741	0.549			

a. Dependent Variable: BP

b. Predictors: (Constant), AL, CT, CO, SP

Key : CT – Courtesy; SP – Sportsmanship; CO – Courtesy; AL – Altruism; BP – Business Performance

Table 4 showed the relationship between job satisfaction to business performance. 91.1% of the variations in business performance relates to job satisfaction, this indicates its significance. The high t value is another

indicator of its importance. The findings agreed with earlier studies (Psilopanagiati, Anagnostoulos, Mourtou, & Niakas, 2012). A satisfied employee is more productive employee. A more productive employee will be an asset to the organisation.

Table 4 : Relationship between Job Satisfaction to Business Performance

Model	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	-0.048	0.137		-0.349	0.728
JS	1.019	0.031	0.955	33.344	0.000
	R	R square			
	0.955a	0.911			

a. Dependent Variable: BP

b. Predictors: (Constant), JS

Key : JS – Job Satisfaction; BP – Business Performance

Table 5 displays the mediation analysis of emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour between job satisfaction and business performance. In the direct effect of X (Job Satisfaction) and Y (Business Performance), the total effect is 0.2152. However, in the indirect effect of X (Job Satisfaction) and Y (Business Performance) with the mediating relationship of emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour, the total effect has increased to 0.8659. The increase of 0.6507 (0.8659 – 0.2152) showed that both emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour does impact the relationship. This meant that employees with high levels of

emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour would have a high level of job satisfaction. These employees will work their best during a crisis especially the current situation where there are a lot of unpredictables. The mediating effects of emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour also showed that soft skills do enhance the business performance of the organisation. These variables especially emotional recognition and expression; emotions direct cognition; emotional management; emotional control and altruism play an important role in strengthening the organisation during the pandemic.

Table 5 : Mediation Analysis of Job Satisfaction and Business Performance with Emotional Intelligence and Organisational Citizenship Behaviour as the mediating variables.

Direct effect of X on Y						
	Effect	SE	T	p	LLCI	ULCI
	0.2152	0.0605	3.5595	0.0006	0.0954	0.3351
Indirect effect of X on Y						
	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI		
Total	0.8659	0.0750	0.7273	1.0192		
OCB	0.0103	0.0317	-0.0566	0.0733		
EI	0.8556	0.738	0.7179	1.0021		

Key : BP – Business Performance; OCB – Organisational Citizenship Behaviour; EI – Emotional Intelligence; JS – Job Satisfaction

5 Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine the mediating effects of soft skills (emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour) in the relationship between job satisfaction and business performance. In the analysis, it was found that both emotional intelligence and organizational citizenship behaviour does enhance the performance of the business. From the dimensions of emotional intelligence, emotional recognition and expression, emotions direct cognition,

emotional management and emotional control were found to have a positive and significant relationship. These 4 dimensions focuses on good communication along the colleagues, good teamwork spirit, conflict resolution and good problem-solving skills. From organizational citizenship behaviour, altruism was found to have a strong positive and significant relationship with business performance. Altruism refers to an individual's effort to help their fellow colleagues without any intention to receive rewards or recognition.

These acts strengthen the organisation's teamwork spirit, dependability, adaptability, flexibility and good interpersonal communication. All of these bonds the organisation, making it stronger and invincible.

5.1 Area of future research

The current study focused on a successful organisation in the manufacturing industry. Findings from the study may not be generalized to organisations from other industries. Moreover, in this study, the variables used to analyse soft skills are emotional intelligence and organizational

citizenship behaviour. For future study, it would be beneficial to examine the effects of soft skills from organisations from other industries such as automobile, construction or oil and gas. By reviewing the study in other business sectors would increase the knowledge gained and would be useful for organisations if they would like to apply soft skills into their organisation.

Acknowledgement: This research work is supported by the Project (MMUI/210056) supported by Multimedia University.

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