Workplace Well-Being in the Maldives: Employee Perspectives on Belongingness and Work-Life Balance

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ABSTRACT

This study explores employee perspectives on workplace well-being in the Maldives, focusing on belongingness and work-life balance. Utilizing qualitative methods, interviews were conducted with employees from diverse backgrounds to identify factors affecting their well-being. Findings reveal significant discrepancies between employee expectations and reality, highlighting issues such as understaffing, high workloads, and inadequate support. The study emphasizes the need for organizations to foster a supportive culture to enhance employee satisfaction and retention.

Keywords— Workplace Well-Being, Employee Perspectives, Belongingness, Work-Life Balance, Maldives

INTRODUCTION

Employee well-being has emerged as a pivotal concern for organizations striving for sustainable success in today's competitive landscape. As businesses increasingly recognize that their most valuable asset is their workforce, the importance of fostering an environment conducive to employee satisfaction and productivity cannot be overstated. In this context, two critical dimensions of employee well-being are belongingness and work-life balance. Belongingness describe how emotionally connected employees feel towards their workplace, while work-life balance refers to managing work and personal life effectively.

Despite the recognized significance of these factors, many organizations overlook them, leading to detrimental effects on employee morale, engagement, and retention. The Maldives, known for its vibrant tourism industry and cultural diversity, presents a unique case for examining workplace well-being. However, there is a notable lack of comprehensive research addressing the specific challenges faced by employees in this context. Reports indicate that Maldivian employees often grapple with issues such as high workloads, inadequate support systems, and a disconnect between management and staff, which can exacerbate feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction.

Research Gap and Rationale

The existing literature highlights a troubling trend: employees frequently report feelings of disconnection and dissatisfaction in their workplaces, particularly in environments characterized by high demands and low resources. In the Maldives, where cultural norms and workplace dynamics may differ significantly from other

regions, understanding the factors that contribute to these feelings is essential for developing effective interventions. The gap in research focusing on employee perspectives within the Maldivian context raises critical questions about how organizations can enhance belongingness and work-life balance to improve overall employee well-being.

Research Objectives

This study aims to explore the following objectives:

To investigate the specific factors that shape employees' perceptions of belongingness and work-life balance in the Maldivian workplace.

To analyse the gap between employees' initial expectations regarding their work environment and the realities they experience after joining their organizations.

To evaluate how workplace dynamics, including management practices, job demands, and available resources, affect employees' sense of belonging and their ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance.

Review of Theoretical and Empirical Evidence on Employee Well-being

Theoretical Insights into Workplace Dynamics

Social Exchange Theory

According to the social exchange theory, people develop relationships through exchanging resources in an effort to maximize gains and minimize expenses (Ahmad et al., 2023). Based to this theory, workers assess their relationships with their employers in the workplace by looking at perceived benefits such advancement chances, employment stability, and recognition (Rajâa & Mekkaoui, 2025). Employees' sense of belonging declines when they feel underappreciated or unsupported, which lowers work satisfaction and increases the likelihood that they would result in leaving (Hasanudin et al., 2024).

Psychological Contract Theory

Psychological Contract Theory centres around the informal and implicit expectations that employees hold regarding their employer's obligations (Fantinelli et al., 2023). These expectations encompass both tangible aspects, such as salary and benefits, and intangible elements, such as respect and recognition. Employee engagement and morale can be severely impacted by a breach of this psychological contract, which can result in emotions of betrayal and discontent (Herrera & De Las Heras-Rosas, 2021).

Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) Theory

Job demands and job resources are the two categories into which the JD-R Theory divides job characteristics. The emotional, physical, and psychological components of work that provide for consistent effort are referred to as job demands, whereas the supportive components that assist employees in meeting demands are known as job resources. (Bakker et al., 2023). Burnout and a decline in wellbeing can result from an imbalance between job expectations and resources, underscoring the significance of preserving a positive work-life balance (Epstein, 2021). Further, the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) theory explains how working conditions have a substantial impact on employee productivity. This theory posits that productivity is affected by job demands, which can initially increase output but lead to decreased performance when prolonged or excessive, and job resources, which generally have a positive impact by buffering the negative effects of demands and enhancing motivation. As such, this theory was supported by the research made by Shafi et al. (2023).

Previous Research

Previous studies consistently highlight the influential role of belongingness and work-life balance in shaping employee satisfaction and loyalty. For example, Ibrahim (2019) noted that employees who feel accepted and

valued within their organizations tend to show greater job satisfaction and commitment. Similarly, Katsaros (2022) emphasized that inclusive leadership fosters a sense of belonging, thereby enhancing employee participation in organizational initiatives.

Moreover, Tamunomiebi and Oyibo (2020) highlighted maintaining a balanced work-life dynamic has been shown to positively impact both mental health and job performance. Thilagavathy and Geetha (2023) emphasized that achieving sustainable work-life balance is vital especially in culturally diverse settings like the Maldives. On top of that, issues pertaining to discrimination, excessive work, unjust compensation, toxicity, job stability, and a lack of work-life balance are all having a negative impact on employees' well-being (Forth and Theodoropoulos, 2022). Additionally, prior studies conducted especially in the Maldives' setting have only looked at things like immigration and the HRM system. Hassan (2022). As a result, there remains a gap in understanding how these dynamics specifically manifest within the Maldivian workplace.

Research Design and Approach

A qualitative approach was adopted, utilizing semi-structured interviews with employees across various sectors in the Maldives. As such, at least thirty participants were chosen for this study using a purposive sampling strategy. The target group consisted of Maldivian employees across various fields, industries, employment statuses, and geographic regions. Participants were selected based on their ability to provide rich, relevant insights, with the main criteria being a minimum of two years' experience within a workplace environment. This purposive approach ensured the inclusion of individuals who were willing and able to contribute meaningful perspectives regarding their sense of belongingness and work-life balance. Consequently, the final sample consisted of thirty-two individuals who have fulfilled the aforementioned conditions. Prior to participation, individuals were informed about the ethical procedures and provided their consent to take part in the study.

Following the completion of the interviews, the recorded sessions were transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis approach was adopted to examine the data, involving both deductive and inductive coding processes. Initially, deductive coding was conducted using predefined codes aligned with the research objectives and the literature review, such as initial expectations, expectation fulfilment, current job demands, and job resources. Subsequently, inductive coding was applied to identify emergent themes that naturally arose from the data, including aspects like mental health concerns, workplace safety, and transparent pay structures. The data were systematically organised to establish patterns and relationships between codes, and themes were developed to capture the deeper meanings behind participant experiences. Throughout the analysis, strict confidentiality and anonymity protocols were maintained to protect the identities and sensitive information of all respondents.

Identified Themes

Initial Expectations

Participants expressed a range of expectations upon joining their organizations. Many anticipated a supportive environment conducive to work-life balance, with flexible hours and opportunities for professional development. They expected to feel a sense of belonging and to be valued as integral members of their teams. For instance, one respondent noted, "I thought that being part of a leading company would mean a focus on employee well-being and a balanced workload."

Expectation Fulfilment

Contrary to initial expectations, many participants reported significant disappointment regarding their experiences. A prevalent theme was the impact of understaffing and excessive workloads, which severely affected their ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Respondents frequently mentioned feeling overwhelmed, with one stating, "The workload is unbearable. I often work late into the night, leaving little time for my family and personal life."

Job Demands

Participants emphasized how the demands of their jobs affected their physical and mental health. Many described their roles as mentally taxing, particularly due to constant on-call responsibilities and high-performance expectations. The pressure to meet sales targets and manage numerous tasks simultaneously contributed to feelings of frustration and helplessness. One respondent shared, "I feel like I'm constantly fighting against the clock, and it's draining."

Job Resources

While some participants acknowledged the presence of positive job resources, such as mentorship and training opportunities, many felt these were insufficient. The lack of adequate staffing and resources was a recurring concern, with several respondents indicating that their well-being relied heavily on external support systems, such as family and friends. "Without my family's support, I don't think I could cope," one participant remarked.

Professional Growth

Opportunities for professional growth were viewed as a double-edged sword. While some participants appreciated the training provided, others felt that increased responsibilities often led to additional stress rather than career advancement. The lack of clear career progression pathways contributed to feelings of stagnation and disconnection from their organizations.

Negligence Towards Employees

A significant sentiment among participants was the perception of management negligence regarding employee well-being. Many felt that financial success was prioritized over employee welfare, leading to a toxic work culture. One respondent succinctly stated, "It seems like the management only cares about profits, not about us as people."

DISCUSSION

Discrepancies Between Expectations and Reality

The findings reveal a stark contrast between employee expectations and their lived experiences. The Psychological Contract Theory, which holds that unfulfilled expectations result in feelings of betrayal and discontent, can be used to understand this misalignment (Coyle-Shapiro, 2002). The high levels of disappointment reported by participants indicate a breach of the psychological contract, which can have detrimental effects on employee morale and retention (Guest, 1998).

The Role of Job Demands and Resources

The JD-R Theory's description of the interaction between work demands and resources is clear from the experiences of the participants. The excessive demands placed on employees, coupled with inadequate resources, contribute to burnout and decreased well-being (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). Adequate resources and support should be provided by organizations to enable employees to cope effectively with their workload.

Importance of Belongingness

Employee well-being was notably influenced by the presence of belongingness in the workplace. A heightened sense of belonging among employees was associated with increased satisfaction and involvement at work. This aligns with the findings of Ibrahim (2019) and Katsaros (2022), emphasizing that fostering a culture of belonging can enhance employee retention and performance.

Recommendations for Organizational Change

To effectively address the challenges identified in this study, organizations in the Maldives must adopt a more strategic and employee-centric approach. One of the primary areas requiring attention is communication. Open and transparent communication channels between management and staff are essential to ensure that expectations are clearly conveyed, misunderstandings are minimized, and employee concerns are genuinely heard and addressed. When employees feel informed and included, their sense of belonging is significantly enhanced.

In addition, organizations should prioritize providing adequate resources to support employees in managing their workload. This includes investing in sufficient staffing, tools, and systems that help mitigate stress and prevent burnout. Such investments demonstrate a commitment to employee well-being and contribute to a more sustainable work environment.

Equally important is the promotion of professional development. Establishing structured career progression pathways and offering training opportunities aligned with employees' personal and professional goals can boost motivation and engagement. When individuals see clear opportunities for growth, they are more likely to remain committed to their roles and contribute meaningfully to organizational success.

Lastly, fostering a supportive organizational culture is crucial. This involves creating initiatives that recognize employee achievements, encourage peer support, and reinforce a culture of mutual respect. A workplace that values and appreciates its people not only strengthens belongingness but also enhances collaboration and morale.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the urgent need for organizations in the Maldives to re-evaluate and enhance their efforts toward promoting employee well-being. The findings emphasize that belongingness and work-life balance are not merely individual concerns but strategic components of organizational effectiveness. By improving communication, ensuring adequate resources, supporting professional development, and cultivating a supportive culture, organizations can create a more inclusive and sustainable work environment. These changes have the potential to increase job satisfaction, lower turnover rates, and ultimately contribute to improved organizational performance and resilience in a competitive landscape.

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