



European Journal of Training and Development

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Johanim Johari Khulida Kirana Yahya , (2016), "Job characteristics, work involvement, and job performance of public servants", European Journal of Training and Development, Vol. 40 Iss 7 pp. 554 - 575

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/EJTD-07-2015-0051>

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Job characteristics, work involvement, and job performance of public servants

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Abstract

Purpose – The primary purpose of this study is to assess the predicting role of job characteristics on job performance. Dimensions in the job characteristics construct are skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback. Further, work involvement is tested as a mediator in the hypothesized link.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 256 public servants reported on their job characteristics and work involvement while supervisory ratings were used to assess their level of job performance. SPSS version 14 and AMOS 16 were used for statistical analyses of the data. A hypothesized structural equation model was tested to examine both direct and indirect influence of job characteristics on job performance.

Findings – The findings revealed that task significance and feedback significantly influence job performance and the relationships are mediated by work involvement. Skill variety, however, has a significant and direct influence on public servants' job performance.

Research limitations/implications – The research results have provided support for the key theoretical propositions. Specifically, this study has managed to substantiate some empirical evidences in partial support of the job characteristics theory.

Practical implications – As for practical implication, the significant and positive impact of skill variety, task significance and feedback on job performance suggests the importance of these job characteristics dimensions in promoting high level of job performance among public servants.

Originality/value – This study aims to provide additional empirical evidence in support of the job characteristics theory. The theoretical framework of this study managed to substantiate empirical evidence in partial support of the job characteristics theory.

Keywords Malaysia, Public sector, Job characteristics, Job performance, Public servants, Work involvement

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The Malaysian Public Service has assumed a key role in the economic and social development of the country. Most importantly, it is to the interest of the nation and the public at large that the public service has to remain strong and competent at providing their services. Jabroun and Balakrishnan (2000), Sanderson (1996), Sarminah (2005) have concurred to the notion that the public service agencies' performance is a heavy-weight component of the national economy. In light of this, the Malaysian Public Service has to be responsive to the changing environment. It has to stay relevant by continually transforming itself to execute the entrusted roles to the satisfaction of its stakeholders and customers.



The quest for a dynamic customer focus and public service is a constant pursuit for the government. Hence, in achieving the high performance standards, the Malaysian Public Service has embarked on its high-performance journey to stay relevant and to optimize value creation. A number of policies and programs have been introduced since 1980s by the Government to reinforce the need for a high performance workforce. Among the recent ones are the New Public Management, which was introduced in 2004 as a basis to benchmark the performance of the public sector and this circular requires all frontline agencies to develop and implement key indicators (Siti Nabiha, 2008; Siddiquee, 2006). In the same year, the National Integrity Plan and the Integrity Institute of Malaysia (IIM) was introduced to reduce corruption, mismanagement and abuse of power, to enhance the efficiency level in the public service delivery systems, and to improve corporate governance and business ethics. In 2009, Government Transformation Program (GTP) was implemented to further upgrade the public service delivery system in Malaysia (Siddiquee, 2014). Through this program, seven National Key Areas (NKRAs) have been identified as the areas of priorities. Each NKRA has its own targets and measurable outcomes to boost performance standards and assessments of the public sector.

The transformation and redefining of the public sector have produced new roles and responsibilities of the respective departments and agencies as well as the public servants themselves. In relation to this, the development of the human capital in the public sector has become a serious agenda for the Government ever since the public service reform programs took place in 1980s. Through appropriate human resource development programs, it is hoped that public servants are able to perform at their best as the knowledge and skills related to their jobs are enhanced. Hence, numerous efforts have been made by the Government to create a band of excellent and dynamic workforce, who are capable of delivering the expectations of both the management and precisely the clients, in the public sector. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that there are many converging factors that form the thrust of being excellent public servants. To be excellent, one has to possess the required level of exemplary competency, which normally is measured in terms of knowledge, skills, ability, attitude and behaviors (Borman, 2004a; Borman and Motowidlo, 1997; Organ, 1997). Contextual factors, such as job design and organizational structure, are of equal importance in ensuring high performance level is in place (Campbell *et al.*, 1990). Both factors (i.e. personal and contextual) are dynamic in nature and complementarily compounding. Accordingly, literature (Campbell, 1990; Williams, 2002) has asserted that there are two major determinants of performance, which are “person factors” and “system factors”. The former refers to the motivation and ability that an individual has and it is determined solely by the criteria of an individual. “System factors”, on the other hand, are the aspects that the organizational environment has to offer, such as work design, organizational culture and so forth that may affect individual performance (Williams, 2002). Job characteristics are considered as the “system factors” that may influence employees’ behavioral outcome (Campbell, 1990; Williams, 2002). This is because the attractiveness of a job is an influential element in determining how much effort that an employee is willing to exert into his/her job functions.

The job characteristics theory by Hackman and Oldham (1975) posits that job characteristics are the systems or situational factors affecting the psychological and attitudinal condition of employees. The theory also posits that enriched and motivating

job design should allow employees to have the opportunity to use different skills and talents to perform tasks, associate or identify themselves closely with the task completed, feel empowered in performing the job through autonomy obtained from the job and get adequate feedback from the job done. Empirical evidences (Ang *et al.*, 2003; Chiu and Chen, 2005; Christen *et al.*, 2006; Dodd and Ganster, 1996; Grant, 2008; Langfred and Moye, 2004; Leach *et al.*, 2005; Morgeson *et al.*, 2005; Parker *et al.*, 2001; Parys, 2003; Thakor and Joshi, 2005; Van den Berg and Feij, 2003); Wood *et al.* (2012) have demonstrated a significant and direct influence of job characteristics on job performance. Importantly, Langfred and Moye (2004) asserted that mediating variable in the job characteristics theory is crucial in further articulating the theory. Nevertheless, it has been suggested that future studies can move beyond the motivational mechanism by incorporating other cognitive responses or positive attitudinal constructs (Fried and Ferris, 1987; Langfred and Moye, 2004). In light of these assertions, work involvement is integrated as a mediating factor in the hypothesized link between job characteristics and job performance. It is purported that enriched and complex jobs are associated with a higher level of work involvement. This state determines the incumbents' way of behaving that is reflected in their behavioural outcomes, such as job performance. Drawing on this, the main objective of this study is to analyse the influence of job characteristics on job performance and to explore the significance of work involvement as a plausible mediating variable between the job characteristics and job performance relationship.

Literature review

The conceptualization of job characteristics and its underlying theory

Based on the literature (Hackman and Oldham, 1975; 1980), the first version of job characteristics definition and measurement was broad. According to Morgeson and Campion (2003), the earliest concept of the job characteristics dimensions was introduced by Turner and Lawrence (1965), which included the aspects of dealing with others and friendship opportunities. However, these two dimensions were later omitted because they are not centrally related to the job characteristics construct and too vague to be operationalised as part of job design (Morgeson and Campion, 2003). Basically, the job characteristics theory by Hackman and Oldham (1975) posits that enriched and motivating job characteristics would bring about positive cognitive, psychological and emotional conditions to the job incumbent. The theory also purports that a positive cognitive state would result in a positive affective or attitudinal state, such as job satisfaction, motivation and affective commitment (Hackman and Oldham, 1975). Ultimately, positive affective and attitudinal condition promotes desirable workplace behaviour, such as a high level of job performance.

The job characteristics theory (Hackman and Oldham, 1975) also proposes that job characteristics could improve the motivational level of employee by developing three psychological conditions, which are meaningfulness of work, responsibility and feedback or knowledge of outcomes. Meaningfulness of work is considered as the main source for intrinsic motivation that can be achieved when a job allows employees to use a variety of skills in performing the job. Task identity, which concerns the ability to identify with the work at hand as more holistic and complete, would result in more pride in the outcome of the job that a particular has performed. Another factor to ensure the state of meaningfulness of work is task significance, which is highly associated with the

identification of the job done as something big for the organization (Hackman and Lawler, 1971; Hackman and Oldham, 1975). Additionally, responsibility, which is derived from autonomy, suggests that adequate freedom of self-decision would ensure incumbents' success at work. Feedback, which is the knowledge of job outcomes, such as the production figures and customer satisfaction scores, offers information that once employees know. Hence, they can use the input that they get to make changes to their work process as they wish to improve their performance level from time to time (Hackman and Lawler, 1971; Hackman and Oldham, 1975; 1980).

According to Hackman and Oldham (1975), the three psychological states are the conditions that incumbents experienced based on the perceptions that they have towards their job. Employees will experience the meaningfulness of job if they perceive it as valuable, worthwhile or important, consistent with the systems or values that they are acceptable to them. Incumbents would experience personal responsibilities if the job provides the feeling of accountability for the outcomes of work that they performed. Importantly, all three psychological states must be experienced by an incumbent for positive behavioural outcomes to transpire (Hackman and Oldham, 1975; Ghosh *et al.*, 2015). Nevertheless, job characteristics factors would yield positive results only when certain conditions are met. First, incumbents must have the psychological need for enriched jobs, whereby variety, responsibility and challenges are highly embedded in the job. Incumbents are also unlikely to experience positive condition if they perceive enriched jobs unfavourably. Second, incumbents resist enriched jobs if they have limited physical or mental skills, abilities or knowledge to perform the job. In essence, desirable workplace results are hardly achievable if enriched jobs are forced on people who are lacked of the necessary traits and knowledge, skill, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs) to perform the assigned job (Dunham, 1977; Hackman and Oldham, 1975; Bacha, 2014). Furthermore, the theory also proposes that the job characteristics and outcomes link is moderated by growth-need-strength (GNS). It is presumed that incumbents perceive enriched job favourably if they have a high level of GNS, and vice versa (Brief and Aldag, 1975). In other words, job characteristics factor works best only if incumbents aspire for self-growth and challenging job.

The conceptual background of work involvement

Work involvement has been defined as the extent to which employees are normally interested in, identified with, and are preoccupied with their work in relative to other aspects of their life (Kanungo, 1982a). In terms of motivational approach, the concepts of alienation and involvement are viewed as opposite ends of a continuum of the same phenomenon (Kanungo, 1982b). This state is considered as an attitudinal condition that reflects the one-dimensional cognitive response of an individual employee. Although work involvement and job involvement are two distinct constructs, the terms have been used interchangeably, resulting in confusion in the literature on their actual definition (Kanungo, 1982a). As such, it is crucial to clearly distinguish the two constructs.

Work involvement is also a normative belief about the value of work in an incumbent's life and this attitudinal state is a result of his or her previous cultural and socialization activities (Kanungo, 1982a). Based on Rottenbery and Moberg (2007), the work involvement concept can be used in assessing employees' level of involvement across jobs, while job involvement is limited to a specific job. In fact, the job involvement construct should be operationalized based on the type of occupation that respondents

have in a particular study (Rotenberry and Moberg, 2007). This is supported by a causal model tested by Elloy and Terpening (1992), which demonstrates that there is a distinction between the said constructs based on the data collected. Given the conceptual assertion and empirical evidence, it can be summed up that job involvement and work involvement are two distinct constructs.

Based on the conceptualizations, Kanungo (1979, 1982a) asserted that studies should place more emphasis on work involvement rather than job involvement because the former is an attitudinal state that employees consistently have from one job situation to another. Furthermore, according to Campbell (1990), Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), Hackman and Oldham (1975), Kanungo (1979, 1982a), Motowidlo (2003), Organ (1988a), attitudinal state is theorized as the main antecedent to various behavioral outcomes. This is based on the notion that employees who are highly involved in their work would put forth an extra amount of effort to achieve organizational objective (Rotenberry and Moberg, 2007). By doing so, highly involved employees would be more likely to engage in productive work activities, resulting in improvement of job performance level. This is reflected through desirable behaviours at work, such as efficient performance of task-related aspects and high levels of engagement in organizational citizenship behavior (Kanungo, 1982a; Motowidlo, 2003; Organ, 1988a; Rotenberry and Moberg, 2007).

There is a constant debate and equivocal results as to whether person or situational factors have a stronger link to work involvement. Although Carmeli (2005) and Carmeli and Freund (2004) reported on the equal importance of person and situational factors in explaining work involvement, Newton and Keenan's (1983) empirical study demonstrates that work involvement is not attributed to a person factor. In fact, work involvement is an attitudinal condition that is highly dependent upon the work environment, not personality traits that exist naturally in one's life. On the same note, the empirical findings by Bozionelos (2004) reported that personality traits are weakly associated with work involvement. Based on the findings, Bozionelos (2004) concluded that environmental factors related to organization and job better predict employee's work involvement. Furthermore, even though work involvement has been reported as a significant predictor of various workplace outcomes (Elloy and Terpening, 1992; Kanungo, 1982a; 1982b; 1990; Rotenberry and Moberg, 2007), there is limited empirical evidence on work involvement-behavioral outcomes association. In most instances, researchers seem to be more interested in testing other attitudinal conditions, such as motivation and commitment, as the antecedent to the behavioral outcomes because these factors have been widely used and theorized as strong predictors of job performance (Langfred and Moye, 2004). Given this theoretical gap, this study attempts to examine the mediating role of work involvement in the job characteristics and job performance link.

The conceptual foundation of job performance

Job performance is one of the most important criterion measures in the industrial and organizational psychology research (Borman, 2004a; Borman and Motowidlo, 1993, 1997; Organ, 1997). This is based on the fact that job performance has always been reported as a significant indicator of organizational performance, although it has been conceptualized in many different ways (Organ, 1997). According to Jex and Britt (2008), Motowidlo (2003), performance is oftentimes assessed in terms of financial figures and

through the combination of expected behaviour- and task-related aspects. Additionally, Schmitt and Chan (1998) categorized employee job performance into “can-do” and “will-do”. The former refers to the KSAOs that an individual has and must have in performing a certain job. “Will-do” reflects the motivation level of an employee in performing his or her work. Further, Cardy and Dobbins in Williams (2002) conceptualized job performance as work outcomes and job-relevant behaviours. Work outcomes deal with task performance, such as quality or quantity of work done, while job-relevant behaviour refers to the behavioural aspects useful in achieving task performance (Williams, 2002). In other words, job-relevant behaviours provide support in performing task-related matters. Most importantly, job performance measures, which may be based on an absolute value or a relative judgement, can be generalized to the overall organizational performance because, in total, it reflects the organizational performance to a certain extent (Jex and Britt, 2008; Sacket *et al.*, 2006; Wall *et al.*, 2004). Absolute value of performance is based on the objective results, such as total points from sales or productivity, while relative judgements are performance evaluation made based on the behavioural-related aspects that are very subjective in nature.

In relation to different conceptualizations of job performance, the main issue raised by scholars, such as Campbell *et al.* (1990) and Borman (2004a), is which employees’ behaviours at work constitute job performance. Traditionally, job performance is limited to the core task activities that were based solely on job analysis (Campbell, 1990; Jex and Britt, 2008). The construct has, however, expanded into behavioural aspects related directly to the core tasks and other behaviours that support the core task performance.

Scholars (Borman, 2004a; Borman and Motowidlo, 1993; Campbell, 1990; Jex and Britt, 2008; Motowidlo and Van Scotter, 1994) asserted that job performance should be measured in terms of task performance and contextual performance to fully grasp a holistic concept of the construct. This is because contextual performance is the behaviours that support the core task performance in enhancing organizational effectiveness (Motowidlo and Van Scotter, 1994). In essence, task performance is concerned with behaviours that are required to complete job tasks, while contextual performance is needed to safeguard and upgrade the organizational, social and psychological environment in the organization (Jex and Britt, 2008; LePine *et al.*, 2000; Van Dyne *et al.*, 1994; Van Scotter and Motowidlo, 1996). Both aspects of performance are crucial to achieve organizational objectives (Black and Porter, 1991; Jahangir *et al.*, 2004). Likewise, Vey and Campbell (2004), Fisher and Hartel (2004) asserted that in measuring job performance, it is important to integrate items on the task, as well as contextual performance because they are strongly related, and it is difficult to differentiate because behavioral aspects of job performance are very subjective. In fact, Johnson’s (2001) findings revealed that task and contextual performance contributed substantially in predicting overall job performance ratings. Borman and Motowidlo (1997) reported that when making overall job performance ratings, supervisors evaluated equally task and contextual performance in which the correlation between these dimensions with the overall job performance ratings were significant (i.e. $r = 0.43$, $p < 0.05$ and $r = 0.41$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that supervisory ratings are a function of task performance and contextual performance (Bolino *et al.*, 2002; Borman and Motowidlo, 1997; Bowler, 2006). In other words, both dimensions provide unique

variance to the job performance domain because supervisors evaluate and combine task and contextual items in appraising their subordinates' overall job performance.

Hypotheses of the study

Job characteristics and job performance

Hackman and Oldham (1975) theorized that a high motivation level is related to experiencing three psychological states whilst working, which are meaningfulness of work, responsibility and feedback or knowledge of outcomes. Empirical investigations (Ling and Toh, 2014; Wood *et al.*, 2012; Zhao and Ghiselli, 2016) have recapitulated that enriched and motivating job design provides employees the opportunity to use different skills and talents to perform tasks, associate or identify themselves closely with the task completed, feel empowered in performing the job through autonomy obtained from the job and get adequate feedback from the job done. In essence, enriched and complex jobs are associated with positive attitudinal outcomes. This state determines the incumbents' job performance. Taken together, it is hypothesized that job characteristics have a significant and positive influence on job performance among employees.

Skill variety and job performance

Skill variety is:

[...] the degree to which a job requires a variety of different activities in carrying out the work, which involves the use of a number of different skills and talents of the employee (Hackman and Oldham, 1975, p. 161).

This factor is considered as the main source for intrinsic motivation, in which positive work outcome can be achieved when a job allows employees to use a variety of skills in performing the job. Similarly, Ghosh *et al.* (2015), Krasman (2012), Sulea *et al.* (2012) reported that a job that allows employees to engage in different activities and to use various skills and talents will result in positive attitude and behavioral outcomes at work. In the context of public sector, public servants would feel that their job is meaningful if they have to use different set of skills in performing job, particularly in fulfilling the need of the various stakeholders. Hence, the meaningfulness of their job would enhance job performance among public servants because they believe that their job can make significant contributions to their respective agencies as well as to the society at large. Consistent with this rationale, it is theorized that:

H1. Skill variety exerts a positive influence on job performance.

Task identity and job performance

Task identity is "the degree to which the job requires completion of a 'whole' and identifiable piece of work – that is, doing a job from beginning to end with a visible outcome" (Hackman and Oldham, 1975, p. 161). This dimension concerns the ability to identify with the work at hand as more holistic and complete. Task wholeness increases the employees' sense of responsibility, ownership and control over work activities (Faturouchman, 1997). As task identity increases, employees are able to evaluate themselves in terms of the quality of work done. Uruthirapathy and Grant (2015) found that employees who have enlarged jobs and are involved in more tasks in their workflow are more likely to perform better than those who are not undergoing such work condition. As for public servants, their involvement in work activities would make them feel that their tasks are more meaningful to themselves and the

department they are attached. Public servants who are engaged in more stages in a certain workflow would feel that they have made greater contribution to fulfil the needs of the public service clientele. Hence, they would have more pride in the outcome of the job that they have performed. Taking all the above into consideration, it is posited that:

H2. Task identity exerts a positive influence on job performance.

Task significance and job performance

Task significance is “the degree to which the job has a substantial impact on the lives or work of other people - whether in the immediate organization or in the external environment” (Hackman and Oldham, 1975, p. 161). This factor promotes the state of meaningfulness of work in which it is highly associated with the identification of the job done as something big for the organization (Hackman and Lawler, 1971; Hackman and Oldham, 1975). Through the experienced meaningfulness at work, task significance yields positive employees’ attitude. As for the public servants, when they recognize that their work has an important impact on the organization’s ability to achieve its mission, vision, and established business goals, they will develop the feelings of social impact and social worth, particularly in the context of their present employment. In essence, public servants would consider that their jobs worthwhile if they believe that their role would make a positive impact on others in the respective department they are attached to as well as on the community at large. This notion is evident in findings reported by Hauff and Richter (2015), Hassan (2014), Krasman (2012). Hence, the following hypothesis is put forth:

H3. Task significance exerts a positive influence on job performance.

Autonomy and job performance

Autonomy is:

[...] the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the employee in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out (Hackman and Oldham, 1975, p. 162).

Responsibility is derived from autonomy. The theory purports that without being given enough freedom of self-decision, it is not possible for an incumbent to succeed (Hackman and Oldham, 1975; 1980). In the context of public sector, public servants who are granted high autonomy jobs perceive that they have bigger responsibilities in determining the outcomes at work. They also have discretion at deciding on how to go about in performing their work. Hassan (2014) reported that public servants put high value on autonomy rather than bureaucratic aspect, in carrying their duties and responsibilities. Hassan (2014), Krasman (2012) and Bontis *et al.* (2011), through their research, have reported that employees in high autonomy jobs will be more likely to develop positive feelings at work and this will result into desirable behaviours. As such, it is posited that:

H4. Autonomy exerts a positive influence on job performance.

Feedback and job performance

Feedback from the job itself is:

[...] the degree to which carrying out the work activities required by the job results in the employee obtaining direct and clear information about the effectiveness of his or her performance (Hackman and Oldham, 1975, p. 162).

Knowledge of the job outcomes offers information that once employees know, they may choose to do things differently if they wish to improve their performance from time to time (Hackman and Oldham, 1975; 1980). Importantly, they have become more aware of the quality of work expected of them. Bacha (2014), Ghosh *et al.* (2015) and Krasman (2012) reported in their findings that employees who obtained feedback from the work they have done are more likely to demonstrate positive attitude and behavior at work. In the context of public sector, employees normally gather feedback from various sources, such as supervisor, peers and customers, as well as the job itself. Different sources of feedback provide useful information on the effectiveness of their own performance. Based on the feedback received, public servants would be more aware and responsive on their roles and its impact on the public sector and greater society. Therefore, they will exert more efforts to enhance their job performance. Having said that, it is purported that:

H5. Feedback exerts a positive influence on job performance.

The mediating role of work involvement

This study posits that work involvement significantly mediates the job characteristics and job performance relationships. The Job characteristics theory by Hackman and Oldham (1975) demonstrates that job characteristics lead to a certain cognitive or psychological state, followed by a job-relevant attitude and behaviour, depending on the level of meaningfulness, responsibilities and knowledge of feedback. Rotenberry and Moberg (2007), for instance, reported that employees who are highly involved in their work will put forth an extra amount of effort to achieve organizational objective. Similarly, Hassan (2014) concurred that work involvement is a function of the design of public servants' jobs. In essence, public servants tend to become more involved in their work when they feel that their work is important, they are required to use various skills in performing challenging tasks, they are involved in most of the work activities related to their job, they received feedback on a periodic basis about their work objectives and performance level and they have adequate autonomy in performing their work activities. In other words, public servants would be highly involved in their work if they perceive their job is meaningful and worthwhile. In similar vein, Edwards *et al.* (2008), Hassan (2014), Hechanova *et al.* (2006), Hunter and Thatcher (2007), Wood *et al.* (2012) reported a significant mediating role of attitudinal aspects in predicting job performance. As such, the following hypotheses are put forth:

- H6a.* Work involvement mediates the relationship between skill variety and job performance.
- H6b.* Work involvement mediates the relationship between task identity and job performance.
- H6c.* Work involvement mediates the relationship between task significance and job performance.
- H6d.* Work involvement mediates the relationship between autonomy and job performance.
- H6e.* Work involvement mediates the relationship between feedback and job performance.

Building upon the literature review, this study proposes a theoretical model that merges job characteristics, work involvement and job performance. A complete description of the model is shown in Figure 1. Specifically, the job characteristics dimensions are integrated as the predictors of job performance, and the association is theorized to be mediated by work involvement.

Methodology

Sampling, procedures and measure

In the initial stage of data collection, letters asking for permission to conduct a survey was sent to each human resource department of the public service agencies in Peninsular Malaysia. In the letter, the research objectives and methodology of this study were briefly explained. Only nine agencies responded and indicated their willingness to participate in the survey. Based on the number of agencies responded, this study used a stratified sampling method. After the population was stratified, a certain percentage of respondents were drawn out from each stratum. In this case, the percentage extracted from each stratum was 7 per cent, based on the value of the total number of subjects in each stratum divided by the total number of elements in each stratum (i.e. 381 divided by 5,473). However, the number of respondents in some stratum was considered small, for instance, Agency C, which consisted of only 93 staff, as compared to the Agency I with a total of 1,378 staff. Hence, disproportionate sampling was used to ensure an adequate number of respondents to represent each department and agency. Table I provides details of the disproportionate stratified sampling of the respondents.

Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to public servants in the respective agencies and they were asked to respond to the items by indicating their level of agreement using a seven-point Likert scale (i.e. 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The questionnaires encompass of items measuring job characteristics, work involvement and job performance. After two weeks, questionnaires were distributed, reminders were sent via email to the respondents from the respective agencies.

The job diagnostic survey (JDS) by Hackman and Oldham (1975) was used to measure job characteristics. A total of 15 items were used to evaluate the job characteristics construct. Skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback

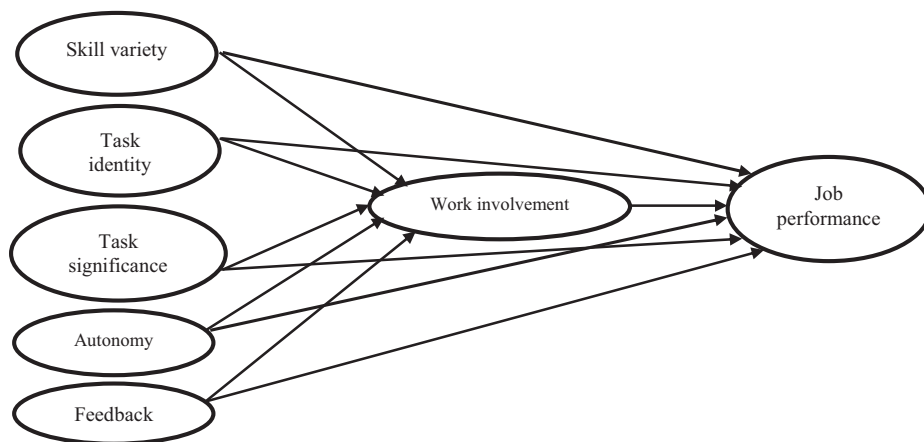


Figure 1.
The research model

feedback were gauged by three items. Sample items are “this job is quite difficult and it involves no repetitiveness”, “this job is arranged so that I can do an entire piece of work from beginning to the end”, “this job itself is very significant and important in the broader scheme of things” and “the job gives me the chance to use my personal initiative and judgment in carrying out work”. Work involvement is a one-dimensional construct measured by five items, which were adopted from Kanungo (1982b, 1990). Sample items for work involvement are “Doing my job well gives me the feeling that I have accomplished something worthwhile” and “In my job, I am willing to put a great deal of effort beyond what is normally expected”.

This study used a supervisory rating of job performance. There were two dimensions of job performance construct: task and contextual performance. Task performance was measured by seven items adapted from Williams and Anderson (1991), while 18 items adapted from Morrison and Phelps (1999), Podsakoff *et al.* (1990) and Van Dyne and Le Pine (1998) were used to gauge contextual performance among respondents. Sample items for this supervisory ratings measure include “He/she neglects aspects of the job that he/she is obliged to perform”, “He/she keeps up to date with changes in the organization” and “He/she tries to adopt the improved procedures for this department”. A total of 381 questionnaires were distributed and 268 were returned. However, only 256 questionnaires were usable for data analysis.

Results

Demographic profiles of the respondents

The sample comprised 61.70 per cent male and 38.30 per cent female. The majority of respondents, i.e. 55.08 per cent, were below 30 years, while 7.42 per cent were above 50 years. Given the fact that Malaysian public service agencies were predominantly Malay-populated, 98.4 per cent of the respondents were Malays. Only 1.2 and 0.4 per cent were Chinese and Indian, respectively. The majority of respondents, 56.7 per cent were secondary-school certificate holders and 29.30 per cent were diploma holders. The rest of the respondents or 13.7 per cent were bachelor and master’s degree holders. A total of 72.2 per cent of the respondents had worked in the organization for less than 10 years, while 27.80 per cent had worked for more than 10 years. A total of 210 respondents or 83 per cent had been in the current job position for less than 10 years, while the rest were more than 10 years. Finally, a vast majority of the respondents or 94.90 per cent were support staffs and only 5.10 per cent were professional and management staff.

No.	Stratum by agency	No. of elements in stratum	No. of subjects in sample
1.	Agency A	866	61
2.	Agency B	429	30
3.	Agency C	93	30
4.	Agency D	894	62
5.	Agency E	433	30
6.	Agency F	619	43
7.	Agency G	280	31
8.	Agency H	481	34
9.	Agency I	1378	60
	Total	5473	381

Table I.
Disproportionate
stratified sampling of
the respondents

Reliability and validity analyses

The results of the internal consistency reliability are depicted in Table II. The Cronbach's alpha values range from 0.795 to 0.938. Hair *et al.* (2006) suggested that 0.60 to 0.70 to be in the lower limit of acceptability. Based on the results, all of the dimensions have an acceptable value of internal consistency reliability (i.e. above 0.60).

Convergent validity was examined by observing the values of composite or construct reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE). As noted by Hair *et al.* (2006), the threshold value for CR should be at least 0.60. The CR value that is lower than 0.6 indicates that the items do not consistently measure the hypothesized latent factor (Hair *et al.*, 2006). CR is calculated by dividing the squared sum of factor loadings by the squared sum of the factor loadings plus the sum of the error variance. AVE should be at least 0.5 and the value was computed by dividing the total of all squared standardized factor loadings, i.e. squared multiple correlations, by the number of items. The value of AVE smaller than 0.50 indicates that more error remains in the items than the variance explained by the latent factor structure imposed on the measure. Convergent validity is established based on the values of composite reliability and average variance extracted for all the variables. Specifically, all of the values are above the cut-off point of 0.60 for composite reliability and 0.50 for average variance extracted. The values lend support for convergent validity of all the items in each factor. Table III illustrates the calculated composite reliability and variance extracted for each latent construct.

Measurement models

The results for all measurement models were based on the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and root mean square residual (RMR) for model fit, the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) and the Comparative index (CFI) for model comparison and Normed Chi-Square (NC) for model parsimony (Schumacker and Lomax, 2004). The

Variables	Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's alpha
Skill variety	3	4.883	0.258	0.818
Task identity	3	5.072	0.059	0.839
Task significance	3	5.131	0.043	0.795
Autonomy	3	4.448	0.037	0.860
Feedback	3	5.291	0.195	0.840
Work involvement	5	5.717	0.006	0.938
Job performance	25	5.523	0.099	0.913

Table II.
Reliability of the
measures

Variables	Composite reliability	AVE
Skill variety	0.788	0.652
Task identity	0.843	0.729
Task significance	0.801	0.664
Autonomy	0.833	0.788
Feedback	0.836	0.757
Work involvement	0.944	0.773
Job performance	0.832	0.713

Table III.
Composite reliability
and average variance
extracted

cut-off values are 0.90 or higher for CFI and TLI (Byrne, 2001; Kline, 2005; Schumacker and Lomax, 2004), 0.08 or lower for RMSEA and 0.10 or lower for RMR (Byrne, 2001; Kline, 2005; Schumacker and Lomax, 2004). As depicted in Table IV, all measurement models achieved the acceptable model fit criterion.

Structural equation modelling

Based on Hair *et al.* (2006), MacKinnon *et al.* (2007), MacKinnon (2008), Maruyama (1998), the plausible mediating role of work involvement was tested by examining the structural model fit and significance level of all paths in the model. The hypothesized structural model revealed that the chi-square statistics were significant at $p < 0.05$ ($\chi^2/df = 1.939$, $\chi^2 = 331.537$, $df = 171$). The structural equation modelling also indicated that path coefficient estimates of task significance ($\beta = 0.154$, $t = 2.026$, $p < 0.05$) and feedback ($\beta = 0.670$, $t = 6.223$, $p < 0.05$) had a significant influence on work involvement. In other words, work involvement is a mediating factor for the relationships between task significance and job performance, as well as feedback and job performance (Table V). The results from the hypothesized structural model also indicated that 61.5 per cent of the variance in employees' work involvement was accounted for by dimensions in the job characteristics factors. Further, the percentage of variance that explained job performance was only 16.60 per cent, which were five dimensions in job characteristics construct, mediated by public servants' work involvement.

Table VI shows the standardized estimates of indirect and direct paths to test the mediating effect of work involvement on all of the relationships as hypothesized. Following Hair *et al.* (2006), MacKinnon (2008), MacKinnon *et al.* (2007), Maruyama (1998), the mediating effect tests were conducted by examining the significance level of the direct and indirect paths. The values of the standardized estimates of indirect effect, direct effect and total effect of the significant paths were then examined to identify the mediating level (Hair *et al.*, 2006; MacKinnon, 2008; MacKinnon *et al.*, 2007; Maruyama, 1998).

Table IV.
Model-fit statistics
for measurement
models

Measurement model	df	χ^2	p	NC	RMSEA	RMR	TLI	CFI
Job characteristics	34	44.028	0.116	1.295	0.034	0.036	0.988	0.993
Work involvement	3	6.387	0.094	2.129	0.067	0.012	0.991	0.997
Job performance	9	12.484	0.187	1.387	0.039	0.011	0.991	0.987
Overall measurement model	320	600.696	0.000	1.877	0.059	0.057	0.918	0.936

Table V.
Results of mediating
tests in the structural
model

Independent variable	Mediator	Dependent variable	β -weight	t -value
Skill variety	Work involvement	Job performance	0.002	0.003
Task identity	Work involvement	Job performance	0.013	0.858
Task significance	Work involvement	Job performance	0.154*	2.026
Autonomy	Work involvement	Job performance	0.018	0.422
Feedback	Work involvement	Job performance	0.670*	6.233

Note: * $p < 0.05$

It was found that the indirect effect estimates for task significance and feedback were significant ($p < 0.05$). Standardized direct estimates for feedback and task significance were found to be not significant, indicating full mediation of work involvement in predicting job performance. Skill variety showed significant standardized estimates of direct effects, lending the evidence of non-mediation. This indicates that work involvement was not a mediator for skill variety and job performance link. However, there is a direct and significant influence of skill variety on job performance. Figure 2 presents the results of the structural model analysis.

Recapitulation of research findings and discussions

The results reported that task significance and feedback have significantly influenced work involvement, which in turn impacted job performance of the public servants in this study. Interestingly, there is a direct link between skill variety and job performance of public servants. The results, however, failed to substantiate the influence of task identity and autonomy on job performance among public servants.

Since the early 1980s, Malaysians have been introduced to various policies such as Look East Policy, the Privatisation Programme, Clean, Efficient and Trustworthy

Independent variable	Mediator	Dependent variable	Indirect effect	Direct effect	Total effect	Mediating status
Skill variety	Work involvement	Job performance	0.007	0.074	0.081	No mediation
Task identity	Work involvement	Job performance	-0.001	-0.011	-0.011	Notsignificant
Task significance	Work involvement	Job performance	0.029	0.014	0.042	Fully mediating
Autonomy	Work involvement	Job performance	0.004	-0.023	-0.019	Notsignificant
Feedback	Work involvement	Job performance	0.084	-0.045	0.039	Fully mediating

Table VI.
Standardized indirect, direct and total effect estimates of the variables interactions

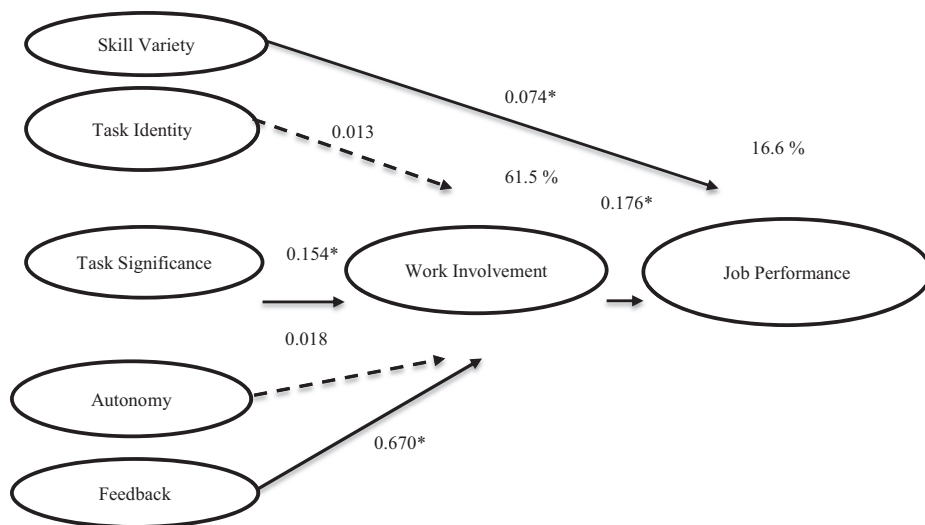


Figure 2.
Results of the structural model analysis

Government, New Development Policy, Key Performance Indicators System and Government Transformation Programme (GTP). All of these policies and programs were implemented to encourage public servants to embrace good management philosophy. They are required to be efficient, productive, ethical and diligent in their jobs to serve various stakeholders. Through numerous campaigns and development programs, public servants recognize that their work has an important impact on the organization's ability to achieve its mission, vision and established business goals. Such development programs also managed to create awareness among public servants that their roles and responsibilities in the agencies would make a substantial impact on the respective community. Hence, they become more concerned about the quality of output and how well certain tasks are performed.

It is evident that a multitude of efforts in terms of reform programs have been undertaken by the Malaysian Government since the early 1980s to create values and to transform the public sector into a more dynamic, customer-driven and result-oriented administration. The public service departments and agencies also are required to design and implement key performance indicators to measure performance. In the New Performance Appraisal Systems (NPAS), which was introduced in 1993, annual work targets are set for each employees and mid-year review will be given so that public servants are aware of their performance level. Furthermore, since 2009, the implementation of GTP requires periodic assessment to be performed in each quarter to ensure that public servants are more cognisant of their performance standards (Siddiquee, 2014). According to Wright and Davis (2003), this is crucial for public servants to improve their quality of work and service delivery. Importantly, transformation programs developed by the government to enhance public service performance and delivery have provided public servants with the necessary information related to their own performance. These feedbacks, which are gathered from their clients, superiors, peers or their own jobs, are key in ensuring the effectiveness of performance and results-based management in the public sector.

The transformation of public sector in Malaysia as the main service provider in the nation has inevitably increased the roles and responsibilities of the public servants. The NPAS was introduced in 1993 to focus highly on the knowledge and skills of Malaysian public servants. This is in line with the government aspiration to transform service delivery system of the public sector in which public servants are expected to be more flexible, effective and efficient at work. This can be achieved by acquiring different skills through training and development programs and capitalizing on those skills and competencies to fulfil the need of various stakeholders. To further improve the public servants' scheme, Malaysian Remuneration System was introduced in 2002 to help support the government vision of knowledge economy and lifelong learning. This system put strong emphasis on the capabilities of public servants because their salary increment and career development are tied to the competency assessments. Hence, public servants are strongly encouraged to attend training and development programs in order to garner more knowledge and skills relevant to their job scope and most importantly to be excellent at work.

Public servants in Malaysia are mostly complacent with their present position because of employment security that the sector offers. In most instances, public servants, particularly in the support group, are not given enlarged jobs and hence, they are less likely to experience enriched and challenging work. Further, there is no serious

penalty apply if they are lagging behind in achieving the key performance indicators. This is because the rules and policies on firing and punishing in the public sector are very much complex to be implemented, resulting in the failure among indolent public servants to achieve the targeted results. According to Siddiquee (2010), the development of competencies and skills as well as reshaping of work attitude and habits of the public servants are of paramount importance in result-based management in the Malaysian public sector. The government should pay closer attention in changing the behavior and attitude of public servants as they are the powerful source in realizing the government aspiration to catapult its service delivery performance standard. On this note, continuous efforts, particularly in terms of human resource development, are deemed crucial to increase competencies of the public servants to expedite excellent service delivery of the public sector in the country.

Generally, the public sector has specified job descriptions, work standardizations and procedures for all jobs. This practice, to a certain extent, restricts public servants' autonomy and discretion in deciding on how to do their jobs (Bozeman, 2000; Denhardt, 2000; Moynihan and Pandey, 2007). Nevertheless, public servants in Malaysia, particularly those in the support group, are accustomed to such practices. This is because they are often considered as the traditionalists, who are loyal and fully accept the existing rules and values in the system. In fact, they would always defend the traditional systems and virtues in the public sector (Berg, 2006). In such a high-power distance culture setting, most decisions are left up to the superiors and this situation continues to persist in the public sector in Malaysia. This is supported by Siddiquee (2014), who stated that public sector in Malaysia remains as centralized as before, in which the structure and operational processes are still bureaucratic and unchanged, despite various transformations being made. Having said that, it is apparent that there is a need to devise more robust job descriptions, which put stronger emphasis on job autonomy, across all positions in the public service. Such transformation, would send a clear message to all public servants that managers at various levels in the public sector provide strong and continued support in improving cultural and result-orientation, eschewing the bureaucratic influences. Importantly, the development of capacity and skills of public servants, who are granted additional autonomy, are more likely to occur when they believe that adequate support is given by the top administrative leaders.

Implications, limitations, recommendations for future research and conclusion

Job characteristics are particularly important at the individual level because each of its dimension has a strong influence on various attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. Theoretically, this study provides additional empirical evidence in the domain of the job characteristics theory. In terms of practical ramifications, human resource practitioners in the public sector should focus on developing a more enriching and fulfilling type of job with high levels of skill variety, task significance and feedback. This could be a useful basis so as to enhance public servants' work involvement as well as job performance.

Two main caveats related to the generalizability of the results are worth noting. First, the vast majority of respondents are support staff in the public service. This limits the generalizability of the findings to other group of public servants, such as management and professional staff. The second caveat relates to the nature of this research which is

cross-sectional. This limits the ability to establish causal relationships of all the variables under study.

This study has also paved several directions for future research. First, a longitudinal study would be of greater value to infer causal associations of job characteristics and job performance of public servants. Second, it would also be more meaningful to gather responses from the management and professional groups in the public sector. Third, the theoretical model of this study should be replicated in other settings, such as the private sector, particularly in the manufacturing and service industries.

The framework offered in this study is of value in two important ways. First, it contributes to theorizing on the predicting role of job characteristics in determining job performance among public servants. Second, it contributes to the empirical evidence in the domain of the respective variables under study, as it analyses the impact of work involvement in the hypothesized linkage between job characteristics and job performance.

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