Abstract
The research aim is to discover the meaning of work to employees, how central work is in their lives, their perceived level of motivation at work and factors that would increase their motivation level. The centrality of work is compared against other factors such as leisure, community, religion and family. The factors representing the meaning of work include: (1) work provides needed income; (2) working is interesting and satisfying; (3) working gives opportunity to meet and socialize with other people; (4) working is a useful way to serve society; (5) working gives status, prestige and respect; (6) working is a religious or spiritual obligation; (7) working to stay occupied. The research method used is a quantitative questionnaire distributed to employees, both academics and non-academics at INTI International University. The research concludes that work is of averagely centrality to employees and that their primary motivation to work is to earn an income. The implication of this is that money is a motivator (which contradicts Herzberg’s Two Factor Theory which says that money is not a motivator) and as such, the organisation should thus provide adequate compensation and reward as a means of motivating employees. According to Moncrief (2010), managers may apply to encouraging their employees by monetary awards when they act in the way expected from them. The effect of such awards is still limited like other motivating tools and they may be useless or even become a damaging factor in the case that they are not used carefully and in a fair manner or not individualized sufficiently. The function of economic awarding used by many enterprises today in various ways in motivating people cannot be denied. However it is seen that appeal to the motivating economic tools and expecting from them more than needed does not seem to result in success very much. Therefore, in planning rewarding, encouraging economic tools should be employed in accordance with employees’ needs. In fact, there are ways of increasing employees’ work motivation and satisfaction other than monetary tools.

Keywords: Meaning of work, employee motivation, work centrality, culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

Working people spend a large chunk of their time at work; either prepare for it, doing it, or resting from it. For most people, the meaning of work is tied to economic necessity (Deresky, 2006), which is tied to the fulfillment of basic needs, hence explaining why people spend so much time on it. However, beyond economic needs, work may also provide a sense of identity (Ghidina, 1992). In a social setting, who you are may be defined by what work you do. Furthermore, the amount of respect accorded to you may correspond to the perceived level of your work status. Therefore, work may mean a lot to people, not just because it provides an avenue for meeting certain basic needs, but also because ultimately, work may define for us our self-identity.

One of the main areas of our life where motivation becomes a subject of contention and confusion is the workplace. It often starts with the numbers. Profits are down and a company looks internally for the cause. Upper management gets leaned on and squeezes middle management who then pressures lower management who in turn accuse employees of not
having enough motivation. The solution is usually a motivational seminar, workshop, or other program to get everyone fired up and back up to peak performance (Voris, 2009).

This paper researches the meaning of work and its centrality to the lives of working people in a private higher educational institution in Malaysia. The research concept is derived from the Meaning of Work (MOW) Research Program conducted by George England and his MOW International Research Team that studied this topic in countries such as Japan, USA, Germany, Belgium, Britain and many others (MOW, 2007; Deresky, 2006). No such study has been done for MOW for Malaysia as yet.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Humans in all countries and societies engage in work; however, what work means may differ based on certain cultural characteristics. For example, applying Hofstede’s model of cultural dimensions (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), people from cultures of higher uncertainty avoidance may be motivated by work that give them job security, whereas those from lower uncertainty avoidance may be more interested in a fast track career and opportunity for speedy advancement and promotion. Job security satisfies the need for a stable and predictable environment whereas fast track career carries more risk and instability.

Further generalisations of Hofstede’s model with regards to work and motivation include the following (Deresky, 2006):

- People from higher power distance are likely to be more motivated by the maintenance of a clearly demarked boss-subordinate relationship whereas those from lower power distance may be more motivated by equal relationships with peers and managers. Thus people from higher power distance tend to be more accepting and less rebelling of clear and authoritarian directives given by management whereas those from lower power distance are more likely to challenge unilateral instructions from the leaders, especially if those directions are deemed unreasonable.

- People from a more individualistic culture may be more motivated by opportunities for individual advancement and autonomy, whereas those from a more collectivistic culture may be more motivated by group support and involvement. Therefore, individualistic cultures are more accepting of competition among peers for promotion and the individual bonuses whereas collectivistic cultures would prefer group reward where everyone would get the same amount of bonus.

- People from a masculine culture are likely to be more comfortable with the traditional division of work and gender roles but those from feminine cultures are comfortable with blurred boundaries of work and gender roles. A highly masculine culture such as Japan, for example, has clear gender roles between men and women as exemplified by the following statement made by the wife of the former Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto (Jordan, 1996): “I don’t interfere with my husband’s business, not with my mouth, hands or legs.” Of course, culture changes with time and in today’s Japan, there is an emergence of a class of young, educated and professional women who prefer to remain single in order to preserve their freedom (Mullen, 1998).

Clearly, work is tied to the concept of motivation. What motivates people to work? According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs model (Maslow, 1968), humans are motivated to fulfill five levels of
needs: basic or physiological needs, safety needs, social needs, esteem needs and self-actualisation needs. Therefore, people work to strive to fulfill these needs. For example, people work to earn income to be able to have basic necessities such as food and have a place to stay. People work to have a sense of security, knowing that at the end of each month they will receive their salary that will enable them to live as securely as before. Some people may enjoy working because it provides them a social environment where they could network and deal with other people. In so doing, their social needs are fulfilled. People's esteem needs may be fulfilled when they receive respect and recognition for their work; and for some very lucky people, their self-actualisation needs may be met by them doing work that they really enjoy and excel at.

Another well-known theory on motivation, namely, Herzberg’s Two-Factor Theory (Herzberg, 1987) proposes that only motivators will motivate employees at work whereas hygiene factors do not motivate but must be present to avoid job dissatisfaction. It is worth noting that according to Herzberg’s theory, extrinsic factors such as salary and relationship with supervisor or leader are not considered as motivating but merely hygienic, that is, must be present but do not lead to increased motivation at work. Our research, to be discussed later, will point toward a different conclusion than Herzberg.

The MOW research program led by George England studies the importance of work in relation to other factors such as leisure, community, religion and family. This concept is called “work centrality” and it is defined as the degree of general importance that working has in the life of an individual at any given point in time (cited by Deresky, 2006). The MOW research finds that the Japanese has the highest score in work centrality. This means that working is very much at the centre of a typical Japanese (man)'s life.

In addition, the MOW research also found that people from the countries that were studied generally value work for the following reasons:

- Work provides a needed income
- Work is interesting and satisfying
- Work provides contacts with others
- Work facilitates a way to serve society
- Work keeps one occupied
- Work gives status and prestige

Elements of MOW research findings do match Maslow's theory. For example, as noted earlier, working for a needed income may be equated to fulfilling basic needs because money earned from work is used to buy food and pay for shelter. Interesting and satisfying work would fulfill the need for self-actualisation. Work providing contacts with others corresponds to Maslow’s social needs. Work giving status and prestige could refer to esteem needs.

This paper uses MOW research factors in studying the meaning of work and the level of employee motivation in a private higher educational institution in Malaysia. There is one additional factor included in this paper which is absent from the MOW research, and that is viewing work as a spiritual or religious responsibility. This factor is added in for this paper due to the fact that the Malaysian culture is openly influenced by spiritual and religious beliefs. Therefore, it is deemed appropriate to acknowledge and include the factor into this research.
This research is conducted at INTI International University (IIU) in Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia. The population for the research is full-time employees of IIU. As of August 2010, the total number of full-time staff is 620 of which 331 is administrative staff and 289 academic staff. The sample size for the research is 40% of the population and thus 250 questionnaires were distributed to all faculties and support departments. The questionnaire is written in both English and Bahasa Melayu to ensure that lower level employees would understand the content and be able to respond with reasonable accuracy. 187 responses were received, which represents 75% of the sample. The sampling was done on a convenience non-random sampling basis.

This research covers four areas:
1. Work centrality
2. Meaning of work
3. Work motivation level
4. Work motivation factors

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 Respondent profile
Demographically, the majority of respondents are female (61%), have college or university degree (80%), Indian (41.7%), between 30-39 years old (49.7%), married with children (55.1%), work as academic staff (62%), have a total working experience of between 6-10 years (44.9%) and earn an average monthly salary of between RM1,000-RM3,000 (53.5%).

The research finding indicate that the majority of respondents are academic staff and that their salaries are between RM1,000 – RM3,000 per month. This amount is rather low and although this research did not set out to study the salary paid to employees in this particular institution, this is one surprising finding of the research.

4.2 Work centrality
The research found that work is not highly central to the population of this research. In fact, family and religion are placed higher in the centrality ranking as evidenced in Table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking of centrality</th>
<th>Rating (highest=5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Family (spending time with and building the family)</td>
<td>4.1872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Religion (spending time on religious or spiritual pursuit)</td>
<td>3.9358</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Work (spending time working at gainful employment)</td>
<td>3.7754</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Community (serving the community or society)</td>
<td>3.5829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Leisure (having free time to spend at leisure)</td>
<td>3.5615</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This seems to infer that while work is important, it is of lesser importance compared to family and religion. This corresponds to and supports the concept that Malaysia is a collectivistic society where family and group belongingness is considered very important to the people in the society.

In addition, the importance accorded to religion and spiritual pursuit supports the notion that Malaysia is a feminine culture where spirituality and quality of life are deemed of more value than materialism and quantity of life.

Serving the community is deemed of lesser importance compared to family, religion and work. Perhaps, while Malaysia is a collectivistic society in general, people may still be more focused on their immediate environment, as represented by family, religion and work. There may also be another possible interpretation, and that is “family” is an extended concept that includes immediate family, relatives and neighbours living in the tribe, village or locality. As such, the concept of serving the community in this research may be seen as part of building the family, which already occupies first place importance in the centrality ranking.

It is worth noting that leisure is at the bottom of the ranking. This could imply that free time for self is really of the least importance to the respondents. In fact, one respondent actually stated that whatever free time she has, she would rather spend it with her family or fulfilling her religious duties. This may also mean that the concept of having leisure time is equated to the concept of not working, and in general, someone who does not work may be seen as unproductive, even a lazy member of the society, and thus is frowned upon. Therefore, to rank leisure time as important may be anathema to the respondents coming from a culture that value productive members of the society.

4.3 Meaning of Work
Meaning of work relates to reasons why people work. The reasons why people work thereon relate to the concept of work motivation. The research findings for the meaning of work are as in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking of importance of meaning of work</th>
<th>Rating (highest=5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1  Working provides needed income</td>
<td>4.1872</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2  Working keeps one occupied</td>
<td>3.8503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3  Working provides an opportunity to meet and socialize with other people</td>
<td>3.8449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4  Working is interesting and satisfying</td>
<td>3.7647</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5  Working gives one status, prestige and respect</td>
<td>3.7807</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6  Working is a useful way to serve society</td>
<td>3.5294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7  Working is a religious or spiritual obligation</td>
<td>3.3155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research confirms that working to gain needed income is the main reason why people work. This lends support to our earlier assertion that people work firstly to fulfill their basic needs. An extrapolation may also be made that salary, therefore, is a motivating factor for the respondents. This would thus contradict Herzberg’s theory that salary is not a motivator. Perhaps in wealthier
countries, salary is not a motivator because the workers may already have good salaries; in poorer countries, salary is likely a motivator probably because of the low pay the workers may be getting. From the respondent profile of this research, it is noted that the respondent’s average monthly salary is rather low. This may strengthen the explanation as to why “working provides needed income” is rated the highest as a meaning of work in this research.

Working keeps one occupied is ranked second as a meaning of work. This is perhaps related to the concept of leisure discussed earlier; that being occupied doing something productive is seen as desirable.

Working provides an opportunity to meet and socialize with other people is third as a meaning of work. Again, this reflects the people-orientation, collectivistic nature of the culture of the respondents.

Interestingly enough, working as a religious or spiritual obligation is rated last in the meaning of work. There seems a disconnect between what work means and spiritual responsibility, although earlier the respondents put religion as being more important than work in the centrality ranking. Could this mean that the respondents clearly divide time to work and time to pursue religious or spiritual responsibility? This paper does not profess to know the real answer to this issue; perhaps the actual religions of the respondents may play a role in how they view work and spiritual responsibility.

4.4 Work Motivation Level
The research also aimed at identifying the actual level of work motivation of the respondents in their current jobs. It is found that the level of motivation of the respondents in their current work is average (rating=3.9412). This means that they are neither unmotivated nor highly motivated. While this is not bad news, neither is it good news. Certainly, it is useful to find out what are the factors that could increase their level of motivation at work. Once these are identified, a good organisation should attempt to introduce these factors as much as is practicable into the workplace.

4.5 Work Motivation Factors
The research studies factors that may increase the level of employee motivation at the workplace. These factors are compiled based on informal feedback from the employees in IIU and formalized into a list. The respondents then ranked the factors based on how important they would be in increasing respondents’ work motivation. The findings of the research are as listed in the Table 3 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking of importance of work motivation factors</th>
<th>Rating (highest=5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Working with friendly and supportive colleagues/relationship with co-workers</td>
<td>4.4759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Given autonomy and freedom to determine what and how you do your job</td>
<td>4.4439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Having good equipment/facilities [internet, laptop, good classrooms, etc]</td>
<td>4.3743</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Given a bonus</td>
<td>4.3743</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The research finds that colleagues play the most important role in affecting employees’ level of motivation at work. This perhaps should not be surprising if we remembered that the Malaysian culture is collectivistic and group-based. People want to work surrounded by good colleagues that are friendly and supportive. This implies how important it is for the organization to create good teams at the workplace.

Autonomy and freedom in doing their jobs are ranked second by the respondents. This is hardly surprising considering that academic staff in the education industry are knowledge workers. Knowledge workers, as defined by Peter Drucker in 1959 in his book *Landmark of Tomorrow*, believe that workers are paid to be effective, not to work 9 to 5, and that smart organisations will strip away everything that gets in their knowledge workers’ way (Drucker, 1994).

The knowledge workers’ desire to be effective perhaps explained the third motivation factor in the ranking, which is having good equipment/facilities [internet, laptop, good classrooms, etc]. LCDs that don’t work, classrooms that are too cramped, too cold or too bright, Internet connection that is not connected – these are laments often heard from the lecturers around the campus. These are the irritating factors that lead to inefficiency. This finding points to a need by the organisation to ensure proper that working facilities are available at all times so that high performance is achieved.

Bonus and salary increment come next as work motivation factors. These point to money as a motivator and the need for the organisation to provide fair compensation to the employees. As indicated in the respondent profile, the average monthly salary of employees in the institution studied can be considered as low. This is one area the organisation should consider to rectify.
No working Saturdays is also wanted by the respondents. Interestingly enough, the institution recently announced that there will be no more working Saturdays. This new policy takes care of this particular motivation factor.

Other factors that are considered important in raising employees motivation level include appropriate compensation & benefits, flexible working hours, good leaders, training & development, job security, less bureaucracy, good organizational communication, interesting duties and good social environment at the workplace.

Interestingly, promotion is lower down in the ranking. This could mean that the respondents of the study are not interested in job promotion; perhaps what interests them more is being given the freedom, autonomy and flexibility in doing the best at their current job. This certainly applies to knowledge workers; they are already doing the job they want; they just want freedom to do it their way, unrestrained by bureaucratic factors that cut down their effectiveness. However, not everyone gets motivated by the same things: Where one gets motivated, obtains satisfaction, and consequently performs better from getting additional responsibility assigned, another may feel much better valued and encouraged to higher productivity if he or she is merely being listened to, or given some flexibility in his or her work schedule (Marques, 2010).

5. CONCLUSION

The study found that work occupies a lower level of centrality compared to family and religion, and this could be explained by the culture within which the study is conducted. Based on the classification of Hofstede’s cultural value dimensions, Malaysia is considered a collectivistic and feminine culture that places high value on family, groups and the spiritual aspect of life. The implication of this finding is that flexi-work should be implemented to accommodate for the fulfillment of family and religious duties.

The study also found that the primary meaning of work is that it is a source of income. This implies that the employees are motivated by money and that adequate compensation must be given to ensure that employees are motivated at work.

The level of motivation of employees under the study at their current job, however, is just average; which implies that they are neither unmotivated nor highly motivated at work. Perhaps, the surprising finding that the average monthly salary of employees is rather low may explain why the current motivation level is so. The organisation should seriously consider a salary review and adjustment to boost employee motivation at work. Rewards play a vital role in determining the significant performance in job and it is positively associated with the process of motivation (Danish and Usman, 2010).

Finally, factors that would increase employee motivation not only include salary and bonus but also having good colleagues as well as proper working facilities that would lead to high effectiveness in performance. Job promotion opportunities is low in the ranking, which indicates that the employees are doing the job they want, but they want the freedom, autonomy and flexibility to do the best in that job.

This research has been conducted at one private higher education institution in Malaysia. Therefore, its applicability for generalisation into other institutions or industries or even outside Malaysia is limited. Nonetheless, the findings of this research perhaps are useful as a starting
point for further research into what motivates employees at the workplace within the context of Asian or Eastern cultures such as Malaysia.

References


