HRM Practices of an International Retailer in Malaysia: Comparing the Perceptions of Subordinates and Supervisors at Six Retail Outlets

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Abstract

Past empirical studies on retail businesses have focused on the marketing and consumer behaviour perspectives rather than on the importance of their human capital. This article highlights the extent to which 292 subordinates and 106 of their immediate supervisors perceive that high involvement human resource management practices are implemented at six outlets of a large international retailer in Malaysia. The survey revealed that supervisors mostly rated higher than their subordinates on employees' ability to participate in decision-making and training programmes, as well as on the presence of relevant resources, information, and fair rewards across the six outlets. In addition, there were differences in opinions between how employees from the different outlets perceived the extent to which the four components of HRM practices were present in their respective organisations.

Keywords: Employee self-reports, HRM practices, Retailing, Supervisor evaluation

JEL Classification: M12

1.   Introduction

Malaysia's distributive trade is the largest sub-sector in the services industry and it consists of both the wholesale and retail businesses. In 2009, it had contributed over 13 per cent of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP) or RM334 billion in sales (Economic Planning Unit, 2010). The liberalisation of this sector has attracted huge investments from several international retail players such as TESCO, Carrefour, AEON

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(formerly known as Jaya Jusco), Giant, and others. Rapid urbanisation, demographic changes, and rising consumer affluence are likely to stimulate the growth of this sector further in the coming years.

There are currently more than five major local and international players in the competitive retail industry in Malaysia. As Malaysia progresses towards being a fully developed nation in 2020, price, ambience, and variety of goods would not be the only reasons customers would patronise a particular retailer. Most Malaysians have become more affluent, sophisticated, and discerning; preferring to shop at retail outlets that not only offer quality goods but those that employ friendly, knowledgeable, and empowered employees.

Past literature reveals positive relationships between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction, resulting in higher customer loyalty, repeat purchases and thereby better organisational effectiveness and profitability (Heskett, Sasser, and Schlesinger, 1997, 2003; McLean, 2006). Heskett et al. (1997) used their service-profit-chain model and subsequently, the value-profit chain model (2003) to challenge management to treat their employees or human capital as valuable assets. They argue that when employees are satisfied, they would invariably delight and satisfy the needs of their customers. Netemeyer and Maxham (2007) as well as McLean (2006) concur with Heskett et al. (2003) that satisfied customers would remain loyal, make repeat purchases, and personally recommend the organisation to others. Such social and organisational exchanges (Blau, 1964) and reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960) could bring about better organisational effectiveness and profitability.

This exploratory survey focuses on obtaining feedback from employees and supervisors instead of the ubiquitous customers at six different outlets of a large retailer. Employees like customers, in the retail business deserve equal, if not more attention and respect from management. To perform well, they need a service climate that empowers and trusts them (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009; De Jong, Van der Vegt, and Molleman 2007; Liao and Chuang, 2004; Schneider and Bowen, 1993). This could be achieved through the implementation of participative or high involvement human resource management (HRM) practices (Lawler, 1986). This study therefore examines the extent to which a large international retailer in Malaysia has consistently implemented high involvement HRM practices across their six retail outlets as perceived by their employees and supervisors.

Like the high performance work systems (HIWPS), the high involvement HRM practices, would enable employees to have a "voice" in matters that affect them and their work (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009; Lawler 1986). In the past, work achievements in the retail industry were the result of control or bureaucratic work systems. However, large retailers are increasingly staffed by younger and academically more qualified employees namely, the Generation Y (born between 1980 and 2001), and this work system may no longer be appropriate.

These younger employees tend to resent from being controlled by higher authorities (Gursoy, Maier, and Chi, 2008; Tay, 2011). According to the authors, they do not like their management and seniors to underestimate their abilities; instead they want to be empowered, trusted, valued, and treated with more respect. Unlike their seniors, they prefer more challenging and interesting assignments, and multi-tasking is almost second nature to them. Although the work expectations and perceptions of employees from different generational age groups may differ, their basic needs to participate in decision-making and training sessions as well as their desire for relevant information, resources, and fair rewards are similar (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009; Gursoy et al., 2008, Tay 2011).

This article discusses a small part of the preliminary findings of a larger study on the relationships of high involvement HRM practices, employee commitment, and performance in the service industry. Specifically, this study explores the perceptions of 292 employees and 106 of their immediate supervisors about the presence of high involvement HRM practices in six retail outlets of a large international retailer in Malaysia. Past literature reports gaps in opinions between those who implement organisational policies and practices, such as supervisors, and those who are affected by them, such as employees (e.g., Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009; Lawler, 1986; McLean, 2006; Vandenberg, Richardson, and Eastman, 1999). The aim of reporting the research findings is to encourage academics to do more to narrow the research gaps on how to manage retail employees effectively, and to encourage retailers to deliberate further on the importance of implementing high involvement HRM practices in the retail industry.

2. Literature review

Intense global competition calls for retail organisations to adopt more innovative and effective methods in managing their businesses and

employees. A review of HRM literature reveals the passionate attempts of academics to identify, and practitioners to implement, fair HRM practices. Both parties have a common desire to develop successful organisations through the positive work attitudes and behaviours of employees (e.g., Batt, Colvin, and Keefe, 2002; Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009; Delery and Doty, 1996; Guthrie, 2001; Lawler, 1986; Lawler, Mohrman, and Ledford, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; McLean, 2006; Shanock and Eisenberger, 2006; Vandenberg et al., 1999). A survey of bank employees by Delery and Doty, for example, reveals significant relationships between HRM practices and profitability. In New Zealand, Guthrie, reports good employee performance in firms that adopt participative human resource practices. Employees' positive perceptions of HRM practices are generally related to customers' views of service quality (Schneider and Bowen, 1993; Tsaur and Lin, 2004).

Employers should involve employees in their work decisions so that they would be committed to their jobs (e.g., Becker and Huselid, 1998; Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009; Lawler, 1986; Lawler et al., 1995; Liao and Chuang, 2004; Vandenberg et al., 1999). Camps and Luna-Arocas (2009, p.1057) recommend that organisations implement high involvement work practices (HIWPS) to equip employees with the ability, skill, and inner drive to contribute more towards the success of organisations. They specifically examined the extent to which HIPWS dimensions such as staff, compensation, flexible job assignments, and training are related to firm performance.

In examining the relationship between HRM practices and profitability of business units, Wright, Gardner, Moynihan, Park, Gerhart, and Delery (2001, p. 875) suggest that, *"…a one standard deviation increase in the use of "progressive" or "high performance" work practices can result in up to a 20 per cent increase in firm performance."* This study therefore proposes that if organisations empower and value their employees' contributions, they would reciprocate by being more helpful towards their customers. I adopted Lawler's (1986) four high involvement components or participative HRM practices because they are more relevant to service industries (Bartel, 2004; Vandenberg et al., 1999).

2.1 Four components of high involvement HRM practices

There are several ways to encourage employees to be more involved in their jobs. Lawler (1986, p. 22) explains that the effectiveness of

involvement programmes depends on the extent to which, "…power, information, rewards, and knowledge are transferred to those who are in the lower hierarchy of organisations." Vandenberg et al. (1999, p. 303) concur that employees should have the, "…power to act and make decisions about work in all its aspects; information about processes, quality, customer feedback, event and business results; rewards tied to business results and growth in capability and contribution; and knowledge of work, the business and total work system."

In some literature, knowledge includes training because it is more encompassing as it takes into account the improvement of employees' skills and attitudes (e.g., Bartel, 2004; Batt et al., 2002). By acquiring relevant knowledge and skills through training, empowered employees would be more confident in making prompt decisions, and in performing more effectively. In addition, if they receive relevant information and resources, and are rewarded accordingly for achieving organisational goals, they would likely put the needs of their customers and organisations first (Bowen, Gilliland, and Folger, 1999; Tsaur and Lin, 2004; Vandenberg et al., 1999). Each of the four components of high involvement HRM practices is discussed next.

2.1.1 Participation in decision making

In a participative work environment, employees are encouraged to make decisions that involve them and their work (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009; Lawler, 1986; McLean, 2006; Vandenberg et al., 1999). In practice, employees should have a say on the productivity, quality, work methods, and other daily decisions that affect them. Employees from a participative or high performance HR work system are reported to perform better than those from a controlled work environment (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009).

2.1.2 Accessibility to information and resources

Participative organisations that seek to empower and encourage employee involvement would allow information to flow freely from management to employees and vice versa. They assume that employees are interested in the strategic and operational plans of their organisations and the performance of their external competitors (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009; Lawler, 1986). Such organisations also acknowledge and value employees' suggestions on how to improve the HR practices and

their contributions. Besides encouraging two-way communication practices, high involvement organisations also provide employees with relevant resources such as staff, material, time, and effective and efficient equipment, technologies and information to facilitate the accomplishment of their personal and organisational goals.

2.1.3   Training and development opportunities

Training to improve employees' knowledge, abilities and skills is important for organisations to succeed (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009; Lawler, 1986; Tsaur and Lin, 2004). Besides providing them with technical and decision-making skills, employees could be coached to work effectively as empowered teams. Participative organisations would do well if their employees are equipped with leadership, interpersonal, and problem solving skills. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) note that trained and valued employees tend to align their interests with their organisations' goals.

2.1.4   Rewards and benefits practices

Literature reports that fair compensation systems are related to organisational performance (e.g., Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009). Rewards should generally be designed to encourage employees to use their power, knowledge, and information more effectively. Performance-based and merit-based rewards that promote accountability, for example, could facilitate a free exchange of information and encourage cooperation among all levels of employee hierarchy (Lawler, 1986; Tsaur and Lin, 2004). An effective reward structure would motivate employees to engage in extra-role and organisational citizenship behaviours (Karriker and Williams, 2009; Shanock and Eisenberger, 2006; Tsaur and Lin, 2004). In addition, when organisations are fair to their employees, it would trickle down to their customers (Bartel, 2004; Batt, et al., 2002; Bowen, et al., 1999; Masterson, 2001; Tsaur and Lin, 2004).

3.   Survey method

3.1   Survey sample and procedure

Questionnaires were personally distributed to the employees and supervisors employed at all the six retail outlets of a large international

retailer in Malaysia. A total of 298 employees from the six outlets had volunteered to participate in the primary survey. Of these, 292 of the completed forms were usable for analysis. The supervisors who participated in the survey completed separate sets of the high involvement HRM practices questionnaires. All the 106 supervisor survey forms that were distributed and completed were usable. The survey forms were collected on site and that accounted for a high rate of return. Confidentiality of the respondents was maintained at all times.

3.2 Selection of measures

The 64-statement HRM measures used in this study were either adopted directly or adapted with permission from the original authors (e.g., Becker and Huselid, 1998; Hartline and Ferrel, 1996; and others). Sixteen items were identified and assigned to each of the four components of the high involvement HRM practices. There were 16 items each that described employees' *participation* or involvement in decision-making, their ability to access relevant *information and resources* as well as *training and development* and to receive fair *rewards and benefits* in their organisations.

The employees and their immediate supervisors were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement or disagreement on each item based on a seven-point Likert scale whereby, 1 = strongly disagree, and 7 = strongly agree. The individual responses to the items describing each of the four HRM indices were then aggregated and averaged to provide their composite mean scores as reported in Table 2.

3.3 Samples of high involvement HRM measures

The following are some examples of the HRM items that describe the extent to which employees could participate and be involved in *decision-making* as well as their ability to obtain relevant *information and resources*:

Employee: My supervisor allows me to use personal initiative and discretion in carrying out my job responsibilities.
Employee: When changes occur in my department, my supervisor tells us why this happens.

In addition, the statements below are some examples that describe the perceptions of employees about *training and development* as well as *rewards and benefits* practices at their outlets:

Employee: Whenever I require extra work training or coaching, I can easily approach my supervisor to assist me.
Employee: When I consistently resolve customer problems at the first attempt, I receive good performance reviews from my supervisor.

The full list of items describing each of the four indices of high involvement HRM measures (for employees and supervisors) can be directly obtained from the author. Their internal reliabilities as perceived by the retail *employees or subordinates* were: .68 for participation in decision making, .88 for accessibility to information and resources, .80 for training and development, and .72 for rewards and benefits. Likewise, the internal reliabilities of the four sub-scales of the high involvement HRM practices as perceived by their *supervisors* were: .67, .62, .65, and .72, respectively. The Cronbach's alpha results were reasonable, as they were all above .60, the minimum for exploratory studies, as suggested by Hair, Black, Babin, and Anderson (2010).

4. Results

4.1 The survey samples

Table 1: Distribution of survey sample from six retail outlets

Retail Outlets	Number of Subordinates	Number of Supervisors
A	50	14
B	40	15
C	55	20
D	49	20
E	58	26
F	40	11
Total	292	106

Table 1 shows the number of employees and supervisors from each of the six retail outlets that participated in the survey. Alphabets are used to represent each outlet to conceal their actual identities. About 58 per cent of the 292 employees and 74 per cent of the 106 supervisors who participated in the survey were males. Their average ages, were 28 and 33 years, respectively. Most of the employees (84 per cent) were at the frontline, while their supervisors consisted of executives (67 per cent), managers (15 per cent), and senior managers (3 per cent). About 61per

cent of the supervisors had diplomas and first degrees while most of their subordinates (75 per cent) had "O" level qualifications. Accordingly, the supervisors who were academically more qualified than the employees were paid more. Majority of the supervisors (88 per cent) earned gross monthly salaries of above RM2000 while their subordinates (89 per cent) earned RM2000 or less a month. The average tenure of the employees and their supervisors across the six retail outlets of the international retailer were 3.1 and 4.5 years, respectively.

The composite mean scores describing the extent to which the employees and supervisors agree to the presence of the four components of high involvement HRM practices in the six retail outlets are summarised in Table 2. They report the participants' average responses to the sixteen statements that described each of the four HRM indices.

4.2 Employees' perceptions of high involvement HRM practices

Table 2 shows that employees and supervisors from the six retail outlets reported mean ratings of between 4.2 and 5.9 in the four indices of HRM measures (namely, participation in decision-making, accessibility to information and resources, training and development, as well as rewards and benefits). Both the respondents' perceptions of the presence of high involvement HRM practices throughout the six retail outlets ranged between weak and moderate.

The descriptive results in Table 2 showed some gaps between employees' and supervisors' opinions of high involvement HRM practices across the six retail outlets. For example, unlike employees from Outlet C (mean score of 5.6), their counterparts from Outlet B (mean score of 4.7) were comparatively less agreeable that they could participate in decisions that affect them at the workplace. However, the supervisors in both Outlets B and C gave relatively higher ratings of 5.9 and 5.4, respectively in this sub-measure. The results empirically supported the typical contradictions between the supervisors who perceived they have empowered their employees to make decisions and employees who perceived otherwise. This perceptual gap should be addressed if management intends to empower their retail employees. They should create more opportunities to involve employees in the decision-making process.

In addition, the employees at Outlet B perceived that they did not have as much access to information and resources (mean score of 4.8)

as their counterparts from the other five outlets (mean scores of 5.4 and above). This could be due to the location of Outlet B, which was in a northern State, far from the capital city of Malaysia where the main office of the foreign retailer was located. They were perhaps "under the radar" of the central office.

Table 2: Composite means describing subordinates' and supervisors' perceptions of high involvement human resource practices at six retail outlets

RETAIL OUTLETS	A	B	C	D	E	F	Overall
Participation in Decision Making	5.2	4.7	5.6	5.4	5.3	5.2	5.2
	(5.4)	(5.9)	(5.4)	(5.6)	(5.3)	(5.0)	(5.4)
Accessibility to Information &	5.4	4.8	5.6	5.4	5.4	5.4	5.3
Resources	(5.5)	(5.8)	(5.4)	(5.6)	(5.5)	(5.1)	(5.5)
Training and Development	4.7	4.7	5.3	5.2	5.1	5.0	5.0
	(5.2)	(5.7)	(5.3)	(5.7)	(5.4)	(5.1)	(5.4)
Rewards and Benefits	4.6	4.2	5.1	4.6	4.7	4.4	4.6
	(5.3)	(5.6)	(5.5)	(5.6)	(5.4)	(5.2)	(5.4)
Total number of Employees &	50	40	55	49	58	40	292
Supervisors	(14)	(15)	(20)	(20)	(26)	(11)	(106)

Note: Figures that are not in the parentheses reflect the composite mean scores of employees' perceptions and those in parentheses, the perceptions of supervisors; Scale:1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Slightly Disagree, 4=Neither, 5=Slightly Agree, 6=Agree, and 7=Strongly Agree.

Employees from Outlets A and B indicated that they had comparatively lesser opportunities to attend training programmes (mean score = 4.7) than those employed at the other three outlets. However, with an average mean score of 5.0 for training and development index across the six outlets, it tends to suggest that more could be done about training retail employees in future. Personal visits to the six retail outlets confirmed that training to improve the retail employees' product knowledge and their customer service skills was urgently needed.

Although all the outlets were well-stocked and the prices of their goods were competitive, they could do better if their employees were more passionate, motivated, and knowledgeable. By providing regular and systematic skill- and knowledge-based training programmes, as well as with some tender loving care from their supervisors and top management, these could improve employee performance.

On the whole, compared to employees at the other five retail outlets, those employed at Outlet C responded more positively towards all the four components of high involvement HRM practices. The employees at Outlet C were perhaps more fortunate than others because their outlet was located directly below the administrative headquarters of the foreign retailer. This is perhaps an excellent contemporary example of employee motivation as reported in the Hawthorne experiment. As its first and oldest retail outlet in Malaysia, the employees at Outlet C were not only managed by its store manager but they had the personal attention of the vice president (then) of human resource and the executive directors of the international retailer. The rest of the retail outlets were each managed by their respective store managers and assisted by a human resource personnel or officer.

In general, Table 2 shows that employees irrespective of the retail outlets they served were particularly unhappy with the retailer's lack of generosity in rewarding them. With an overall composite mean score of 4.6, and Outlet B reporting the lowest means score of 4.2, it was not surprising that some store managers of the retail outlets complained of fairly high employee turnover. Given that there are several other large local and foreign retail players in the industry, more could be done if this foreign retailer desires to be the retailer and employer of choice in Malaysia.

Overall, the employees from all the six outlets rated their involvement in decision-making (5.2), and accessibility to information and resources (5.3) comparatively, higher than that for training and development (5.0) and rewards practices (4.6). Efforts therefore must be taken by the international retailer to improve the prospects for training, career development, rewards, and recognition of its employees. These perceptions were confirmed via informal personal interviews with some of the employees throughout the six outlets and they should be addressed in order to retain and enable employees to serve their retail customers better.

4.3 Supervisors' perceptions of high involvement HRM practices

Table 2 also reports the composite mean scores ranging between 5.0 and 5.9 for supervisors' perceptions of the four components of high involvement HRM practices. Unlike employees, the supervisors at the six retail outlets unanimously agreed that their employees were able to

participate in making decisions, have access to relevant information, resources, and training facilities, and they were rewarded accordingly. In general, the comparatively higher perception ratings given by the supervisors than their subordinates revealed that, the former were more convinced that high involvement human resource management practices were implemented by the retailer.

However, the differences in mean scores between their opinions were in some instances more than 1.0. In Outlet B, for example, unlike their employees (mean score = 4.2), the supervisors (mean score = 5.6) seemed to view that they have rewarded their subordinates reasonably well. This discrepancy could be explained by the misperceptions between those who implement organisational policies and their recipients (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009). In future, to succeed in the competitive retail business, and to minimise employee and customer dissatisfaction, the retailer's top management must have the political will to diligently resolve such differences.

5.   Discussion and summary

The findings from this initial survey revealed weak to moderate agreement among employees of the six retail outlets about the presence of high involvement HRM practices at their workplace. Although, the majority (89 per cent) of the subordinates surveyed were low income and unskilled frontline or customer-contact employees, they nonetheless had reasonable expectations. Their perceptions (*what they get*) seemed to be lower than their expectations (*what they want*) for more opportunities to participate in work decisions, to have more access to information, resources, and training programmes, as well as to be fairly rewarded for their contributions.

Although some of the respondents had only basic academic qualifications, this should not disqualify them from being empowered and from shouldering more responsibilities. They could be trained and entrusted to make effective decisions on matters that relate to them and to efficiently use the additional resources and information they receive. When they succeed, management should reward them accordingly, so as to reinforce more positive work behaviours and performance.

The survey also revealed that with the exception of only a few, most of the supervisors had consistently rated all the four components of the HRM practices higher than their subordinates. Although the differences in their composite mean scores were not statistically

significant, nonetheless future research should look into this interesting response pattern. At this early stage of the analysis, one can only guess some of the possible reasons for the results. One possible explanation could perhaps be that the retailer did not implement participative HRM policies and practices consistently across their outlets.

In future, the retailer's top management should diligently monitor and ensure that their managers and supervisors implement the HRM policies and practices consistently across all the six outlets for their employees' benefit. This could help to overcome differences in perceptions between supervisors and their subordinates and perhaps lower the rate of employee discontentment, disengagement, and the rate of employee turnover. It is interesting to note also that the supervisors seemed to have rated their perceptions of the HRM practices rather modestly (the composite mean scores were between 5.0 and 5.9 out of a maximum score of 7.0) and objectively. They could have rated higher in order to create a good impression to the researcher but they did not. While this is good, however, the outcomes from this initial data analysis should be interpreted with caution. One should refrain from making any conclusions from this peculiar pattern of responses until additional in-depth analysis confirms the interesting findings.

In future, it is important that large retailers with critical mass of young employees implement participative or high involvement human resource management practices (Tay, 2011). Younger employees generally detest the top-down leadership style and the control-type of management systems. If they find any unreasonable rules and procedures they are likely to break those (Gursoy et al., 2008). Retailers should engage their employees and treat them as assets through the implementation of the participative management systems. Such inclusive practices could enhance employees' commitment, job satisfaction, and extra role performance behaviours, as well as minimise their turnover intentions (Camps and Luna-Arocas, 2009; MacDuffie, 1995; Tsaur and Yin, 2004). After all, happy and satisfied employees are likely to reciprocate by treating their customers even better (Bowen et al., 1999; Liao and Chuang, 2004; Tsaur and Yin, 2004).

Theoretically, this study highlights the gaps in perceptions between the implementers of HR policies and practices and their recipients, the employees. More empirical research would be required to determine the cause of the perceptual gaps between the two important internal customers or stakeholders of organisations. In practice, the HR professionals should act on the findings and take practical measures to

narrow the gaps between the perceptions of employees and their immediate supervisors about high involvement HRM practices. It is also important that they appreciate the need to monitor the consistent implementation of high involvement HRM policies and practices across their branches or outlets.

6. Limitations and Conclusion

This study is descriptive in nature and suffers from the general limitations of cross-sectional studies. The focus on a single large retailer, for example, limits generalisation of the results across the retail industry in the country. Future research should include employees from several other international and local retailers in Malaysia. Instead of focusing on a single retailer, perhaps inter- and intra-retailer comparisons between employees' and supervisors' perceptions of HRM practices would be more useful. In addition, in the absence of a more rigorous analysis of the data and an access to more in-depth information about the business dynamics of each outlet, prescribing specific solutions in this article would be deemed inappropriate.

This article highlights some of the challenges of managing employees in the retail business. Like employees in other industries, retail employees have the same desire to be empowered, trained, rewarded, and to have access to relevant information and resources. Results from the primary survey showed that there were gaps in the subordinates' and supervisors' perceptions of high involvement HRM practices. More perhaps could be done to narrow their perceptual gaps for organisational effectiveness in the retail business.

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