Perceived Job Autonomy and Employee Engagement as Predictors of Organizational Commitment

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Abstract

Employees usually leave due to unmet workplace needs and the lack of resources to perform their organizational roles. This has made it more difficult for organizations to enhance employees' commitment and retain talents in today's workforce. Since employees' perceptions of job autonomy and their engagement at work have been consistently linked to organizational commitment in past literatures, the present study aimed to examine the relationship between perceived job autonomy and organizational commitment, the relationship between employee engagement and commitment, and the interaction effect of autonomy and engagement upon commitment. A cross-sectional study was conducted on 83 corporate employees from a private higher education institution in Malaysia based on a purposive sampling. Three main scales were used to measure work autonomy, job engagement, and organizational commitment. Findings from the hierarchical multiple regression analysis revealed that autonomy and the interaction effect of autonomy and engagement did not significantly predict commitment. However, engagement was found to have significantly predicted commitment. Several organizational and individual factors that could have accounted for the study outcomes were discussed. The research limitations and implications were also pointed out to set the direction for future research.

Key Words:
job autonomy, employee engagement, organizational commitment

Employee turnover has received a considerable attention in organizations amidst the recent years of economic uncertainties. In Malaysia, 70% of employers identified employee turnover as a pressing problem in their business operations ("Seventy percent plan to leave", 2014). This is not limited to the Malaysian private higher education sector where employee turnover is seen as a deterrent to a high quality education. In the past, organizational commitment has been found as an important predictor of turnover (Jaros, 1997). Studies have found employees' commitment to be negatively correlated with their turnover intentions, whereby employees with higher commitment would have higher intent of staying in the organization due to their positive experiences (Deconinck & Bachmann, 2011; Hussain & Asif, 2012; Lew, 2011). Undoubtedly, high employee turnover impedes an organization's capacity to

achieve its business goals. In order to increase the retention rate of employees, it is pivotal for organizations to examine employees' commitment prior to embarking on strategic workforce planning to reduce the negative effects of turnover intentions and retain high-performing employees.

As of 2014, only 28% of employees in Malaysia were purported to be committed to their employers, which was below the global average of 31% (Surendran, 2014). Job autonomy has yet to be fully recognized as a driver of organizational commitment in the Malaysian workforce as it is rarely viewed as an important job characteristic that would significantly affect commitment. According to The Edge (Surendran, 2014), 70% of Malaysian employees preferred flexible working arrangements which ties back to the value of job autonomy in workplace. 76% of Malaysian employees regarded flexible working hours as a

factor that would improve employee retention (Gan, 2014). Employee engagement is seen as a crucial factor that attracts and retains talents from inside and out of the nation. One out of two Malaysian employers deemed people issues as the top business challenge, emphasizing on the need for employee engagement in order to propel Malaysia to a high-income status (Quah, 2014). There is thus a growing need for private higher education institutions in Malaysia to provide their employees, particularly those at the lower level of organizational hierarchy (with the position title of "executive") but serve as the key people in providing office and administrative support to academic staffs, with the resources pivotal to perform their jobs in a productive manner so as to ensure that the quality of the Malaysian higher education is compatible on a global scale.

Organizational commitment. Organizational commitment revolves around employees' attachment to the organizations through affective, normative, and continuance factors, which causes the desire to maintain organizational membership (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Meyer et al. (2002) described affective commitment as the commitment that is based on employees' emotional ties with the organization that develop primarily via positive work experiences, normative commitment as the commitment that is based on perceived obligation toward the organization, and continuance commitment as the commitment that is based on the perceived economic and social costs of leaving the organization. The topic of organizational commitment has been widely studied across different cultures and professions, and likewise, empirical studies pertaining to organizational commitment have long been established in Malaysia. More often than not, the antecedents of organizational commitment become a chief interest to researchers in the field of organizational psychology and human resources (Aube, Rosseau, & Morin, 2007; Karim, 2010; Siew, Chitpakdee, & Chontawan, 2011). Based on the studies conducted in Malaysia (Karim, 2010; Siew et al., 2011), factors such as job satisfaction, perceived organizational support, role clarity, and job involvement have been shown to share a positive correlation with commitment. However, job autonomy and employee engagement have not been studied in past commitment studies in the Malaysian spectrum. This could be due to Malaysian employees being seen as not ready to accept autonomy and employers are not convinced on providing autonomy to their employees. Also, employee engagement may not be deemed as a crucial factor that directly impacts organizational performance in the Malaysian context. Studies beyond the Malaysian spectrum, however, have highlighted the relationship between autonomy, engagement and commitment, which will be discussed in the later sections of the literature review.

Perceived job autonomy. Job autonomy is among several other job conditions (task variety, feedback, completion of task, task significance, and task importance) included in Hackman and Oldham's job characteristics model that is believed to have an impact on employees' responses to work. Job autonomy, by definition, is the freedom and discretion allowed of employees in facets of work method, work schedule, and work criteria to perform their tasks and responsibilities (Dodd & Ganster, 1996; Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Breaugh (1985) defined work method autonomy as the discretion in choosing the procedures/methods to go about one's work, work scheduling autonomy as the feeling of which one could take control of the sequencing or timing of his or her tasks, and work criteria autonomy as the discretion in making changes to indicators/standards used to evaluate one's own performance. Based on this definition, having sufficient job autonomy is viewed as a favorable workplace condition that allows employees to exercise their decision-making skills in fulfilling job-related tasks. Aligned with Hackman and Oldham's model, employees' perceptions of their job autonomy tend to impact their psychological states of "experienced meaningfulness of work" (i. e., how work makes a difference to others), "felt responsibility" (i. e., the degree of responsibility assumed for work), and "knowledge of results" (i. e., the awareness of work quality) (Nwoksu, Chiamaka, & Tochukwu, 2013, p. 484). These psychological states in turn affect the level of commitment in employees.

Perceived job autonomy and organizational commitment. Throughout the decade, more organizational studies have found job autonomy to be significantly and positively correlated to organizational commitment (Dude, 2012; Karim, 2010; Naqvi, Ishtiaq, Kanwal, & Ali, 2011; Park & Searcy, 2011) than those studies, which discovered a weak relationship between the two variables (Gergersen & Black, 1996; Jong, Mueller, & Price, 1997). The concept is therefore straightforward; when employees perceive themselves as having discretionary power in performing their organizational roles, they are more likely to remain in their current organizations because of enhanced ownership in work (Parker & Wall, 1998) and the increased motivation to master new tasks (Morgeson & Campion, 2003).

Although past literatures have revealed that greater job autonomy is related to higher organizational commitment, Adler (1991) found that autonomy, if granted to employees, does not make any difference to them. Adler's findings showed that workers with more standardized jobs reported the same level of autonomy as workers who were given more freedom in performing their tasks due to the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) that they have to follow in completing their tasks. Furthermore, the organizational impact of providing autonomy to employees at lower hierarchical levels of organizations has yet to be adequately explored. Sisodia and Das, in 2013, initiated a study on the impact of job autonomy upon organizational commitment in employees at different hierarchical levels of an organization in India and they found that employees at higher hierarchical levels tend to enjoy a greater amount of autonomy than those at lower hierarchical levels. The study has then paved way for the present study to focus on the perceptions of job autonomy amongst office and administrative staffs at the lower hierarchical level of an organization.

Interestingly, perceptions of job characteristics have been linked to employees' personality attributes (De Fruyt & Mervielde, 2006; Mowday & Spencer, 1981). Holland and Gottfredson (1992) stated that individuals inclined toward conventional work styles tend to enjoy structure-oriented jobs in which they have to follow a standardized set of procedures. Some employees do not feel comfortable with autonomy provided to them because they do not want to take responsibility of their task outcomes (Naqvi et al., 2013). In the validation of the John Holland's Occupational Personality test, which was standardized over a sample 15 000 participants across 28 occupational groups, it was found that the highest occupational mean scores in the "conventional" scale belonged to office and administrative support staffs (Bakker & Macnab, 2014). From here, it can be deduced that typically, office and administrative staffs do not enjoy high-autonomy jobs so if given job autonomy, they may not be receptive towards the autonomy given to them and subsequently, it may reduce their commitment or cause no effect to commitment.

In accordance to the involvement of several factors such as SOPs, personality, and hierarchical level, there is a possibility that job autonomy does not significantly and directly predict organizational commitment due to the aforementioned factors acting as moderators.

Employee engagement. Current practices of organizations have called for an accountability of "people issues" in declining organizational performance and effectiveness. Consequently, employee engagement has been regarded as a variable that contributes to commitment, turnover, and retention. Employee engagement is defined as employees' physical, cognitive, and emotional involvement in the performance of their organizational roles (Kahn, 1990). The physical aspect of engagement refers to employees' physical presence at work, the cognitive aspect pertains to employees' beliefs about the organization, its leaders, and work conditions while the emotional aspect reflects the employees' attitudes toward these three aspects (Shanmugam & Krishnaveni, 2012). Kahn posited that employees could be engaged in one aspect and not the other, but this would still contribute to their overall engagement. Additionally, engagement or disengagement at work has been found by Kahn to be related to three psychological states; experienced meaningfulness, safety, and availability. May, Gibson, and Harter (2004) found that job enrichment, role-fit, rewards, and

relationships with supervisor were all positive predictors of these psychological states of engagement. Another definition for employee engagement is that it is a positive, fulfilling state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption at work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). This definition is then supported by Saks when he carried out a study about employee engagement in 2006.

Employee engagement and organizational commitment. The association of employee engagement with organizational commitment has been studied in past researches in that employee engagement has been found as a significant predictor of organizational commitment (Ariani, 2013; Field & Buitendach, 2011; Saks, 2006). As employee engagement has been linked to employees' involvement in their jobs (Yong, Suhaimi, Abdullah, Rahman, & Nik Mat, 2013), past studies have shown that job involvement shared a significant relationship with organizational commitment (Ologbo & Sofian, 2012; Raymond & Mjoli, 2013). Literatures supporting the significantly positive relationship between engagement and commitment have been well established that there is a dearth amount of studies proving otherwise. Nevertheless, Britt (2007) contended that engaged employees are not necessarily committed to the organization as they are the ones likely to become frustrated and dissatisfied when they do not receive necessary support to be effective in their roles, inciting the possibility of a negative relationship between engagement and commitment.

From the theoretical perspective, employee engagement functions on the basis of the social exchange theory (SET) in which obligations are generated through a series of interactions between parties who are in a state of mutual dependence and comply with specific rules of exchange (Saks, 2006). Saks postulated that engaged employees are likely to share a more trusting and high-quality relationships with their employer, therefore they are more likely report positive attitudes and intentions toward the organization. Based on the mechanism underlying the SET, it becomes clear that employees who are engaged by their employer in

their jobs would more likely reciprocate by being committed to the organization.

Perceived job autonomy and employee engagement. Job autonomy has been positively associated with employee engagement (Saks, 2006; Shantz, Alfes, Soane, & Truss, 2013; Yong et al., 2013). Based on a study conducted by Yong et al. (2013) in the Malaysian private sector, the allowance of autonomy at work serves as an impetus to employees who may develop a sense of return by showing higher levels of engagement in their jobs. When the organization fails to foster these job characteristics or provide resources to perform tasks, employees are more likely to withdraw and disengage themselves from their roles (Saks, 2006). Again, the SET is brought to attention in order to explain the different levels of engagement found in workplaces. It can be deduced that the amount of cognitive, emotional, and physical resources that employees are prepared to allot in the performance of their work roles are contingent on the economic and socio-emotional resources received from the organization. Considering that job autonomy shares a positive relationship with engagement and it serves as an antecedent of commitment, there is a possibility that the effect of employees' perceived job autonomy on commitment is dependent on their engagement levels. This has brought the present study to examine the interactive nature of autonomy and engagement.

The possible factors that could affect the direction of the relationship between job autonomy and employee engagement have been investigated in past studies. Studies have found a positive relationship between transformational leadership style and employee engagement (Lockwood, 2007; Seijts & Crim, 2006). Managers who practise transformational leadership style tend to empower their subordinates to assume more autonomy in their work and this subsequently causes subordinates to develop a greater sense of engagement in their work (Schaufeli et al., 2004). Further, employees' job perceptions were also found to be affected by leadership styles of their managers in which the greater display of transformational and transactional leadership by managers altogether led to more positive perceptions of jobs (Felfe &

Schyns, 2006). If employees are given job autonomy without being empowered by their superiors to perform their jobs, they are more likely to view job autonomy as a less important determinant of their decisions to stay in an organization.

In the process of providing autonomy, positive and negative feedback would enhance employees' feeling of competence if they are given in an informational, non-critical, and autonomy supportive manner (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989). Communication of feedback between superiors and subordinates is regarded by MacLeod and Clarke (2009) to be an enabler of employee engagement. Dodd and colleague (1996) found that increased feedback from superiors in high-autonomy tasks significantly contributed to employees' performance while increased feedback in low-autonomy tasks had little effect on performance. Opportunities to provide feedback to superiors also serve as an avenue for employees to enact and express their autonomy, allowing them to participate in active discussions with their superiors in designing their work method, schedule, and criteria (Bauer & Mulder, 2006). Hence, job autonomy has to come with opportunities for employees to receive and provide feedback about job-related matters in order for them to be engaged and committed to the organization.

Organizational tenure, engagement, and commitment. Karim and Noor (2007) defined organizational tenure as the number of years that an employee has worked in an organization. In past literatures, organizational tenure has been found to be a strong antecedent of organizational commitment (Cohen, 1993; Karim et al., 2007; Meyer et al., 2002; Salami, 2008). As employees become more tenured in an organization, it becomes more difficult for them to leave the organization due to their investments that may reap benefits in forms of compensation, positive feelings, and improved relationships with colleagues. Also, they gain more experience and security in performing their roles with their established skills and capacities, resulting in higher levels of engagement in their jobs (Ying, 2009). Because past literatures have provided evidence that organizational tenure can directly affect engagement and commitment, the effects of tenure would be controlled in the present study in order to attain a clearer depiction of the predictive strengths of autonomy and engagement on commitment.

Research Objectives and Hypotheses

The nature of job autonomy and employee engagement allows them to be conceived as antecedents of organizational commitment due to their roles in producing positive organizational outcomes. Furthermore, there is a lack of empirical studies focusing on the interaction of autonomy and engagement in affecting commitment. Hence, it is relevant to study the extent to which autonomy and engagement affect commitment, considering the interrelationships of these three variables. Due to the importance of autonomy and engagement in influencing employees' commitment in Malaysia, outcomes of the present study would instigate organizational interventions to provide better workplace conditions that would eventually ease Malaysia's struggle in dealing with talent shortage.

In line with the reviewed literatures, the present study aimed to achieve the following three objectives: (1) to examine the relationship between perceived job autonomy and organizational commitment, (2) to examine the relationship between employee engagement and organizational commitment, and (3) to examine the interaction effect between perceived job autonomy and employee engagement upon organizational commitment. Following that, three hypotheses have been formulated as below:

H1: Perceived job autonomy is a significant predictor of organizational commitment.

H2: Employee engagement is a significant predictor of organizational commitment.

H3: There is a significant interaction effect of perceived job autonomy and employee engagement on organizational commitment.
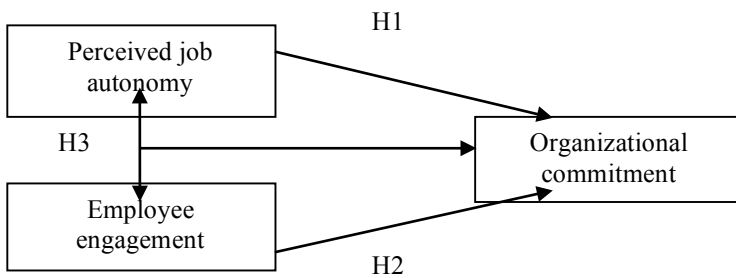
Figure 1. Hypothesized model of the relationship between perceived job autonomy, employee engagement, and organizational commitment

Method

Design

The study conducted was a quantitative, cross-sectional study where data from the participants were collected at one specific point of time. The independent (predictor) variables of the study included employees' perceived job autonomy and engagement at work. Perceived job autonomy was measured as the amount of autonomy perceived by employees in aspects of their work method, work schedule, and work criteria (Breaugh, 1985). Employee engagement was quantified as the amount of physical, cognitive, and emotional energy elicited by employees in performing their jobs (Kahn, 1990). The dependent (criterion) variable of the study included employees' organizational commitment. Organizational commitment was measured as the degree in which employees are attached to the organization due to affective, normative, and continuance reasons (Meyer et al., 2002). The variables were continuous variables and there was no unit of measurement used.

Participants

A total of 83 participants (14 males, 69 females, *M* = 35.25 years, age range: 24-62 years) were sampled from a private higher education institution in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to participate in the study. The participants consisted of employees with the job title of "executive", representing corporate employees at the lower hierarchical level of the organization. The participants were selected from purposive sampling where participants were chosen by the researcher based on specific criteria to serve the research purposes (Latham, 2007). Only full-time employees and those who have worked in the organization for six months or more were included in the sample. Since there are three ranks of executives in the organization, only employees from the two highest ranks (E1 and E2) out of the three ranks (E1, E2, and E3) were chosen to ensure that they have a certain extent of autonomy in their job nature.

Apparatus and Materials

Each set of questionnaire consisted of four sections - a demographic section and three scales. The demographic information enquired were gender, age, education level, organization tenure, and intent to stay in organization. The online survey software, Survey Monkey, was used to collect responses from the participants. The selected Survey Monkey plan (with basic features) allowed for customization of survey and more than 10 questions to be asked. Prior to that, Google Docs was used to collect responses for the pilot study. Also, the Predictive Analytics Software (PASW) Version 18 was used to conduct the analysis for the pilot study and actual study.

Perceived job autonomy. Perceived job autonomy was measured using the Breaugh's Work Autonomy Scale (Breaugh, 1985) with 9 items (α = 0.82) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale measured job autonomy in three facets; work method, work schedule, and work criteria. The scale was selected due to its strong reliability and validity (Breaugh, 1999) as well as its ability to measure comprehensive aspects of job autonomy.

Employee engagement. Employee engagement was measured using the Job Engagement Scale (Rich, LePine, & Crawford, 2010) with 18 items (α = 0.95) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The scale was selected due to its strong reliability and its ability to measure all the three components of engagement, namely the physical, emotional, and cognitive aspects, through easily understandable items.

Organizational commitment. Organizational commitment was measured using the adapted version of Meyer and Allen's

Organizational Commitment Scale (Lee, Tan, & Javalgi, 2010) (α = 0.81) with 11 items. It consisted of three subscales of affective commitment (α = 0.90), normative commitment (α = 0.85), and continuance commitment (α = 0.72) on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The first three questions of the scale were reverse-coded items. Given that the primary interest of the study was to measure employees' overall commitment in addition to its small sample size, organizational commitment was measured as a whole rather than in separate composites. The scale has a strong construct validity that empirically distinguished organizational commitment from other work attitudes (Maier & Woschee, 2002) and it has been cross-validated across countries including Malaysia.

Procedure

Pilot study. Upon approval from the Research Ethics Committee to conduct the study, permission was obtained from the Human Resources Department of the organization email executives. A pilot study was conducted on 30 corporate employees with the job title of "executive" to evaluate the reliability and applicability of the questionnaire in the Malaysian population. Questionnaires were administered to the participants via Google Docs. A reliability test (measured by Cronbach's alpha, α) was performed for each scale; Breaugh's Work Autonomy Scale (α = .76), Job Engagement Scale (α = .94), and Meyer and Allen's Organizational Commitment Scale (α = .81).

Actual study. The actual study was carried out after ensuring that the reliability of each scale is greater than .70, which signifies sufficient internal consistency (DeVellis, 2003). A total of 83 out of a total population of 131 executives were recruited to participate in the study. The required sample size for the study was derived from the statistical software (openepi) with a confidence interval of 95% and a response distribution of 50%. The questionnaires were distributed via Survey Monkey in order to reach out to a greater number of employees. Prior to attempting the questionnaire, each participant was briefed on the study background and given an informed consent form. Participants were assured that their responses are kept strictly confidential and would only be reported as group data. They were also allowed to withdraw from the study at any point of time. Specific instructions on how to answer the items were stated in each section of the questionnaire whereby participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree with each item that represent them and their jobs. After an adequate number of responses were collected, the participants' responses were compiled for data analysis. A focus-group involving several Human Resources personnel was also conducted following data analysis to further understand the implications of the findings in the organization of interest.

Data analysis.

The participants' scores were keyed into the PASW to perform preliminary analysis and hierarchical multiple regression analysis. In the preliminary analysis, descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviations were obtained for the variables of interest (see Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3). Normality, outliers, linearity, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity were checked to ensure that these assumptions were not violated. Spearman correlations were generated to demonstrate the correlations between the independent variables and dependent variable (see Table 2 & 3) as the data obtained for the variable of organizational tenure were not normally distributed. As multicollinearity is an unfavorable condition for hierarchical multiple regression (Pallant, 2007), the correlations between the variables, tolerance values, and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were generated to detect for multicollinearity. Given that multicollinearity was detected, the independent variables were centered around their means. After the preliminary analysis, the hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted whereby the main effects of the independent variables on commitment were tested, followed by testing the interaction effect of autonomy and engagement on commitment.

Table 1

Number of Cases and Percentage in Demographic String Variables

Variable	N	%
Sex		
Male	14	16.9
Female	69	83.1
Education level		
High school/SPM	4	4.8
College/diploma	21	25.3
Bachelor's degree	48	57.9
Master's degree	10	12.1
Intent to stay		
Less than 3 years	18	21.7
More than 3 years	65	78.3

N=83

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

Variables	M	SD
Organizational Tenure	5.21	5.31
Perceived Job Autonomy	38.21	4.26
Employee Engagement	70.85	9.32
Organizational Commitment	62.10	6.71

*p < .05

Table 3

Bivariate Correlations among Study Variables

Variables	1	2	3	4
Organizational Tenure	----	-.01	.16	.15
Perceived Job Autonomy		---	.16	.15
Employee Engagement			---	.63*
Organizational Commitment				---

*p < .05

Results

Table 4 illustrates the main effects of the predictor variables and the interaction effect between autonomy and engagement in predicting organizational commitment. Model 2, which included all the predictor variables of interest after controlling the possible effects of organizational tenure, explained 43.0 percent of the variance in organizational commitment, R^2 = .43, $F(2,78) = 25.66$, $p < .05$. Model 2 achieved statistical significance in that it significantly contributed to the prediction of organizational commitment ($p < .05$).

The B coefficients of all the predictor variables were reported to be positive, indicating that each of the predictor variables shared a positive relationship with commitment. The predictive ability of perceived job autonomy upon commitment was notably the weakest as one unit of increase in autonomy led to only a .05 unit of increase in commitment. This means that perceived job autonomy did not significantly contribute to commitment. H1 was thus not supported.

Among the predictor variables, employee engagement was found to be the strongest predictor of organizational commitment. For one unit of increase in engagement, there was a .62 unit of increase in organizational commitment when other variables were held constant. Employee engagement was the only predictor variable that significantly predicted commitment. Hence, H2 was supported. One unit of increase in the interaction between autonomy and engagement caused a decrease of .04 unit in commitment, indicating a negative relationship. The interaction effect was shown to be statistically not significant. This means that autonomy did not depend on engagement to predict commitment. H3 was therefore not supported.

Discussion

The present study examined three hypotheses: (1) perceived job autonomy significantly predicts organizational commitment; (2) employee engagement significantly predicts organizational commitment; (3) there is a significant interaction between autonomy and engagement in predicting commitment. Several factors that could explain the outcomes of the present study were discussed. The limitations and research implications were also delineated for improvements of future studies.

Table 4

Hierarchical Multiple Regression Testing the Main Effects and Interaction Effect of Predictor Variables (Centered) While Controlling the Effects of Organizational Tenure

Model	Variable	B	β	t	p
1	Constant	62.03		85.58	.000
	Organizational tenure	.30	.24	2.16	.034
2	Constant	61.66		104.95	.000
	Organizational tenure	.09	.07	.80	.425
	Perceived job autonomy	.06	.04	.45	.657
	Employee engagement	.45	.63	6.92	.000*
	Autonomy x engagement	-.01	-.04	-.51	.615

Dependent variable: Organizational commitment
N=83; *$p < .05$

Relationship between Perceived Job Autonomy and Organizational Commitment

The outcome of the present study revealed that employees' perceptions of their job autonomy did not significantly predict the likelihood of them staying in the organization although higher perceived job autonomy led to higher organizational commitment. The findings for hypothesis one contradicted previous findings that job autonomy predicted organizational commitment (Dude, 2012; Karim, 2010; Naqvi et al., 2011; Park et al., 2011). On the other hand, the present findings were supported by studies conducted by Gergersen and colleague (1996) and Jong and colleagues (1997).

A possible reason that could have caused the insignificant results lies in the job grade of the participants. Mainly because the participants consisted of a group of office and administrative support staffs, the amount of job autonomy contained in their job nature may not be sufficient to be measured by the Breaugh's Work Autonomy Scale. Sisodia et al. (2013) found that job autonomy enhanced employees' commitment only if they were in the higher hierarchical level of an organization. Meanwhile, employees in the lower hierarchical group possessed a lower job commitment regardless a high or low extent of job autonomy given to them. The findings of Sisodia and Das discovered that job autonomy was effectual only amongst employees with higher job grades but not for those with lower job grades in an organization. Of course, this may apply only to the non-Western context as the study was carried out in India. Since there was a significant interaction effect of job autonomy and hierarchical level upon organizational commitment of employees, as demonstrated by Sisodia and colleague (2013), there is a chance that participants in the present study, who are in the lower hierarchical level of the organization, are resolved to the limited amount of job autonomy in their jobs and they may then dispel job autonomy as a compelling reason for them to stay in the organization.

Mowday and colleague (1981) found an interaction effect between employees' perceptions of task characteristics and personality upon turnover intentions, which have been found to negative correlate with organizational commitment (Deconinck et al., 2011; Lew, 2011; Hussain et al., 2012). Owing to that, it is possible that the employees' personalities could affect their job perceptions, which could in turn impact their commitment to the organization. In explaining that hypothesis one was not supported, there is a possibility that the participants in the present study possessed a dominant occupational personality type of "conventional". This is tied back to the job nature of the employees which mainly involved developing and maintaining database systems, writing reports, and implementing academic policies defined by the organization, all of which are structured tasks that are based on guidelines

set by the organization or instructions from superiors. It is then possible that these individuals typically desire working within a chain of established commands and executing well-defined instructions (Holland et al., 1992). Hence, the reason for why employees' perceptions of job autonomy did not significantly predict their commitment could be due to their preferences of adhering to a set of rules, policies, and procedures rather than having the ability to exercise flexibility in performing their jobs.

Besides that, no differences were found in the job autonomy level between employees with standardized jobs and those with more discretion in their jobs (Adler, 2001). Due to the SOPs embedded in employees' jobs, a possible explanation of autonomy not affecting commitment could also be employees' lack of autonomy in their work method as they are required to follow the SOPs of their jobs. Through a focus group with the HR personnel of the organization, it was found that employees are usually required to adhere to SOPs in performing their tasks, which means that they may not have adequate amount of work method autonomy. As for work schedule autonomy, employees' work schedules have been fixed from 8.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. or 9.30 a.m. to 6.30 p.m., indicating that employees may not have autonomy in deciding on their work schedules.

The insignificant relationship between perceived job autonomy and organizational commitment can thus be attributed to several reasons such as employees' job grade, personality, SOPs, and organizational policies, most of which have been associated with job autonomy and organizational commitment in past studies.

Relationship between Employee Engagement and Organizational Commitment

Consistent with past studies (Ariani, 2013; Field & Buitendach, 2011; Saks, 2006), employee engagement was found to be a significant predictor of organizational commitment. Contradicting the present study, which found that higher engagement led to higher commitment, Britt (2007) pointed out that engaged employees are not necessarily committed to the organization as they are the ones likely to become frustrated and dissatisfied when they do not receive necessary support to be effective in their roles. According to Britt, given that engaged employees have the tendency to blame their superiors when they are not given necessary support and due to their high energy and proactivity levels, they are more likely to leave the organization in pursuit of a more supportive work environment. Thus, Britt's postulation serves to bring in the possibility that higher engagement is related to lower commitment in employees.

The relationship between engagement and commitment can be explained by the social exchange theory in that employees involve themselves in their roles at varying degrees depending on the resources they receive from the organization (Saks, 2006). When an organization does not provide the necessary resources for employees to thrive in their roles, it is highly likely that employees would withdraw or disengage from their roles, reducing their organizational commitment. On the contrary, if an organization provides the resources vital for employees to perform their roles, they would be more engaged in their roles and committed to the organization. This therefore supports the findings of the present study that employee engagement determines the likelihood of employees staying in the organization.

Relationship between Perceived Job Autonomy and Employee Engagement

Since employee engagement is dependent on the organizational resources received by employees to perform their roles, further testing of the interaction between perceived job autonomy and employee engagement on organizational commitment was carried out. Despite the fact that engagement was found to be a significantly positive predictor of commitment (Saks, 2006; Shantz et al., 2013; Yong et al., 2013), findings of the present study showed that engagement did not significantly improve the predictive ability of autonomy upon commitment. In fact, the interaction between the two variables has been related to a decrease in commitment. A few possible reasons that could justify for the not

significant results in hypothesis three include the leadership styles of managers and communication of feedback between superiors and subordinates.

Employee engagement in Malaysia is viewed as a process supported by engagement drivers such as communication, empowerment to make decision, supervisory support, and career development (Shahril, 2010). Leadership style of managers/supervisors has been found as an antecedent of engagement (Lockwood, 2007; Seijts et al., 2006) and employees' perceptions of their jobs (Felfe et al., 2006). In relation to the rejection of hypothesis three, a possible explanation could be the lack of transformational leadership (empowering employees) and a transactional form of leadership (task-oriented) being more prevalent amongst managers in the organization. Superiors may be more focused on completing tasks to the extent of forgoing the relational aspects of their leadership, depriving subordinates of the empowerment to perform their jobs or more specifically, to be provided with autonomy, informed, and guided on the use of autonomy at work. This implicates that managers in the organization should take into account subordinates' autonomous needs and empower them to achieve their goals when a certain amount of autonomy is given. The engagement of subordinates by superiors would increase with employees' positive perceptions of their work conditions, and ultimately, job autonomy could be strengthened as a predictor of commitment.

Communication of feedback has been advocated to enhance employee engagement (MacLeod et al., 2009). For communication of feedback between superiors and subordinates could also impact employees' perceptions of autonomy (Bauer et al., 2006; Deci et al., 1989; Dodd et al., 1998), employees would perceive greater job autonomy as a result of greater supervisory support, owing to the increase in experienced meaningfulness of work, felt responsibility, and knowledge of results. When employees are provided with opportunities to communicate and receive feedback from their superiors in interactions characterized by trust, knowledge sharing, and acknowledgement, they may be more motivated in performing their jobs, thus they are more likely to perceive supervisory support for autonomy and remain in the organization. This can be tied back to the outcome of the present study where it could be that superiors have not effectively engaged their subordinates by enabling them to understand the importance of job autonomy, weakening the interaction between autonomy and engagement. From the focus group, it was found that the criteria of which employees' performance are evaluated could be determined by employees themselves through discussing with their superiors. Based on the context in which employees' work criteria are determined, it can be said that employees in the organization have work criteria autonomy and their perceptions of this form of autonomy may be determined by whether they are being guided by their superiors in setting their key performance indicators (KPIs), competencies, and individual development plans (IDPs). Therefore, the engagement of employees, elicited by the leadership style of managers and opportunities for feedback communication, serves as an important factor that could have changed the direction of the results obtained in the present study.

In the present study, employees were found to possess considerable amounts of job autonomy (see Table 3), yet the results showed a not significant interaction between autonomy and engagement. This could be due to employees being not adequately or effectively engaged in their jobs as a result of their superiors being more task-oriented and/or the lack of effective feedback communication between employees and their superiors. Employees may have perceived themselves as having job autonomy but if they are not effectively engaged in their jobs by their superiors, there may not be any significant interaction between autonomy and engagement and this would even lower commitment when employees do not find meaning in their autonomy.

Limitations and Future Research

As only 83 participants were involved in the present study, the small sample size may have

caused the not significant results in the present study. The limitation was due to the mediocre response rate of 63.4%, which could be caused by employees' lack of understanding of the study and apprehension for negative consequences of their participation. So, one of the recommendations of the present study is to increase the sample size of participants, including corporate employees from different private higher education institutions. This would enhance the generalizability of research findings to the entire population of corporate employees in the Malaysian private higher education sector. A suggestion to improve the response rate would be to personally distribute the questionnaires to participants so that they would be able delve into the questionnaires on the spot and obtain direct clarification from the researcher should they have any doubt pertaining to the study.

There is also a possibility of response bias from participants as a result of the administration of self-report questionnaires. Response bias is defined as the systematic tendency to respond to questionnaire items in a particular direction (Paulhus, 1991). A suggestion would be to scramble the order of the items in the questionnaire so that participants would not tend to answer in a certain manner due to similarities in the way items of each scale were worded. Another alternative to reduce response bias would be to set up a survey collection box in a specified location where participants who have completed the questionnaires can place them in the box without being identified. This would assure participants of the anonymity of their responses and thus, they would be more likely to answer truthfully.

The present study utilized a cross-sectional design, which involved measuring the participants at one point of time. Because of this, the effects of participants' perceptions of autonomy and engagement on commitment may not be accurately measured due to possible confounding factors when attempting the questionnaire. To address this limitation, future research could consider conducting a longitudinal study in which participants' commitment were measured at the beginning of the study and at a later point of time after experiencing a certain

form of autonomy and engagement initiatives. Besides, future studies may consider conducting focus groups with the participants to further understand their work autonomy, involvement at work, and intent to stay in the organization. Findings from the focus group can then be used as qualitative data to supplement the quantitative study.

Because organizational commitment was not measured in different subscales in the present study, the effects of autonomy and engagement on affective, normative, and continuance commitment may not be seen distinctly. For future research, the effects of autonomy and engagement on the three types of commitment, specifically affective and continuance commitment, should be further explored as Karim and colleague (2007) have found both affective and continuance commitment to be distinguishable constructs, indicating that autonomy and engagement could affect both types of commitment in different ways.

Research Implications

The outcomes of the present study can be utilized by the human resources department of the organization to improve employees' commitment. Since autonomy was found to be an uncritical factor to commitment, organizational efforts to retain employees could focus on job characteristics other than autonomy and at the same time, consider personality and job grade as potential factors that could affect employees' perceptions of autonomy. Regardless, managers of should be aware of their subordinates' capacities and readiness to accept autonomy so that subordinates could be granted with the required support to perform their jobs. When employees are not ready to exercise autonomy in their jobs, training and development opportunities should be made available to them so that they would be able to develop job skills that allow them to be autonomous in performing their jobs. The present study also shed light on the importance of engagement in determining employees' commitment. If autonomy is to be given to the employees, it has to come with two-way communication where regular communication of feedback between managers

and subordinates could take place to facilitate employees' acceptance and practice of autonomy. Two-way communication could be facilitated in the organization by placing suggestion boxes to obtain employees' feedback on job-related matters and having regular open meetings where subordinates are encouraged to voice out their opinions to managers or upper management. Moreover, the head of departments in the organization could be trained on their feedback giving skills to engage their subordinates in their jobs. This also brings into context the importance of developing coaching and mentoring skills in managers so that they are able to guide subordinates to find answers to their own issues.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding that the present study did not show support for the relationship between autonomy and commitment, and the interaction between autonomy and engagement in predicting commitment, it nevertheless provided useful insights into the importance of

organizational commitment in the Malaysian workforce. Job autonomy, though demonstrated to be a strong predictor of commitment in past studies, does not imperatively contribute to employees' decisions of staying in an organization. Nevertheless, managers need to engage their subordinates by providing them with autonomy and enhancing it through effective leadership and feedback communication before their subordinates would engage themselves in their work and consequently, be committed to the organization. Furthermore, the Malaysian workforce can bank on the fact that employee engagement is an important determinant of organizational commitment so engagement efforts must not deteriorate but should instead be intensified in the midst of the availability of more attractive jobs in the market that could lure employees away. The present study, therefore, sets the direction for future studies to focus on studying resources or conditions in which providing job autonomy to employees would be effective to retain them within the organization.

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