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The Impact of Leadership Competencies on Employee Performance in Malaysia during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract:

Employee performance is essential to ensure the survival of many businesses. The literature has indicated that employee performance may be enhanced through leadership competencies. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, leaders have been the navigators for teams, departments and organizations, and it is through their competencies that employees may have felt motivated and productive even if they were working from home (WFH). As such, the purpose of this research was to study the influence of leadership competencies (cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence, and social intelligence) on employee performance in Malaysian businesses due to the limited studies available in the Malaysian context. This research may have an impact on the implementation of policies that would facilitate the training of leaders to enhance these competencies. Furthermore, this study would allow scholars to have a deeper understanding of the different competencies needed in a leader to enhance employee performance. The study used a deductive approach with questionnaires distributed online to 200 employees in Selangor. SPSS was used to conduct the data analysis and in studying the relationships between the three leadership competencies and employee performance in Malaysia. The results of the study showed that cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence, and social intelligence all had significant positive relationships with employee performance. The study found that employees in Malaysia want a leader who has all three of these leadership competencies, especially during a time of crisis, which is the scientific novelty of this study. Implications of the research findings are presented as well.

Keywords: employee performance, cognitive intelligence competency, emotional intelligence competency, social intelligence competency.

新冠肺炎大流行期间领导能力对马来西亚员工绩效的影响

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摘要:

员工绩效对于确保许多企业的生存至关重要。文献表明,通过领导能力可以提高员工绩效。自2020年新冠肺炎大流行开始以来,领导者一直是团队、部门和组织的领航者,正是通过他们的能力,员工即使在家工作(WFH)也可能感到积极和富有成效。因此,本研究的目的是研究领导能力(认知智力、情商和社会智力)对马来西亚企业员工绩效的影响,因为在马来西亚的研究有限。这项研究可能会对促进领导者培训以提高这些能力的政策的实施产生影响。此外,这项研究将使学者们更深入地了解领导者提高员工绩效所需的不同能力。该研究采用演绎法,将问卷在线分发给雪兰莪的200名员工。SPSS用于进行数据分析并研究马来西亚三种领导能力与员工绩效之间的关系。研究结果表明,认知智力、情商和社会智力都与员工绩效有显著的正相关关系。该研究发现,马来西亚的员工想要一位拥有所有这三种领导能力的领导者,尤其是在危机时期,这是本研究的科学创新。还介绍了研究结果的含义。

关键词: 员工绩效、认知智力能力、情绪智力能力、社会智力能力。

1. Introduction

Employee performance is imperative in the development and progress of any organization. Employee performance allows organizations to achieve their planned goals (Bahagia & Putri, 2020). Employee performance is crucial, as it will reflect on the company's brand and image as great employees lead to repeated customers. Employee performance will contribute to an organization's competitive advantage (Dahkoul, 2018). Furthermore, employee performance impacts organizational culture as well. Every organization places great importance on individual employee performance, encouraging them to innovate and compete for the betterment of the organization. In return, employees are appraised, rewarded, and promoted based on their performance (Cappelli & Tavis, 2016).

Employee performance is defined by Kalogiannidis (2020) as the behavior of an employee performing a designated task in the workplace. The scientific management study has been associated with employee performance. It focuses on increasing employee performance, productivity, and company profitability by finding the right employee for the job, the fair pay and reward for employees, their training and development. Today, many organizations provide feedback and apply performance appraisal, promotion, and merit pay systems to improve employee performance (Atatsi et al., 2019). At the beginning of 2020, many countries were forced into lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, this pandemic disrupted production, services, and the global supply chain, affecting customer demand, profit, and sales (Erokhin et al., 2019). A 2020 study by Deloitte, involving 1,000 of its employees in China, found that the COVID-19 pandemic had severely affected the company's cash flows, customer services, and overall management (Tymchenko, 2021). Further, the study found that the pandemic had affected employees' performance efficiency. Across the workforce in Malaysia, performance and productivity dropped by 5.4% during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. New

ways of working were adopted during the pandemic, with some employees working from home (WFH) and interacting with customers and co-workers virtually. However, some employees continued to travel to their workplace each day, performing their duties in accordance with strict standard operating procedures (SOP) (Garton & Mankins, 2020). Across the country, various measures—such as WFH, social distancing, 14-day quarantines, country and state border closures—were implemented that had the potential to affect employee performance (Chen & Sriphon, 2021). As it became compulsory for most employees to WFH, effective leadership became the driving force in motivating and enhancing employee performance during the lockdown (Chen & Sriphon, 2021).

1.1. Leadership

Many empirical studies have examined the influence of internal and external factors on employee performance. Such internal factors include the level of commitment and engagement of employees, incentives, the corporate recruitment environment, compensation policies, communication about training and development (Kalogiannidis, 2020), as well as employees' abilities and skills (Bahagia & Putri, 2020). External factors include living costs and family responsibilities (Bahagia & Putri, 2020). However, research is still scarce on the influence of leadership competencies—such as cognitive intelligence competency, emotional intelligence competency, and social intelligence competency—on employee performance (Krishnan et al., 2018).

There have been many definitions of leadership offered in the literature. According to Kruse (2013), leadership is a “process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal.” In order to have such an influence on employees, it is vital that leaders possess the aforementioned leadership competencies. They must have good judgement and be able to empathize, to interact with others, and to acknowledge employees' feelings and emotions in order to empower, motivate,

and inspire them to perform well (Raharja et al., 2019).

We have witnessed how the COVID-19 pandemic crippled many businesses and affected employees' work routines and activities, with many having to WFH and juggle work and family at the same time (Narayanamurthy & Tortorella, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic was, indeed, a lesson in crisis management and we saw leaders, such as Jacinda Ardern, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, displaying empathy, warmth, and transparency, as well as decisive and clear communication skills. We also saw successful leaders and companies displaying strong people-skills and supporting employees through the crisis. In this way, leadership competencies proved to be important in helping employees to cope with the pandemic and in enhancing employee performance. In Malaysia, AirAsia Group founder, Tony Fernandes, implemented strategies with those aims in mind, such as diversifying the business into e-commerce and finance, and providing mental health and employee/family support services for AirAsia employees (Pesek, 2021). This is an example of cognitive intelligence in leadership, which includes the ability to plan, innovate, and solve problems.

Emotional intelligence is another competency that is important for leaders, but which appears to be still lacking among Malaysian leaders. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown that emotional intelligence needs to be inculcated in bosses and managers, as listening to employees' views or problems without judging can have a tremendously positive effect on employee performance.

In order to build the necessary connection with employees, a leader must have the ability to interact with those employees. This can be considered a leader's social intelligence. A report on the COVID-19 Epidemic Employee pulse survey, conducted by Aon Malaysia, revealed that 74% of employees were WFH. These employees felt that there was lack of person-to-person communication, and they only felt visible during video calls with their bosses (Haroon, 2021).

An employee that feels that a company—or leader—promotes his or her physical, psychological, and social well-being is usually a high-performing employee. Hence, the purpose of this research is to analyze the likely relationships that may exist between leadership competencies and employee performance in Malaysian businesses. The leadership competencies in question are cognitive intelligence competency, emotional intelligence competency, and social intelligence competency. The results of this research would not only enrich the current literature but would also establish awareness of and advocate for the appropriate training in leadership competencies needed for the enhancement of employee performance in Malaysia (Krishnan et al., 2018).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cognitive Intelligence Competency

Cognitive intelligence, for the leader of a business, is the capability to reflect upon and analyze data and situations, and to discover talents within the company's employees that can help in the strategic planning of the business (Boyatzis & Ratti, 2009). Leaders with high cognitive intelligence competency will allow employees to develop the knowledge that is relevant to their work. They also display effective information processing, which leads to good decision-making (Güngör & Toprakçı, 2019). According to Swanson et al. (2020), "cognitive intelligence competency involves a leader's ability to assess the situation, understand the cause-and-effect, and recognize patterns in random events." Their study involved 497 respondents from several five-star hotels in Seoul, South Korea, working in divisions such as rooms, management, and food and beverage. They found that the cognitive intelligence competencies of leadership in these divisions, especially as it related to knowledge-sharing about jobs, had a significant effect on the performance of employees. The study of Diskiene et al. (2019) on 206 employees found that a leader's cognitive intelligence competency affected employee motivation and performance. The authors found that employees appreciated in their leaders a sense of equality and fairness when dividing tasks and roles, and that they respected leaders who could see potential in their employees and help them to develop. In China, the president of Alibaba, Ma Yun, has used cognitive intelligence in managing employees and helping them to reach their full potential, which has enhanced employee performance (Miao et al., 2018).

Based on this literature review, we propose that:

H1: In Malaysia, there is a significant positive relationship between the cognitive intelligence competency of business leaders and their employees' performance.

2.2. Leader's Emotional Intelligence Competency

Emotional intelligence competency is a leader's ability to identify, comprehend the impact, and work from an understanding of the emotions of his or her employees to enhance overall business performance (Boyatzis & Ratti, 2009). Adigüzel and Kuloğlu (2018) found that leaders with high emotional intelligence could easily resolve problems faced by employees. Wahyono et al. (2020) performed a study on 42 employees from BRI Bank, Semarang, Indonesia. They found that the employees felt a leader's emotional intelligence was critical in their motivation and performance. Choudhary et al. (2017) stated that, in India, leaders with more stable emotions could motivate and enhance employees' job performance at the organization. The authors mention that providing intellectual stimulation encouraged employees to challenge and question their old school of thought and find new solutions to unresolved problems. The authors' study on respondents working at private universities

and colleges in the Northern part of India discovered that leaders' ability to manage emotions affected employees' job performance. Dirani et al. (2020), Rocco and Shuck (2020) stated that great leaders provide an opportunity for employees to grieve and express grievance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Such leaders with high emotional intelligence are needed in the future and after the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance employee performance. Based on this literature review, we supposed that:

H2: There is a significant positive relationship between the leader's emotional intelligence competency and employee performance in Malaysia.

2.3. Leader's Social Intelligence Competency

Social intelligence competency is a "leader's ability to get along with others and understand social dynamics that influence the situation, often known as people skill or relational skill" (Swanson et al., 2020). According to Maamari and Majdalani (2017), social intelligence competency exhibited in a leader may influence the behavior of the leader's subordinates, hence strongly influencing their work performance. According to Diskiene et al. (2019), employee performance was affected by a leader's social intelligence. The authors stated that social intelligence in a leader creates trust between the leader and employees. The employees would feel free to talk to their leader regarding work- and non-work-related issues, subsequently building strong connections and trust. Katou et al.'s (2021) study on private companies involving 657 Greek employees found that social intelligence possessed by leaders had an impact on employees' work performance. During the COVID-19 pandemic, employees' morale may be low, and they may come across a tough challenge adapting to a new situation, e.g., WFH. Hence, a leader with high social intelligence would have frequent and explicit communication with employees as an essential part of managing crisis, positively impacting employees' work performance. Furthermore, Dirani et al. (2020) stated that leaders who exhibit high social intelligence through psychological empowerment, positive reinforcement, and appreciation of work and communication during a crisis would allow employees to continue performing their work. Based on this literature review, we proposed that:

H3: There is a significant positive relationship between the leader's social intelligence competency and employee performance in Malaysia.

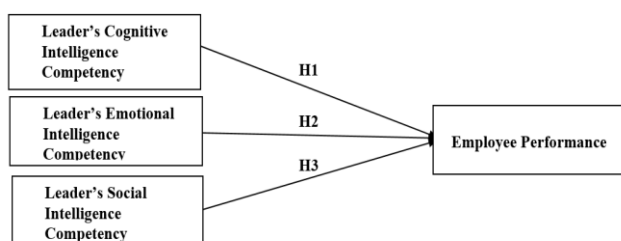


Figure 1. The conceptual framework

3. Research Method

3.1. Sample

Due to the ongoing lockdown, the respondents answered the questionnaire online. Two hundred employees working for multinational corporations (MNC) in Selangor, Malaysia, participated in the survey. Selangor was preferred as it has the highest gross domestic product (GDP) and foreign direct investment in Malaysia. Non-probability sampling method was used in collecting the sample.

3.2. Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire included two sections. Its first section comprised the demographic profiles including gender, race, age, highest education level, and monthly income. The second section of the questionnaire contained questions related to the independent variables and the dependent variable of the study. A seven-item scale to measure employee performance adapted from Kalogiannidis (2020) was applied in the questionnaire. Next, a six-item scale for a leader's cognitive intelligence competency, a five-item scale for their emotional intelligence competency, and a four-item scale for their social intelligence competency were adapted from Palaima and Skaržauskienė (2010). Palaima and Skaržauskienė's (2010) item scale was derived from Boyatzis and Goleman's (2007) Emotional and Social Competency Inventory, Self-Assessment Questionnaire (ESCI-U SAQ) using factor analysis. Each variable in this study was measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree."

3.3. Data Analysis

Using SPSS software, the overall reliability of the study was 0.920, while the reliability for individual variables were 0.955 for leadership cognitive intelligence competency, 0.842 for leadership emotional intelligence competency, 0.918 for leadership social intelligence competency, and 0.861 for employee performance, all above the acceptable level of 0.70. The Z-score calculation for normality was 1.8023, which is within $-3.29 < Z < 3.29$. Furthermore, the linearity test assumption was met based on the randomized pattern of the scatter plot.

3.4. Demographics of the Respondents

The respondents were composed of 51.5% males and 48.5% females. Approximately 43.5% of the respondents were Chinese, 33% were Indian, and 14.5% were Malaysian. Forty-six percent of the respondents were between 31 and 40 years old, followed by 23.5% between 20 and 30 years old, and 22.5% between 41 and 50 years old. Forty-five percent of the respondents have a bachelor's degree, while 30% of the respondents have a master's degree as their highest qualification. Financially, 31.5% earned a monthly income between RM3,001 and RM4,000, 27% earned a monthly income

between RM4,001 and RM5,000, and 23.5 earned less than RM3,000. Table 1 shows the respondents' demographic profile.

Table 1. The respondents' demographic profiles

Demographic features		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	103	51.5
	Female	97	48.5
Race	Malay	29	14.5
	Chinese	87	43.5
	Indian	66	33.0
	Others	18	9.0
Age	20-30	47	23.5
	31-40	92	46.0
	41-50	45	22.5
	> 50	16	8.0
Highest Education level	Diploma / A levels	34	17.0
	Bachelor's Degree	90	45.0
Income level	Master's Degree	60	30.0
	Others	16	8.0
	< RM3,000	47	23.5
	RM3,001 – RM4,000	63	31.5
	RM4,001 – RM5,000	54	27.0
	> RM5,000	36	18.0

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Pearson Correlation

The relationships between leadership competencies, specifically the cognitive intelligence competency, emotional intelligence competency, and social intelligence competency, and employee performance were tested using the Pearson correlation test. The results indicate that the correlation with leadership cognitive intelligence competency is 0.850, the correlation with leadership emotional intelligence competency is 0.712, and the correlation with leadership social intelligence competency is 0.514. Table 2 shows the results of the Pearson correlation test.

Table 2. The results of the Pearson correlation test

		Employee Performance	Leader's cognitive intelligence competency	Leader's emotional intelligence competency	Leader's social intelligence competency
Employee Performance	Pearson Correlation	1	.850	.712	.514
	Sig. (2 tailed)				
	N	200	200	200	200

4.2. Multiple Regression Analysis

In the multiple regression analysis, the Durbin-Watson test resulted in 1.932, which is within the

required range of 1 to 3. The result of the Durbin-Watson test indicates that there is no autocorrelation among residuals (homoscedasticity). The R-Square shows a value of 0.793, meaning 79.3% of the total variance in the dependent variable is explained by the total independent variables. Table 3 shows the model summary.

Table 3. Model summary

Model	R	R-Square	Adjusted R-Square	Std. Error of Estimation	Durbin-Watson test
1	.891 ^a	.793	.790	.52240	1.932

According to an analysis of variance (ANOVA), the p-value is 0.000. Therefore, the model is statistically significant and is considered fit for further analysis. The F value of 250.762 indicates that the conceptual model is strongly significant and that the variation is not completely accounted for by chance. Table 4 shows the ANOVA analysis in this study.

Table 4. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) in this study

Model		Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F	Significance
1	Regression	205.300	3	68.433	250.762	.000 ^b
	Residual	53.489	196	.273		
	Total	258.789	199			

The coefficients in Table 5 reveal that H1, H2, and H3 are accepted as the significant values for leadership cognitive intelligence competency, leadership emotional intelligence competency, and leadership social intelligence competency as they were all lower than 0.05. The highest B value obtained in this study belongs to the leader's emotional intelligence competency, which is 0.664., indicating that a leader's emotional intelligence competency is the most central factor in this study affecting employee performance. Additionally, the leader's cognitive, emotional, and social intelligence competencies have positive B values, which means that, when these independent variables increase, employee performance will increase too. Lastly, the collinearity statistics were analyzed. In this study, the VIF value for all independent variables was moderately correlated. Therefore, the result shows no multicollinearity problem. Table 5 represents the results of the coefficients, while Table 6 shows the summary of the hypotheses' results.

Table 5. The results of the coefficients

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		Collinearity Statistics		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Tolerance	VIF
Constant	.686	.093		7.357	.000		
Leader's Cognitive Intelligence Competency	.609	.043	.712	14.227	.000	.421	2.374
Leader's Emotional Intelligence Competency	.664	.084	.660	7.944	.000	.153	6.550
Leader's Social Intelligence Competency	.495	.065	.548	7.585	.000	.202	4.946

Table 6. Summary of the hypotheses' results

		Significance	Results	Gradient (Beta, β)
H1	There is a significant positive relationship between the leader's cognitive intelligence competency and employee performance in Malaysia.	.000	Accepted	.609

Continuation of Table 6

H2	There is a significant positive relationship between the leader's emotional intelligence competency and employee performance in Malaysia.	.000	Accepted	.664
H3	There is a significant positive relationship between the leader's social intelligence competency and employee performance in Malaysia.	.000	Accepted	.495

5. Conclusion

The results of this study in Malaysia have shown that a leader's cognitive intelligence competency has a significant positive association with employee performance, similarly to past studies (Diskiene et al., 2019; Gungör & Toprakçı, 2019; Miao et al., 2018; Swanson et al., 2020). A leader's emotional intelligence competency also has a significant positive association with employee performance in Malaysia, as in previous research (Adigüzel & Kuloğlu, 2018; Choudhary et al., 2017; Dirani et al., 2020; Rocco & Shuck, 2020; Wahyono et al., 2020). Lastly, the leader's social intelligence competency has a significant positive association with employee performance, as supported by past research (Dirani et al., 2020; Diskiene et al., 2019; Katou et al., 2021; Maamari & Majdalani, 2017; Swanson et al., 2020).

Every organization has to start making strategic plans for the future as they move forward and embrace the fact that businesses may have to continue to operate amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Leadership competency programs have to be executed with emphasis on enhancing leadership skills, and this must be incorporated to enhance employee performance. There is a need for leadership programs to enhance intelligent competencies in contemporary organizations, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as employees need to be guided to avoid uncertainty about how they should perform the work. A leader's cognitive intelligence competency plays a significant role in employee performance, hence organizations must dedicate special attention to leaders' cognitive development, heightening their ability to think and analyze information (Pauline, 2017).

Roupnel et al. (2019) stated that choosing the right person as a leader is important for employee enhancement. The leader nevertheless must be exposed to training such as action-based learning. Action-based learning done in a small group with other leaders encourages problem-solving in four important areas: (1) Application of scientific methods; (2) A quest for a rational decision; (3) The sharing of advice and frank criticism; (4) Learning of new behaviors (Roupnel et al., 2019). A leader's emotional intelligence competency plays a significant role in employee performance; hence organizations must focus on training programs such as coaching, an effective method of stimulating and supporting self-reflection, practice, and personal transformation, boosting emotional intelligence (Roupnel et al., 2019). Employees' performance will improve with a leader who has high self-awareness (Diskiene et al., 2019). A leader's social intelligence competency plays a

significant role in employee performance; hence organizations must focus on programs encouraging communication, e.g., mentoring sessions encouraging leaders to provide support, direction, and feedback to employees to enhance their personal development and performance (Lamm et al., 2017). Kalogiannidis (2020) stated that leaders must communicate with their employees to help solve problems affecting their work, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, as better interaction will greatly influence employee performance. Promoting leadership competencies in organizations will not be successful without support from the Ministry of Human Resources (MOHR) and the Malaysian Institute of Human Resource Management (MIHRM) in developing policies and procedures to adopt proper leadership programs for enhancing employee performance. The scientific novelty of this study is its discovery that employees in Malaysia want a leader with all three leadership competencies, especially during a crisis, as this study was conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown between March 2020 and May 2021 (Rosmin & Muhammad Rosli, 2020).

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study has a few limitations; however, they can be used to conduct future studies. Other states of Malaysia should be included in the study, notably Sarawak, Johor, Penang, and Sabah, due to their high GDP per capita. It will also be important to conduct this study after the COVID-19 pandemic as a longitudinal one. Mediating variables such as work-life balance (WLB) may be included as this could be an intervening variable affecting employee performance (Brhane & Zewdie, 2018). This research will contribute to the existing knowledge on the importance of leadership competencies (cognitive, emotional, and social intelligence competencies) for employee performance in Malaysia. The results of this study will promote the appropriate leadership-training programs needed in organizations to enhance employee performance. The intervention of the Malaysian government, policymakers, and professional bodies in creating awareness and providing assistance in implementing the appropriate leadership competency training is vital. This will improve the organization's culture, climate, and attitude of employees.

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