

## Employees' Tenure and Length of Service and Performance: A Case Study on the Moderating Role of Psychological Empowerment among Supervisors

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**Abstract:** Employee productivity is extremely crucial in today's business environment. In order to achieve high productivity, companies need to have a team of high performing employees. This empirical study explores the influence of employees' tenure in an organisation together with their academic background in the relationship towards improving and enhancing their performance. The study also looks into whether psychological empowerment has any influence on the relationship between their tenure and academic background and performance. Respondents for this research were from the supervisory staff from Malaysia's glazed ceramic tile industry. The results of the study have shown that employees' academic background and their tenure at their organisations have an influence on their performance but in the presence of psychological empowerment, both demographic variables do not improve performance.

**Key words:** *Supervisory Level Staff, Performance, Ceramic Tile Companies*

### INTRODUCTION

Ceramic tiles, both wall and floor, have been used for centuries as it helps add beauty and style to any home or business and will last for many years with least maintenance. However, Malaysia's ceramic tile manufacturing industry is facing numerous challenges. Among them include the threat from lower priced ceramic tile imports from low-cost Chinese manufacturers and the continual high price level of liquefied petroleum gas and natural gas, the main fuels used to power the kilns in the tile manufacturing process. These factors have had a serious effect on the local manufacturing industry. Another important factor is the lack of local industries to support the glazed ceramic tile manufacturing industry whereby most of the raw materials have to be imported from countries like China, Spain and Italy. This has resulted in an increase to the production costs of this industry.

For companies in the manufacturing sector, especially for ceramic tile manufacturers in order for them to survive and remain in business in the face of numerous challenges, they have to look into their unit labour cost which is defined as labour compensation per person employed relative to output produced per employed person. If an organisation wants to stay competitive, it has to

either decrease its labour costs or increase its labour productivity [1].

In order to control unit labour cost, organisations today have to focus on ensuring that their employees always perform at the best of their ability in order to bring down unnecessary costs which can contribute to an increase in the unit labour cost. This can be achieved by developing a team of high performers, motivated to produce high quality work by putting in enough efforts on their jobs [2].

For this research, the performance of the supervisory level staff in Malaysian ceramic tile companies was measured. Supervisory staff, also known as middle managers were chosen as respondents for this study because they are situated between senior leaders and frontline staff in the organisation [3] and one of their main job functions is to coordinate and direct staff, train them and motivate them. The population for this research consisted of diverse ethnic backgrounds, different academic qualifications and a significant number of female employees.

An organisation's productivity and profitability are affected when employees do not perform well [4]. Therefore, employers have to find ways to motivate employees to become high performers in order to attain the organisation's targets [5]. In another study [6], it was noted that poor performers contributed to a 20 percent deficit in output. Poor performers also

generate significantly less revenue than their motivated peers and tend to make many more serious mistakes, which can result in waste and require expensive redoing [7]. Therefore, poor performing employees are a huge liability to any organisation.

Despite knowing the importance of high performing employees, employers are still faced with the problem of building and sustaining a team of high performers in their respective organisations. Employers are unable to utilise fully the full potential of all their employees in order to enable them to operate at their peak / optimised level of performance. For these reasons, it is hoped that this study will benefit companies, managers and also employees on the importance of producing a team of high performing employees.

A substantial amount of research work has been done to determine the factors that could influence employee job performance. The existing literature on improving and enhancing employees' performance reveals the role of organisational antecedent factors. Organisational factors which are factors that are external to the employee consist of the work environment, standard operating procedures and management's own behaviours. Past literature have indicated that among the organisational factors with strong influence on employee performance is psychological empowerment.

Besides the organisational factors, demographic variables also play a role in determining how an employee performs in his / her job. According to Oyewole and Popoola [8], demographic variables are personal factors that include age, gender, educational level, tenure or working experience, job level and monthly salary. Two common demographic variables are employees' academic background and their tenure or years of service at their respective organisations. Previous research found that the more higher educated the employee was, the more concerned he/she was on performance and productivity as compared to lower educated employees [9-10]. For employees' tenure at their respective organisations, Sepahvand, Guilani and Zamani [11] observed that longer tenured employees showed higher levels of commitment than shorter tenured employees which resulted in better performance among them.

A lot of research has been carried out on the link between psychologically empowering employees and their performance and the results obtained have shown a clear link between these two variables [12-13]. However, there is a gap in the relevant literature concerning the effect of psychological empowerment in enhancing the value of employees'

academic background and their tenure at their respective organisations in order to achieve better employee performance. Seibert, Wang and Courtright [14] suggested that more studies were needed to examine the moderating roles of psychological empowerment on employee job performance. Based on this reason, this study will also look into the impact of psychological empowerment as a moderator in the relationship between employees' academic background and their tenure and employee performance. The results of this study are expected to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on improving and enhancing employee performance especially among the supervisory level staff in ceramic tile companies.

The structure of this paper is as follows: the second section reviews the literature on employee performance, psychological empowerment, their academic background and tenure, the third section is on the methodology used. This section consists of the questionnaire used, population and sampling. The fourth section discusses the results obtained in this study while the concluding section reviews the results and their implications.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Employee Performance**

Performance is a function of ability and motivation. Employee performance is defined as whether a person executes their job duties and responsibilities well. Therefore, organisations need to find ways to enable their employees perform at their best. Levels of employees' work performance are determined not only by their ability but also by the strength of their motivation.

For effective work performance to thrive in the organisation, motivation has to be managers' top priority [15]. Employees' motivation represents a key factor which determines employees' actions and behaviours towards accomplishing the goals of the company. Armstrong [16] highlighted that one is motivated when the effort put in will lead to the attainment of the set goal and the rewards associated with its achievement. Therefore, it is one of the main functions of managers or employers to motivate their employees so that they will be able to contribute to the success of the organisation.

Fostering a supportive working environment in which employee perform well is essential to employee retention and motivation [17]. Desired performance is achieved only when employees perform effectively and efficiently when they get a sense of mutual gain for themselves and for their organisation when they attain a certain goal or target set by their employers [18].

In order to optimise employees' performance, employers have an important task to determine the appropriate individual and organisational factors that would contribute towards them performing well at their workplace [19]. Therefore, to motivate their employees, managers or employers must fully understand what their employees want and properly design the work environment to complement their needs or desires in order to enhance their performance.

### **Psychological Empowerment**

Empowerment is the dynamic process of redistribution of power between management and the employee [20]. Two key perspectives of empowerment from the literature have been identified. The first perspective is on the psychological dimension while the second is the structural perspective which examines the role of managers and leaders in sharing power and authority with their employees at their respective organisations.

The psychological perspective is based on how employees experience or feel empowered at work. Conger and Kanungo [21] defined this perspective as a "process of enhancing the feeling of self-efficacy among organisational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by formal techniques of providing efficacy information" (p.474). These researchers view empowerment as a motivational construct meant to enable employees to carry out their tasks effectively when they have the enhanced feelings of self-efficacy to carry out the tasks.

This point was further stressed by Thomas and Velthouse [22] who expanded the works of Conger and Kanungo [21]. They highlighted that empowered individuals will perform better than those employees who are relatively less empowered as empowerment is a process that makes employees utilise their full potentials to carry out their tasks effectively due to the feelings of heightened levels of intrinsic task motivation. Another researcher, Spreitzer [23] viewed empowerment mainly as a motivational construct evident in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination and impact. These four cognitions refer to the individual employee's intrinsic motivation in relation to a job. Therefore, psychological empowerment is the personal evaluation of the experience of empowerment [24]. When employees are psychologically empowered, there will be a corresponding positive change in attitude, cognition and behaviour, self-efficacy as well as better psychological well-being which will all be brought into work [25].

Kemal [26] analysed the relationship between psychological empowerment and employee performance and noted that empowerment had a direct and positive effect on employees' behaviours and thus improved on their performance. However, studies done by Dewettinck, Singh and Buyens [27] and Wood and Wall [28] concluded from their studies that empowerment, especially psychological empowerment, significantly, but only marginally explained the difference in employee performance levels where there was only between six and seven per cent of the variance in performance when the employees felt psychologically empowered at their work place.

Therefore, the first hypothesis is to empirically test the relationship between psychological empowerment and their performance.

H<sub>1</sub>= There is significant positive relationship between psychological empowerment and employee performance.

### **Employees' Academic Background**

Academic background or education levels refer to the academic credentials or certificates an individual has obtained. Many studies have been conducted to determine the link between employees' performance on their job and their academic background. Kuneel, Hezlett and Ones [29] and Daniel [30] observed that education facilitates performance in most jobs. The more education the employee received, the more are the effects of education and skill on his / her job performance, leading to a more productive employee. Higher educated employees held higher positions in their organisations and were assigned more responsibilities which motivates them to perceive themselves as having a good understanding of the work and its duties, therefore, were able to perform much better than those with lower education. In another study by Ng, W. H. Thomas, and Feldman [31], they noted that higher educated workers appeared to engage in fewer counterproductive work behaviours like workplace aggression, workplace substance abuse and absenteeism as compared to employees with lower qualifications.

However, there are studies that show higher educated employees have higher expectations from their employers and when these expectations are not met, they tend to quit more often as compared to lower educated employees [32-33]. This means that when expectations are not met, the lower is the performance among these higher educated employees.

From here, it can be summed up that employees with higher qualifications were more concerned about

their success and their organisation's success, resulting in their focus being placed on performing well on their jobs.

Therefore, the second hypothesis is to empirically test the relationship between employees' academic background and their performance.

H<sub>2</sub> = There is significant positive relationship between employees' academic background and their performance.

### **Employees' Tenure**

The second demographic variable is employees' tenure or years of service at their respective organisations. Previous researches conducted have shown that employers could expect better performance from employees who have worked for a long time with them as they are more dependable when compared to newer employees [34]. Researches done by Schmidt, Hunter and Outerbridge [35] and Shaffril and Uli [36] showed that employees' performance improved with their experience. Ng and Sorensen [37] noted that employees with higher tenure were more familiar with their job roles and may have also reached a higher level of career attainment than newer employees and therefore, were able to perform much better on the job. Similarly, in a study done on teachers, Ruggai and Agih [38] observed that there was a significant positive relationship between experience and their work performance. Individuals with greater work experience are also more likely to be paid better and given more opportunities to develop themselves which is another reason for better work performance [39].

However, there are also studies that have shown that tenure not necessarily improves performance over a period of time. Ng and Feldman [40] found evidence of a curvilinear relationship between organisational tenure and job performance. According to them, although the relationship of tenure with job performance is positive in general, the strength of the association decreases as tenure increases. In another study, it was found that the impact of this tenure on core task performance is most significant between 3 and 6 years with an organisation, and gradually diminishes until about 14 years of employment [41].

Based on the above statements, the third hypothesis is to empirically test the relationship between employees' tenure and their performance.

H<sub>3</sub> = There is significant positive relationship between employees' tenure and their performance.

### **Moderating role of psychological empowerment**

A variable functions as a moderator when it affects the direction and / or the strength of the relationship between the independent and dependent variable [42]. Thomas and Velthouse [22] highlighted that psychological empowerment is characterised by the increased feelings of intrinsic task motivation by individual employees and is measured in terms of four rewards that they get directly from their work tasks: impact, competence, meaningfulness and choice. Spreitzer, Kizilos and Nason [43] stated that employees' feel psychologically empowered when they perceive that they have some control on the works that they are doing. Therefore, empowered employees are motivated to perform better on their jobs. Based on these reasons, Indradevi [44] concluded that psychological empowerment should be seen as an intrinsic motivator.

Putting in extra efforts or giving back to their respective organisations would only be possible if the employees felt that they were motivated through being empowered. Therefore, the relationship between employees' tenure and their academic background and their performance is likely to be enhanced with an increase in psychological empowerment.

Based on these findings, the following relationships were hypothesized.

H<sub>4</sub> = Psychological empowerment moderates the relationship between employees' tenure and employee performance.

H<sub>5</sub> = Psychological empowerment moderates the relationship between employees' academic background and employee performance.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A set of questionnaires were developed to collect data on employee performance, psychological empowerment and the two demographic variables, employees' tenure and their academic background. Employee performance was measured using the Employee Work Performance questionnaire, developed by Suliman [45] which was based on five factors, work skills, work duties, work enthusiasm, readiness to innovate and job performance factors. The Spreitzer's Empowerment Scale, 1995 developed by Spreitzer [23] consisting of a twelve item scale on meaning, competence, self-determination and impact, was used to measure psychological empowerment.

For employee performance and psychological empowerment, a five point Likert scale was used to allow the respondent to express how much they agree or disagree with a particular statement in the questionnaire. 600 sets of questionnaires were

distributed to supervisory staff in tile manufacturing companies and the response rate was 39%.

Frequencies and percentages of gender, age, academic background and years of service of respondents were first analysed. This was followed by the frequency distribution for employee performance and psychological empowerment according to their mean and standard deviation scores. Then, the reliability of each item in the questionnaire was determined using the Cronbach coefficient alpha [46] to ensure that the measures are free from any error. The correlation analysis was performed to quantify the strength of association

between two numeric variables. Inter correlations checking was then carried out to determine if the variables were independent or correlated by using the Pearson Correlation. The last technique applied was regression analysis to test the hypotheses generated in this study.

**RESULTS AND ANALYSES**

**Demographic Profile of Respondents**

Demographic profile of all respondents is as per Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	195	82.6
	Female	41	17.4
Academic Background	Form 3 and below	11	4.7
	Form 5 / O-level	53	22.5
	Form 6 / A-level	31	13.1
	Certificate	55	23.3
	Diploma	41	17.4
	Degree	45	19.1
Tenure	<1 year	38	16.4
	1-5 years	64	27.1
	6-10 years	48	20.3
	11-15 years	31	13.1
	>15 years	55	23.3

**Frequency Distribution of Variables**

The frequency distribution for each study variable obtained is as follows:

Table 2: Frequency distribution for each variable

Item	Mean Rating	Standard Deviation
Psychological empowerment	3.33	.76
Employee performance	3.59	.57

**Reliability Analysis: Reliability Analysis of variables of the study**

Table 3: Reliability analysis between variables

Variable	Cronbach Alpha
Performance	.885
Psychological Empowerment	.913

Nunnally and Bernstein [47] suggested all alpha values were greater than .70 are considered reliable for group research. From the results obtained, as

shown in the table above, the alpha values for both variables were greater than .70, therefore they are reliable.

**Correlation Analysis**

Table 4: Zero-Order Correlations between variables

	Performance	Psychological Empowerment
Performance	1	
Psychological Empowerment	.747**	1

From the table above, the inter correlations among the two variables researched were positive and statistically significant. The relationship between psychological empowerment and employee performance showed a strong correlation ( $r=.747$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ).

**Regression Analysis for Hypotheses**

*Relationship between Psychological Empowerment and Employee Performance*

Table 5: The effects of regression analysis for the independent variables on employee performance

Independent Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	Beta (β)	Std Error	t- value	Significance (F)
Psychological Empowerment	.652	.808	.028	20.775	.000

From the above table, the  $\Delta R^2$  change for psychological empowerment was .652 which meant that the variability percentage of employee performance increased by 65.2 percent with the addition of psychological empowerment.

*Relationship between Employees' Academic Background and Employee Performance*

The second research question in this study was to what extent employees' academic background explained employee performance? The hypothesis posited that employees' academic background will have a positive significant effect on employee performance.

Table 6: The effects of regression analysis for the independent variables on employee performance

Independent Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	Beta (β)	Std Error	t- value	Significance (F)
Academic Background	.065	.256	.022	4.018	.000

This research found full support for the above hypothesis. From the standard regression analysis (Table 4.6), employees' academic background was positively related with employee performance ( $\beta=.256, p=.000$ ). This indicates that the higher the level of employees' academic background, the higher was their job performance.

*Relationship between Employees' Tenure and Employee Performance*

The third research question in this study was to what extent employees' tenure explained employee performance? The hypothesis posited that employees' tenure will have a positive significant effect on employee performance.

Table 7: The effects of regression analysis for the independent variables on employee performance

Independent Variable	R <sup>2</sup>	Beta (β)	Std Error	t- value	Significance (F)
Employees' years of service	.077	.278	.023	4.394	.000

This research found full support for the above hypothesis. From the standard regression analysis, employees' years of service was positively related with employee performance ( $\beta=.278, p=.000$ ) as given in Table 4.7. This indicates that the longer the duration of the employees' years of service, the higher was their job performance.

**Psychological Empowerment Moderates the Relationship between Employees' Academic background and Performance**

The moderating effects of psychological empowerment on the relationship between academic background and employee performance were first tested. Table 4.8 depicts the regression results of the study.

Table 8: Regression Results of the relationship between the academic background and the interaction variable and employee performance

Model	β	R Square	Adjusted R Square	R Square Change	F Change	Sig F Change
1	.083	.652	.649	.652	216.280	.000
2	-.090	.660	.655	.008	5.309	.022

In Step 1, the two variables, employees' academic background and psychological empowerment were entered. The R<sup>2</sup> was equal to .652 meaning that the independent variables explained 65.2 percent of the variances in employee performance.

In Step 2, with the inclusion of the interaction variable, R<sup>2</sup> increased very slightly from 65.2 percent to 66.0 percent with the change in R<sup>2</sup> at 0.08 percent and it was significant (p=.022). This significant interaction shows that psychological empowerment does moderate the relationship between employees' academic qualification and their performance. However, the β value of -.090 indicates that one standard deviation increase in academic background led to a .090 standard deviation decrease in employee performance. This showed that the higher the academic background of the employees, the lower was their employee performance in the presence of psychological empowerment.

This result stands in contradiction to what was expected and to what has been demonstrated in previous research in that psychological empowerment has a strong influence on employees' performance at their workplaces. The results show that in the presence of psychological empowerment, employees' academic background has a significant but negative relationship with their performance.

**Hypothesis 5: Psychological Empowerment Moderates the Relationship between Employees' Tenure and Performance**

The effects of psychological empowerment as a moderating variable in the relationship between employees' academic background and their performance was studied and the results are presented in Table 4.9 below

Table 9: Regression Results of the relationship between the demographic characteristic (employees' academic background) and the interaction variable and employee performance

Model	β	R Square	Adjusted R Square	R Square Change	F Change	Sig F Change
1	.093	.668	.665	.668	231.762	.000
2	-.020	.669	.664	.000	0.244	.022

In Step 1, the two variables, employees' years of service and psychological empowerment were entered. The R<sup>2</sup> was equal to .668 meaning that the independent variables explained 66.8 percent of the variances in employee performance.

In Step 2, with the inclusion of the moderating variable, R<sup>2</sup> increased very slightly from 66.8percent to 66.9 percent with the change in R<sup>2</sup> at 0.1percent but it was not significant (p=.622). This insignificant interaction shows that psychological empowerment does not moderate the relationship between employees' years of service and their performance.

**CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this research was to test the relationships between psychological empowerment, employees' academic background and tenure, and employee performance.

The first hypothesis on the relationship between psychological empowerment and performance, found full support for the said hypothesis. In the standard regression analysis, psychological empowerment was positively related with employee performance. This indicated that the higher the level of psychological empowerment was felt by the

supervisory staff of the ceramic tile manufacturing companies, the higher was their job performance. This is in line Spreitzer [23] who highlighted that psychologically empowered employees are likely to be seen as effective because they were able to proactively execute their job responsibilities.

On the relationship between employees' academic background and their performance, this research Shows that the higher the level of employees' academic background, the higher was their job performance. This is in line with the findings of Daniel [30] who noted that the higher the education level of employees, the better was their performance.

Similarly, this research also found that employees' tenure was positively related to their performance. The longer their tenure at their respective organisations, the higher was their job performance. Employees who have worked for a much longer period were more familiar with the job and therefore, were able to perform much better than newer staff. They were also more committed and loyal to their organisations and held more responsible positions that made them perform better [45].

When psychological empowerment was the moderator in the relationship between employees' academic background and performance, a negative but significant relationship between employees' academic background and their performance was obtained. This shows that for every increase in the employees' academic background, there was a decrease in their performance with the presence of psychological empowerment. For lower educated employees, psychological empowerment would help to improve their job performance. However, for higher educated employees, they may already have the required competencies to carry out their tasks. Additional empowerment would then not affect their performance or in some instances, could even lower their performance.

A negative and a non-significant relationship between employees' years of service and their performance ( $\beta = -.020$ ,  $p = .622$ ) was obtained with psychological empowerment being the moderator. This insignificant result showed that there was no relationship between employees' years of service and their performance with the presence of psychological empowerment. Employees who have worked long in organisations tended to be poor performers as they were no longer motivated as age increased when compared to younger or new employees who were usually more dynamic, enthusiastic and excited about the job and the rewards it would bring for their increased effort [48]. This means that when employees felt that they were psychologically empowered, their length of service did not have any influence on their performance.

As with any research conducted, there are limitations that should be considered. First, this study was conducted within a single sector of the manufacturing industry. This leads to the question of generalizability and applicability of the findings of this research to other sectors in the manufacturing industry in Malaysia. A suggestion would be that research like this, in future, be conducted across various manufacturing industries. Secondly, the respondents for this study were from the supervisory or the middle management level. This designated group was selected because available literature has shown the role played by them in enhancing the total performance of the company.

Future research should include different levels of management as respondents rather than just the supervisory level as in this study. This is because different levels of management will have different views on psychological empowerment as the motivating factor that could affect their job performance. Secondly, since this study could not clearly reflect the moderating effects of psychological empowerment in the relationships between the employees' academic background and

their tenure, and employee performance, data should be collected across various industries in the manufacturing industry as well as at different levels of management, should be able to show some relationship of the moderator in these relationships.

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