

# WORK ENGAGEMENT IN NURSING: DO JOB DEMANDS AND RESOURCES REALLY MATTER?

Noraini Othman<sup>1,\*</sup>, Zahiruddin Ghazali<sup>2</sup>, Sa'ari Ahmad<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Business Management, College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 UUM, Sintok, Kedah Darulaman, Malaysia

<sup>2</sup> Othman Yeop Abdullah Graduate School of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 UUM, Sintok, Kedah Darulaman, Malaysia

<sup>3</sup> School of Business Management, College of Business, Universiti Utara Malaysia, 06010 UUM, Sintok, Kedah Darulaman, Malaysia

\*For correspondence; Tel. + (60) 124328005, E-mail: n.aini@uum.edu.my

**ABSTRACT:** *The greatest strength and asset of any service-based organizations is their customer-contact employees. In healthcare organizations, nurses as customer-contact employees play an important role to portray the organization's competence as they spend most of their time directly with patients. Their attitudes and behaviors will significantly impact the quality of healthcare services. The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between job resources (job feedback and job autonomy) and job demand (work overload) with work engagement. A total of 366 staff nurses working in two general hospitals in East Malaysia participated in this study. Significant positive relationships were found between job feedback, job autonomy and work engagement. In contrast, work overload was shown to have no significant impact on work engagement. Job resources which include job feedback and job autonomy were significant predictors of work engagement among nurses.*

**Keywords:** Work engagement, job characteristic, job feedback, job autonomy, work overload, nurses

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Nursing profession is a very stressful and emotionally demanding profession. As nurses represent frontline employees and play the role of boundary spanners, their attitudes and behaviours will significantly impact the quality of healthcare services provided to the patients. According to [1], nurses play an important role to portray the healthcare organization's competence as they spend most of their time directly with patients. The quality of nursing has a main impact on patients' physical and psychological health outcomes both throughout and after hospitalization [2]. Under such circumstances, nurses in public hospitals should exhibit the "positive psychology" of work engagement. Moreover, [3] argued that work engagement in nursing is becoming significant because of (1) a global shortage of nurses who are the main group of healthcare providers; (2) political resolve to restrain the growth of rising healthcare costs; and (3) a medical error rate that threatens the health of people.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Work engagement is defined as "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption" [4], leads to positive job performance [5]. Vigor is a state where individual experiences a high degree of energy, a strong work ethic and an ability to persevere when confronted with challenging work [4]. Meanwhile, dedicated individuals have an enthusiastic attitude and being motivated and proud of their work. They also experience a sense of significance, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Finally, absorption in work is being fully immersed in work and feeling happy about one's work roles. Individuals who are absorbed in their work perceive time to pass quickly and find it difficult to separate themselves from works [4]. Engaged employees have a sense of energetic and effective relation with their jobs, and perceive that they are able to manage their job demands [6].

Additionally, [7] argued that engaged employees are regularly go the extra mile, love their jobs, and proud to be part of the organization. He further claimed that greater engagement leads to better financial performance and better financially-performing organizations have higher engagement. In general, organizations expect their employees to be proactive and show initiative, highly engaged in their

work and committed to great quality performance standards. Hence, these organizations require employees who feel energetic and dedicated, and who are absorbed by their work [8].

Many studies provided empirical evidence on the relationship between work engagement and work-related outcomes. For example, work engagement has been found to be positively related to job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviours [5], in-role performance [6], organisational commitment and business unit performance (customer satisfaction, loyalty, profitability, productivity, turnover and safety) [9] and financial returns [10].

According to the JD-R model [11, 12], job characteristics can be grouped in two broad categories: job demands and job resources. This model elaborates how employees' working conditions affect their health and commitment to their organization via two independent processes. Firstly, a motivational process in which job resources encourage employees' motivation to foster engagement and commitment toward organization and, secondly, a health impairment process wherein high job demands diminish employees' mental and physical resources causing job burnout and health problems [13].

In order to increase high work engagement within the nursing workforce, nurses need to have adequate job resources (e.g., job characteristics) in doing their jobs. Job resources refer to those physical, social or organizational aspects of the job that may (a) reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs; (b) be functional in achieving work goals; and (c) stimulate personal growth, learning and development [11, 4]. According to [14], job resources fulfil basic human needs, including the needs for autonomy, relatedness [15] and competence [16]. For instance, appropriate feedback promotes learning, thus increasing job competence, while decision latitude and social support satisfy the need for autonomy and the need to belong, respectively. Additionally, the job resources' intrinsic motivational potential is also recognized by job characteristics theory developed by [17]. Furthermore, [18] noted that job characteristics theory by [17] is the most explicit theory in predicting particular strategies of redesigning jobs that have positive effects on employee well-being, motivation and performance.

Meanwhile, job demands refer to the characteristics of the job that need persistent physical or psychological (cognitive and emotional) effort or skills and are related to physiological or psychological costs [12]. Job demands may turn into job stressors when employee’s job requires high effort and abilities of the employee, and the employee may not recover from these stressors [19]. Within the nursing setting, common job demands include pressure due to heavy workloads and extreme administrative works, time-related demands (e.g., shift-work, working long hours), emotional demands (e.g., nurses being constantly dealing with people’s problems, and suffering) and typical demands in the nursing environment (e.g., dealing with an increasing number of HIV/Aids patients) [20, 21, 22].

According to [23], a specific relationship between job demands and work engagement is still unclear. Several studies have shown that job demands have no effect on work engagement, but positively and significantly related to psychological well-being, namely, exhaustion [24, 25], depression [26], absenteeism [27], and burnout [12]. Nonetheless, some studies [28, 29] found linear relationship between job demands and work engagement. This scenario postulated that the higher the job demands an employee perceives, the more they are engaged in their work. A meta-analysis study by [30] argued that the association between job demands and work engagement depends on whether the demand is a challenge or a hindrance demand. Employees recognize challenge demands (e.g., high level of responsibility) as an opportunity for personal growth or future gain. In contrast, employees perceive hindrance demands (e.g., role overload) as constraints that hinder goal achievement of effective performance [31].

[32] purported that employees would continuously improve their performance and committed to their jobs if they are given suitable jobs, authority and responsibility, and also supported by the supervisors. As a result, they will feel energetic and strong, and passionate about their work, leading to greater in-role and extra-role performance, and better service quality. Therefore, this study sought to examine the effect of job resources (job feedback and job autonomy) and job demand (work overload) on work engagement among Malaysian nurses.

Based on these arguments, we hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 1: Job feedback is positively related to work engagement.

Hypothesis 2: Job autonomy is positively related to work engagement.

Hypothesis 3: Work overload is negatively related to work engagement.

**3. METHODOLOGY**

Data were gathered from a sample of staff nurses working in two general hospitals in East Malaysia. A total of 400 self-administered questionnaires were distributed with the assistance of the Matron’s Office of the participating hospitals. The distribution and collection of the completed questionnaires took about two months. Of the 400 questionnaires distributed, only 366 questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 91.50%.

A shortened nine-item version of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) developed by [33] was employed to measure work engagement. This scale consists of three constructs, which are measured with three items each: vigor, dedication and absorption. Respondents reported on a seven point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “never” to 7 = “always”. Job resources comprised of job characteristics (job feedback and job autonomy,). Each subscale consisted of three items developed by [34]. All items were evaluated on a seven point Likert-scale ranging from 1 = “very inaccurate” to 7 = “very accurate”. A scale by [35] measured 4 items of work overload. Respondents evaluated based on a seven Likert scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”. Demographic information such as gender, marital status, age, race, organizational tenure, job tenure and educational qualification were also requested.

**4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Our results found that majority of the staff nurses were females (98.8%) while the remaining were males (1.2%). Almost of the staff nurses were married (91.3%). The mean age of the respondents was 31.52 years (SD=7.78). In terms of ethnicity, the majority of the respondents were Malays (54.0%), followed by other races (38.5%), Indians (4.9%), and Chinese (2.6%). Education-wise, 71.6% of staff nurses had basic training and 28.4% had post basic training. As for organizational tenure, the mean value was 6.77 years (SD=6.08). Meanwhile, the mean value for job tenure was 8.21 years (SD=7.19).

**Table (1) Descriptive Statistics, Correlations, and Reliabilities of the Study Variables**

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Work Engagement
Work Engagement	4.97	0.82	(0.85)
Job Feedback	5.66	0.87	0.30**
Job Autonomy	4.87	1.12	0.26**
Work Overload	5.28	0.87	0.14**

  

Variables	Job Feedback	Job Autonomy	Work Overload
Job Feedback	(0.83)		
Job Autonomy	0.29**	(0.68)	
Work Overload	0.22**	0.07	(0.68)

Note: \*\* p<0.01, \* p<0.05. Figures in parentheses denote the reliability coefficients for the study variables

Table (1) represents the descriptive statistics, correlations, and reliabilities of the study variables. On the average, the level of job feedback (M = 5.66, SD = 0.87), and work overload (M = 5.28, SD = 0.87) were slightly high. On the other hand, the mean value for work engagement (M = 4.97, SD=0.82), and job autonomy (M = 4.87, SD = 1.12), were found to be moderate. The Cronbach’s alpha values for the study variables were considered acceptable as the values were above the threshold value of 0.60 [36]. Meanwhile, correlations between the study variables were found to be significant (p < 0.01). However, job autonomy was insignificantly correlated to work overload.

**Table (2) Regression Analysis for the Relationship between Job Resources, Job Demand and Work Engagement**

	Std Error	Beta
(Constant)	.343	2.703
Job Feedback	.050	.222
Job Autonomy	.038	.135
Work Overload	.048	.068
	t	Sig.
(Constant)	7.882	.000
Job Feedback	4.484	.000
Job Autonomy	3.597	.000
Work Overload	1.420	.950

**Note:**  $R^2$  (.130), ( $R = .359$ ), ( $F = 17.808$ ), ( $p = .05$ )

Table (2) summarizes the results of the regression analysis. Regression analysis procedure aimed to gain a better understanding of the strength of association between work engagement and the independent variables: job feedback, job autonomy, and work overload. Results of the regression analysis indicate that job feedback and job autonomy contribute to overall nurses’ work engagement, thereby, supporting H1 and H2. In contrast, work overload was not shown to be a predictor of work engagement, thereby, leads to the rejection of H3. The model explained 13 per cent of the variance in work engagement as measured by the  $R^2$ .

The results revealed that job resources (job feedback and job autonomy) were significant predictors of work engagement. Nurses who perceived they are given sufficient job feedback and job autonomy would also display greater work engagement. The results of this study validated previous findings with regard to positive and significant relationship between job feedback, task significance, job autonomy, and work engagement [28, 37, 38, 39].

Job resources not only help employees to deal with job demands but also have the potential to motivate employees. According to [19], job resources can play an extrinsic motivational role, since a resourceful work environment will create an individual’s willingness to dedicate one’s efforts and abilities to work task. Furthermore, social exchange theory by [40] stated that employees who are given challenging and enriched jobs will feel obliged to exhibit greater work engagement. Furthermore, [17] proposed the positive relationship between job resources and work engagement aligns well with the Job Characteristics Theory. This theory assumes that job characteristics such as autonomy, feedback and skill variety have motivating potential which leads to positive outcomes, and this intrinsic motivation is similar to the concept of work engagement. Hence, nurses who perceive high job feedback and job autonomy in their jobs will be more encouraged and motivated to display higher work engagement in their daily jobs.

Meanwhile, job demand (work overload) was found to be unrelated to work engagement. According to [23], a number of studies have concluded that job demands have no effect on work engagement. Malaysian healthcare sector is still far away from achieving the recommended nurse-to-population of 1:200 by the World Health Organization (WHO). This situation is believed to be critical as nurses have been recognized as the backbone of the healthcare services [41]

and represent the largest employee group within the healthcare industry [42]. Under such circumstances, existing nurses have more workload and greater responsibilities to enable them to deliver quality care service to the patients. However, due to their job nature with high workloads and responsibilities cause nurses to be accustomed to greater work burden. These may have accounted for the non-relationship between work overload and work engagement.

The results of the study provide various implications for enhancing engagement levels among the nurses. Since job feedback and job autonomy effect work engagement, it is important for the hospital administrations and the Ministry of Health to provide the necessary job resources (job feedback and job autonomy) to nurses to enable them to become more engaged in their works. Specifically, the supervisors (sisters) should provide more feedback to nurses regarding their jobs. This is to ensure that the nurses know how well they are doing. Furthermore, they should be given sufficient autonomy in doing their daily jobs to warrant efficiency when delivering quality care services to the publics. Generally, public hospital administrations should place a greater emphasis on improving and increasing job resources as they predict work engagement.

Future research should expand the scope of this study by focusing on more job resources and job demands variables. Besides, this study is limited to staff nurses working in two public hospitals situated in East Malaysia. The same research could be expanded and replicated among other healthcare personnel from public and private hospitals. Furthermore, the present study has only focused on the unidirectional impact of job characteristics (job feedback and job autonomy) and job demand (work overload) on work engagement. However, recent studies have established the reciprocal relationship between them. Future research should be undertaken to test this dynamic relationship between job feedback, job autonomy, and work overload on work engagement in the nursing context.

**5. CONCLUSIONS**

Our results support the idea of the JD-R model, which suggests that work engagement is mostly influenced by work-related resources. The present study provides support for a link between job resources (job feedback and job autonomy) and work engagement. Within the nursing setting, sufficient job resources may help nurses cope with their demanding jobs, eventually enhance the quality of healthcare services. Nurses who perceive their jobs as being high on job feedback and job autonomy will be more encouraged and motivated to display higher work engagement in their daily jobs. Therefore, the Malaysian Ministry of Health and nursing management should create a resourceful work environment that supports the work engagement of nurses.

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\*For correspondence; Tel. + (60) 124328005, E-mail: [n.aini@uum.edu.my](mailto:n.aini@uum.edu.my)