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## High Commitment HR Practices in Malaysian SMEs

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### Introduction

The scope and complexity of global challenges that organizations face today are remarkable. To survive, let alone prosper in such conditions, organizations must manage their resources strategically and effectively. Technological innovation coupled with global competition has dramatically influenced the business landscape. Traditional bases of competition have had to be revised to include human resources as part of the strategic system for success (Ahmad & Schroeder, 2003; Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Zhou et al., 2013). Managing human resources has become a central feature of organizational success (Zhou et al., 2013). Research studies suggest that specific combination of human resource practices can improve organizational effectiveness and capability (Becker & Gerhart,

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1996; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Saridakis et al., 2016; Tracey, 2012), while being closely associated with sustainable competitive advantages (Michie & Sheehan, 2005). HRM practices are constituted by configurational combinations of specific methods, procedures, and processes that companies use to implement policies (Jiang et al., 2012; Lepak et al., 2006a).

Depending on the nature and level of human resource development, two types of HR systems can be identified. The two HR configurations can be grouped into either control or commitment practices (Hauff et al., 2014; Hu et al., 2020). Control practices aim to increase efficiency through the enforcement of strict rules and providing rewards based on outputs. In contrast, high commitment practices create conditions that encourage employees to identify with the organization's goals and commit effort towards achieving them. High commitment human resource configurations forge a psychological link between the organization and the employee, such that employees are trusted to execute their tasks in alignment with organizational goals (Boon & Kalshoven, 2014; Zhang et al., 2019). They also generate trust among employees and include factors such as empowerment and participation in decision-making, richness of communication, training and development of employees, selective hiring, team and idea pooling, low status and authority demarcation between management and staff, and lastly, rewards commensurate with effort and value of staff regardless of role (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005; Pfeffer, 2010). Through such protocols, high commitment practices result in a higher level of positive experiences and employee engagement (Boon & Kalshoven, 2014; Zhang et al., 2019).

Given their role in enhancing productivity and performance, businesses have increasingly looked for ways to hold onto and motivate human talent to develop a high commitment, high performance workforce (Walton, 1985; Morris et al., 1993). Consequently, many organizations have experimented with ways to develop their workforce as a resource for constructive change (Takeuchi et al., 2012) and competitive advantage (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Over time, research studies have accumulated sufficient evidence to indicate that high commitment HR practices induce positive job attitudes in employees (Boon & Kalshoven, 2014; Kehoe & Wright, 2013). Notwithstanding the need and

importance of configuring human resource practices for competitive success in the face of increasingly complex and dynamic environments, there remains a lack of understanding of the process and mechanisms through which HRM practices exert their influence (Delery, 1998). This lack of understanding of pathways and processes towards high performance HR practices has often been referred to as the “black box” (Boselie et al., 2005; Edgar & Geare, 2009; Harney & Jordan, 2008; Jiang et al., 2013; Lepak et al., 2006b). Even though a burgeoning amount of research enquiry suggests that investing in employees leads to positive organizational impact in terms of employee commitment, engagement, and performance (Messersmith et al., 2011), the processes and conditions under which these outcomes are derived remain largely unclear (Boon & Kalshoven, 2014).

Most discussions of HRM in SMEs have focused on HRM issues in small and medium-sized enterprises (de Kok & Uhlaner, 2001; Szamosi et al., 2004). This has highlighted the tendency of owner-managers of SMEs adopting unsophisticated and casual people management practices instead of formally adopting HRM systems (Kaman et al., 2001; Kotey & Slade, 2005; Ma et al., 2016). With limited formal HR practices in SMEs, whether or not the adoption of HR practices is control-oriented or commitment-oriented is inconclusive (Cai et al., 2011; Su & Wright, 2012). In this chapter, the author looks at the front-end of the black box and explore the nature of the relationships SMEs enact with processes that trigger leaders to adopt particular HR approaches and practices. The study setting is SMEs in the developing country setting of Malaysia. Typically, high commitment work systems are implemented in a large firm context through formal institutional structures and formal human resource practices. Although it is widely acknowledged that formal and professional HRM policies are crucial for the long-term success of small firms (Chandler & McEvoy, 2000; Jiang et al., 2013; Mazzarol, 2003), small firms are much less likely to adopt formal HR practices than large firms (Bartram, 2005; Kotey & Slade, 2005). In the small firm context, one may wonder about the extent of high commitment work systems and what form they take. Indeed, given the resource challenges that SMEs face, one may ask whether SMEs are concerned about employees’ welfare

and, if they are, what approaches and practices they deploy to engender employee engagement and commitment?

Sitting at the apex of organizations, leaders and senior managers are key agents who influence the social exchange process (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) and shape the form and nature of HR policies and their execution. Consequently, SME owner-managers' attitudes and actions present a fundamental cue that employees read and respond to by taking a specific reciprocal position(s) towards the organization. If SME owner-manager actions are viewed positively, employees respond by providing attitudes and behaviours that the organization values. This is consistent with the view of high commitment (Arthur, 1994; Zhang et al., 2019) or high involvement (Edwards & Wright, 2001; Kim & Wright, 2011) work systems that engender positive behaviours by developing a psychological link between organizational goals and employee needs. This chapter examines HR practices that SMEs use. To tackle this gap, an in-depth interviews with SME owner-managers were conducted in Malaysia and their views and experiences in managing human resources were examined.

## Social Exchange and Human Resource Practices

With limited resources, SMEs may be constrained when offering generous compensation, as well as training and development, which is not helpful when attracting and retaining talent (Adla et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2016). Also, relatively weak HR infrastructure and a lack of HR expertise result in a rather informal nature of HR practices in SMEs (Kaman et al., 2001; Kotey & Slade, 2005; Ma et al., 2016). The owner-manager of SMEs plays a key role in managing and retaining their manpower based on exchange mechanism (Adla et al., 2019). This study adopted the Social Exchange Theory, where the central notion highlights the reciprocity in relationships between individuals where valued outcomes are gained as a result of the mutual reciprocation of effort (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Developing positive employee behaviour through HR practices is an important part of the jigsaw of organizational success in highly competitive environments. Valuable talent can easily be poached by competitors

or feel insufficiently motivated to perform. Under these conditions, employee perceptions of how committed their employer firm is towards them influences their attitudes and discretionary behaviours (Wayne et al., 1997). The employer's positive discretionary activities signal to employees that the organization cares for their well-being, which impels their reciprocal motivation and commitment to the firm. This view aligns with social exchange theory, in which reciprocity arises out of voluntary actions rather than formal contracts that typify economic exchange (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005; Veth et al., 2019). Based on this perspective, whenever an organization exhibits goodwill, employees will reciprocate by going beyond contractual behaviours, resulting in a mutually beneficial gain for both the firm and the employees (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005; Veth et al., 2019).

Social exchange theory is premised on the notion of “exchange” and “reciprocity” between two parties engaged in a relationship over time. Viewed as such, the employment relationship can be seen as one constituted by economic and social exchanges (Aryee et al., 2002). As such, exemplified and embodied leadership behaviours through HRM practices contribute to the exchange relationships between the employer and employee. When an organization invests in its employees, it sets up an expectation that such treatment will be eventually reciprocated (Gouldner, 1960) through the initiation of voluntary actions by the employee (Blau, 1964). The social exchange process takes form when the organization engages in activities that employees perceive to take care of their welfare and well-being, which subsequently leads employees to reciprocate in the form of good deeds (Aryee et al., 2002). For instance, if an organization provides sought-after training to develop employee competencies, employees will respond by engaging in desirable work-related behaviours (Bagger & Li, 2014; Matthews & Toumbeva, 2014; Wayne et al., 1997).

High commitment HR practices are typically conceived as carefully designed configurations of HR practices that improve performance (Boselie et al., 2005), and are implemented on the assumption that they will induce employees to actively engage with the organization. This is known as the soft approach to HRM, as opposed to a hard or control-based approach, in which employees are closely monitored and directed

(Arthur, 1994; Truss et al., 1997). When organizations invest in these high commitment practices, employees are assumed to see this as the organization's expression of care, commitment, and trust towards them and the work they perform. In addition, such investments signal the organization's desire to engage in a long-term relationship with employees (Boon & Kalshoven, 2014; Kehoe & Wright, 2013; Sun et al., 2007). According to Osterman (1995), organizations that seek to implement high commitment work systems tend to adopt work-life programmes in their effort to create a committed workforce. Work-life initiatives that ease employee childcare burdens bring about favourable employee outcomes and productivity (Glass & Finley, 2002; Masterson et al., 2021). Organizations that offer childcare support as part of work-life programmes witness heightened levels of employee loyalty (Glass & Estes, 1997; Mansour & Tremblay, 2018). The presence of work-life benefits has also been associated with organizational citizenship behaviour (Agarwala et al., 2014; Lambert, 2000). Poelmans et al. (2003) claim that family supportive programmes are a way for firms to compete for scarce resources in the labour market. Broadly speaking, employee-directed facilitations from organizations, whether in the form of HR practices or supportive leadership behaviour, improve employee commitment and retention (O'Neill et al., 2009; Straub, 2012).

## Institutional Business Context of Malaysia

Malaysia is a developing country that aspires to attain developed country status quickly. Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) make up 97.2 percent of business establishments and constitute 48 percent of total employment in Malaysia (SME Corp. Malaysia, 2020b). As the major employers in the Malaysian economy, it is important to understand the stance of SMEs when managing human resources. As part of their drive to achieve a global presence, a growing number of foreign firms have set up branches or subsidiaries in Malaysia, where many MNCs establish their regional or global operations. In 2021, Malaysia attracted RM80.6 billion (equivalent to \$19.4 billion) in foreign direct investment (MIDA, 2021). This suggests that the Malaysian workforce has been exposed to employment

opportunities with foreign firms structured with well-established human resource management practices. Lehmann (2009) observed that Malaysian firms competing for scarce human resources are constantly at a disadvantage relative to American and European firms that offer higher salaries and better opportunities. Hence, local SMEs face challenges to compete with these MNCs and large local firms for human resources. Foreign employers who are more resourceful in both institutional structure and financial resources when offering support make local SMEs less attractive as potential employers (Au, 2021). Given this setting, it is interesting to examine how SMEs manage HR to hold and motivate their employees to perform at a high level.

## Research Method

In order to explore how Malaysian SMEs develop HR practices to attract, retain, and motivate employees, a qualitative research approach was adopted. A thematic analysis was carried out to analyse data collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

## Sample Identification

Owner-managers of Malaysian SMEs were invited to participate in the study. Selection criteria were pre-specified to ensure that all participants in the study had initiated the business, owned at least 50 percent, and played an active managerial role in the business. Various definitions of what constitutes an SME were applied in different countries. A number of past studies have considered organizations with up to 250 or 500 employees as SMEs (Cassell et al., 2002; Cunningham, 2010; Zheng et al., 2006). For the purpose of this chapter, SMEs were defined as companies with 200 or fewer workers (for the manufacturing sector) and 75 or fewer workers (for the service and other sectors). This criterion is in accordance with the guidelines set out by SME Corporation Malaysia (SME Corp. Malaysia, 2020a).

A complete list of the total population of entrepreneurs in Malaysia is not available. Therefore, participants were randomly selected from the Malaysian Trade organization's SMEs list available online. Subsequently, snowball sampling was adopted to recruit more participants. A total of 48 entrepreneurs were interviewed. All of them were owner-managers of the firms who possessed more than 50 percent ownership and were active in a high-level managerial role. The sample consisted of business owners from various industries, including manufacturing, wholesale, retail, and services. All businesses involved in the study were small and medium, ranging from 1 to 130 employees. The oldest business was established in 1981, and the most recent in 2015.

## Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews, where interviews guides were used flexibly, were conducted around the experiences of SMEs in managing the business, where particular attention was given to human resource practices, as well as owners-managers' motivations and challenges when initiating and sustaining the business, and any prior experiences that shaped their current practices. Most interviews were in English, a widely used language in Malaysia. Several interviews were conducted in Chinese or Bahasa Malaysia. On average, each interview lasted approximately one hour. With the permission of the participants, all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis was adopted for the analysis of the qualitative data collected from the interviews. The inductive approach is a data-driven process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Patton, 2002), in which the data coding is done "without trying to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame, or the researcher's analytic preconceptions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). The researcher read the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the interview data before starting the coding process. In this step, the researcher picked up all meaningful units concerning how the



owner-managers deal with their employees. The researcher completed the coding procedure for the first transcript and then moved onto the subsequent transcript. After coding the first five transcripts, the researcher searched for themes based on all the codes. The researcher made constant comparisons between cases by grouping all related meaningful units and trying to assign a tentative theme using simple phrases that resembled the language used by the owner-managers. Once the initial themes were established, the researcher continued coding the rest of the transcripts. Throughout the coding procedure, each code was assigned to a respective theme. During the data analysis, the author engaged with the literature on social exchange theory to understand and explain the emerging themes related to how SMEs' owner-managers undertake HR practices. This procedure of developing new themes, reviewing themes, and naming themes continued until the final transcript was completely coded. In this step, the researcher applied constant comparisons for the themes again, to ensure that they captured the nuanced meanings and were clearly differentiated. The researcher established three main themes that identified how owner-managers in SMEs adopt social exchange mechanisms in their HR practices: (1) High commitment HR practices through informal, ad-hoc, and personalized support; (2) Performance-based high commitment HR practices; and (3) Care-based approaches to HR practice development.

## Findings

### **Theme 1: High Commitment HR Practices Through Informal, Ad-Hoc and Personalized Support**

An analysis of interview data revealed that employee engagement and commitment are essential in Malaysian SMEs' goal of achieving higher productivity. The SMEs highly value employees' proactive involvement in business operations and novel problem-solving. High involvement and the commitment of employees frees SME owner-managers from routine operational decisions and allows them to focus on important strategic decisions. Employees who proactively contribute ideas and undertake

self-initiated actions contribute most strongly to the performance of SMEs. The observations made by SMEs show the importance of human resource practices that provide organizational flexibility and empower, trust, and build a collective sense of ownership and teamwork in employees.

### **Illustration: Empowerment and Responsibility**

*Along the way, everybody contributes great ideas. Lots of one-on-one [sessions] where we can air our issues. Weekly meetings where we raise a question and everyone can contribute [...] in a way, it helps control the stress, so it doesn't get too much on [just] us [the founder]. (SME41, interior design and construction)*

### **Illustration: Sense of Ownership**

*The thing that I am looking out for is to have a sense of ownership. This means they take ownership of every task [I assigned]. The only way you can get this [sense of] ownership [is to] treat them as adults and give them the flexibility they want. Then, they understand what we want. (SME35, telecommunication)*

*We have staff that perform. You can see they treat the company as their own company ... the major thing you can do is make them feel like they are working in their own. company. That's more valuable. (SME38, Mobile App developer)*

### **Illustration: Creative Problem-Solving and Teamwork**

*They don't just do give you instructions, they also support you with ideas. They challenge you on what you're doing as well. I think that's a very important element. They don't just do what you tell them to do; they're thinking about the product as well. (SME37, online recruitment platform)*

SMEs manage employees through displays of care and concern. For instance, providing maternity care or allowing a mother to work from

home when her child is unwell can profoundly impact the bond between the employer and employees. Supporting employees in terms of flexible work schedules, time off, and unrecorded paid leave were SMEs' most common forms of support. Allowing employees to take time off when there is a family emergency, prolonged public holidays, and shortened business hours are some of the simple gestures SMEs can enact to show care towards employees. Additionally, the small scale of operations allows SMEs to quickly respond to employee requests. In SMEs, it is possible to adjust and even accommodate ad hoc employee requests due to the flexibility of small-scale operations and the minimal cost of adjusting. This allows SMEs to execute HR practices with a type of informality and responsiveness that formal HR processes cannot easily accommodate in large firms. Indeed, SMEs use closeness and personalized responsiveness as a means to differentiate the nature of care and support they provide via a vis larger firms. Individualized attention becomes a bridge builder for deep relationships between the SME and its employees.

### **Illustration: Flexible Work Hours**

*In terms of monetary rewards, we can't give what other bigger companies can give, but if you're looking for flexibility, more work-life balance, then at least we can discuss that. (SME23, skincare manufacturing)*

*At times they come a little bit late, you know, they have to go back early, they have to take their time off, take their kids to the clinic, they have to go to the hospital. All these little things, I try not to be too rigid. Give and take. (SME34, company secretarial service)*

Furthermore, SMEs suggest that their focus is not just about retaining employees. They are aware that SMEs are less attractive in terms of career development, and thus, they pay more attention to getting employees engaged and motivated in the tasks they execute during employment with the firm rather than excessively worrying about retention.

### **Illustration: Conducive Work Environment**

*Over here, we always give them the flexibility. Based on this type of working culture, things do get done. They do appreciate [it]. It's not just about monetary rewards for them anymore; it's more like they have a place to come, instead of just [a] full time (housewife) at home. (SME23, skincare manufacturing)*

The analysis also showed that SMEs organize and develop high commitment practices that are highly informal and personalized. Ad hoc and personalized support in terms of money and time feature strongly in employee support. This very much corresponds to the contextual condition of Malaysia, where the income level of the operations-focused workforce is generally not high. Workers' monthly incomes are only sufficient to cover routine living expenses, and their salaries do not allow them to accumulate sufficient savings to cover unplanned expenses or large outlays (e.g., purchase of big assets like a motor vehicle or house). These employee stressors create conditions in which the SMEs can configure a specific HR practice or arrangement that demonstrates to the employee that the organization cares for them. The stress situation opens an opportunity for the paternal/maternal characteristics of Malaysian SME owner-managers to surface. This allows them to emerge as key sources of support for protecting and enhancing the quality of life of their employees. Such responsibility is not written but is understood, and most respondents seem very happy to accept it.

### **Illustration: Trust**

*We are a small company. We are not like Intel or big companies who [can] give lots of huge incentives, so how do we motivate them? It's by giving them trust and by [being] sincerely caring for their welfare and pay attention to [their] work environment. These have helped us over the past few years, yea. (SME14, apparel manufacturer and retailer)*

In probing the drivers and motivations of SMEs to manage human resources, two main approaches to relationship-building and exchange surfaced: performance-based social exchange and care-based exchange.

## Theme 2: Performance-Based High Commitment HR Practices

In terms of performance-based exchange, a few SMEs explicitly admit that their support is offered conditionally to employees meeting certain expectations, whilst others imply this quid pro quo exchange in their conversations. SMEs expect higher productivity and performance in return for the support they provide to employees. They highlight that, as employers, they have “paid” for their employees’ time. With this approach, employers compensate employees if additional work needs to be done, especially if it intrudes on employees’ nonwork time. Employers are selective when providing support; only employees who demonstrate commitment and loyalty can gain an employer’s support and care, especially when it comes to nonwork interests. The instrumental nature of this quid pro quo exchange can be noted by SMEs who stress heavily on employees’ work-life balance, yet make it clear that benefits can only be accessed if the firm’s needs are met first.

### Illustration: Conditional and Loyalty-Based Benefits

*If they work long [enough] with me, I will consider that (laugh)... in my company, those staff that work with me for more than three years, only they are eligible to claim all my benefits. Yes. You need to have a certain level of loyalty. (SME01, electrical appliances manufacturing)*

### Illustration: Performance First, Benefits Later

*When a company is pushing for a [job] tender, I think staff should not think about work-life balance but about just winning it. And then everybody wins because salary wise, reward wise (will be raised accordingly). Then you can buy your balance, by having days off, your holidays. (SME07, training)*

Expectation of performance is a central core in the enactment of the performance-based employer-employee relationship. Employees are given consideration only when they can meet the performance standard.

Failure to meet performance standards is met with sharp corrective actions and even the withdrawal of “kind” acts. In other words, benefits contained within HR practices are conditional.

### **Illustration: Flexibility-Performance Trade-off**

*Sometimes they tell me, “I don’t feel like coming in today. I got nothing [pending]. I see you after lunch?” I say, “ya, it’s fine”[...] When they have [unfinished] work, sometimes they don’t want to bring [it] home, so they stay [back]. Since they [may] have taken it easy for days or [even] weeks, they ensure everything is delivered on time when they have tasks. I think it is totally fair. (SME35, telecommunication)*

### **Illustration: Care Predicated on Customer Orientation and Business Performance**

*I do not involve with every project site, but I help out a little bit everywhere. So I always check them [the employees] out, “would you be able to do this? what you’re up to?” [...] We have a very good team; they stepped up and took ownership of some of the projects. And they’re very well-rounded. [...] We always tell our operations team that being proactive in help, and [they should] always take the initiative to settle problems in advance. That would be [the] most important [to retain customer]. Most contractors usually just leave it and wait for the clients to raise the issue, and they will solve it. But for us, we bring it up first and solve it for you. (SME41, interior design and construction)*

The prevailing norm of performance-based practices is that employees must prove themselves before they can gain full access to benefits. Commitment over time, consistent performance, and loyalty are key dimensions that SMEs use to gauge the level of support they will render to employees. Thus, SMEs are willing to put mechanisms in place to support employees, if there is demonstrable proof of sustained high work performance. In exceptional cases, SMEs are even willing to give out equity shares to safeguard the commitment of high performing, highly loyal employees.

### **Illustration: Benefits Earned over Time**

*We give out shares. So when you enjoy the company shares, you are part of the shareholder, but only for those who are really contributing. Yea. Of course, they must have gone [stay] through a certain amount of time with us. (SME38, mobile App development)*

Overall, as the above indicates, benefits such as work flexibility are not immediately given, but must be earned over time and can just as easily be revoked if performance expectations are not met.

### **Theme 3: Care-Based Approach to HR Practice Development**

Small companies enable SMEs to build very close and “personal” relationships with their employees. They tend to know most of their employees personally, regardless of their rank, and can build family like relationships within their companies. Some respondents identify themselves as “father” or “mother” figures to employees in such settings. This is especially true of the older cohort of owner-managers, while the younger cohort identifies themselves as “brother” or “sister” figureheads. Whichever family role they assume, owner-managers adopt an authority position over employees and act as primary agents defining the nature and boundary of support. By reciprocally acting out this relationship, employees look up to and depend on their employer for help, even in personal family matters. This parent-child relationship plays out in the way the HR practices are deployed. It engenders a familial commitment and sense of loyalty from employees to the organization, particularly the patron figurehead.

### **Illustration: Nurturant Mother Relationship**

*I'm like a mother to them [the immigrant labours], you see? I see they have comfortable accommodation; I see their food is organized; I take them to the bank to open an account. I organize the money changers to come and send all*

*their money [back home], whatever money they want to send to India, Bangladesh, Philippines, all that services. From the beginning, they call me mother, they call me mum. (SME22, apparel manufacturing)*

### **Illustration: Sibling Relationship**

*I'm managing a small team. I treat them like my brothers. So when they are my family, how should I treat them? (SME39, industry robotics consulting)*

Recognizing the unequal power distribution between themselves and employees (in terms of greater resources, information, and power), SMEs widely acknowledge their obligation and responsibility to care. Respondents show concern for employees' needs beyond the workplace, often offering personal development advice or getting personally involved in employee family matters. Whether they are local employees or foreign labourers, SMEs view employees as part of their larger family. They perceive themselves as elder members of the family, with a responsibility to take care of the junior members, their employees.

### **Illustration: The "Elder" Responsibility**

*Employees are like children; you need to take care of them, feed them. They have emotions, they will have bad moods, be emotional, and you have to care about them, it's just like taking care of our children. If you can treat your employees like half of your own children, then you are successful. (SME16, furniture manufacturing)*

Moral principles that underlie ethics of care can help explain SMEs' caring actions. The emotional tie between SMEs and employees is the foundation upon which acts of care are justified. Some respondents note that their obligation and responsibility originate from their sense of religious duty. Others tap into a more vicarious sense of responsibility, suggesting a sense of humanity as the driving force behind their caregiving actions. Many participants emphasize that everyone is a human being and needs to be treated fairly and kindly. This is often the foundation that



drives their caregiving approach. Employers who adopt this perspective portray sincere care towards their employees and hold firm convictions that the SME's business aim should not solely be about profit. Instead, they see taking good care of their people as a core part of their responsibility and obligation as employers.

### **Illustration: Obligation as an Employer**

*Make sure everybody is paid; that's a huge responsibility. You may ask, why do I go through all this and create so much stress [for myself]? But it's joy for me. I create so many jobs and make such an impact on their family; I think it's awesome. (SME46, Mobile Healthcare Service)*

*We try to provide whatever that they need. When they need help in their family matters, and it is within our reach, we would help them. If they tell me their problems honestly, I will try to help them. Especially financially, if I am able to help, I would help. (SME25, law firm)*

*Here at 6 pm, everybody goes back; nobody does overtime. I value efficiency. [...] The system is very important, the company must have a very good system, if you design a good system, when everybody gets their job they know how to do it. We cut down a lot of unnecessary things, and they work very efficiently. Hence, they can have a good work-life balance. (SME48, Pharmaceutical products trading)*

### **Illustration: Equality and Equity for All**

*I always feel that they [the immigrant labours] are also human. They want to be treated equally. And when they are away from home, they're very lonely. So they need to be at least given attention. (SME13, plastics manufacturing)*

SMEs with a care-based approach tend to view their employees as equal to themselves, with the same basic needs in life. Some respondents express that they wish to treat their employees the way they themselves want to be treated. They genuinely put themselves in their employees' shoes when considering whether and how they should go about looking

after them. This type of consideration governs their caregiving actions and the type of HR practices they adopt. In many cases, their past experiences (as employed individuals, childhood experiences, or even general life experiences) sensitize them to employees' needs and motivates them to provide support and care. Strong human centrality, a sense of mutuality, and wide social responsibilities are key characteristics observed.

### **Illustration: Human Centrality and Sense of Mutuality**

*We as a human wish to live in this kind of environment, so we thought the employees would think the same way too. (SME36, eco-farm and eco-tourism)*

*When I get a good chair, I feel it is fair to give them (employees) a good chair [too]. They probably spend more time than me (in the office). I feel they should have the same thing [as me]. (SME42, contact lens manufacturing)*

Another critical feature of care-driven HR practices observed with SMEs is the importance of ensuring the business's survival and healthy progression. SMEs realize that the quality of life of their employees is reliant on the employer and the business. Respondents shared that they are not only responsible for their own families, but for the financial stability and sustainability of their employees and their families.

### **Illustration: Wide Circle of Responsibility**

*Being a small company, we cannot afford to pay extra for maternity leave or all the hospital expenses. So out of our own effort, we make sure to visit them and give what we can, [and] to support them. We try our best to make them happy. (SME19, accessories retail)*

*During Raya (festival), we buy them clothes. Let's say their parents want to go to Mecca [Islam's holiest city]; we give them money. We do more; we go beyond the office; we go to the family. (SME25, law firm)*

Under the care-based approach, many SMEs consider their employees' ability to progress in life as part of the employer's responsibility. They feel that employees' quality of life should not be disregarded when business owners are flourishing and enjoying the fruits of their labour. These SMEs expect their employees' lives to progress positively in tandem with the business. They draw a wide and encompassing circle of care, and their HR practices are reflective of this.

### **Illustration: Inclusive Progress and Growth**

*Our internal CSR would be like; we will help our staff to buy a car. If they need a deposit for the loan, we will provide for it because we want to improve their standard of living. We will [even] tell them where to buy a house, how to apply for low-cost housing. (SME14, apparel manufacturing & retail)*

## **Discussion**

An investigation of the in-depth interviews revealed several underlying processes involved in developing and deploying HR practices in SMEs. In addition, they shed insights into the "black box" of HRM by unveiling some of the mechanisms and nuances at play in the conundrum surrounding the deployment of high performance, high commitment work systems. This study finds that Malaysian SMEs recognize the importance of human resources as a critical feature when building a competitive premise for sustainable success. Unsurprisingly, they take actions to develop and implement HR practices that help improve productivity and performance and motivate and retain their best human talent. At a high level of aggregation, the activities and mechanisms that Malaysian SMEs utilize fit the practices universally identified to constitute high commitment work systems. Even though the implementation of HR practices in these SMEs is nuanced to be informal at the micro level, at a higher level, they aggregate into well-identified categories observed in prior research. These include worker empowerment, involvement in decision-making, richness in communication and feedback, reward packages that are

commensurate with worker effort, and the value of all workers regardless of their hierarchical position and role (Marchington & Grugulis, 2000; Pfeffer, 2010). As such, this study finds support in the universal existence of high commitment HR systems in our developing country setting. In all, the study demonstrates that Malaysian SMEs need to invest in employees to develop alignment between employee values and organizational goals.

Additionally, just like their more developed country counterparts, Malaysian SMEs face specific challenges due to their smaller size and resource base. Unlike large firms with formal structures and policies, Malaysian SMEs rely heavily on ad hoc and personalized support to look after their employees. Most SMEs demonstrate consideration and understanding when responding to the needs of their employees. This informal source of affective involvement aligns with the findings of Bruni et al.'s (2004) study. This study shows that informality predominates over formal approaches for Malaysian SMEs. In many instances, Malaysian SMEs build close-knit relationships with their employees, facilitating informal support when taking care of them. SMEs sensitivity can range from minor considerations, such as providing food and clothing, to significant involvement in large projects, such as an employee's property purchase. Many of the support gestures depend on specific employer-employee relationships and are emotionally situational.

Besides the prevalence of informal mechanisms, this study's findings reveal that Malaysian SMEs adopt two distinct approaches. One approach develops relationships that heavily stress the performance component in the exchange, while the other approach's exchange relationships are more altruistic and care-focused. For SMEs to adopt performance-based exchange relationships in their HR practices, they expect higher performance and productivity in return for the resources and support provided. In other words, employees are expected to have positive attitudes and demonstrate significant performance in exchange for their employer's investment and care. On the other hand, SMEs adopt a care-based approach and believe that a key responsibility is to take care of employees and treat employees as important stakeholders in the company. This relationship with stakeholders is reflected in the interview data, and the care actions practised by SMEs epitomize the relationship. SMEs in this study

draw upon their personal nature to take care of their employees, and display relational traits that stress cohesion, trust, and empathy. This closely aligns with a stakeholder perspective, in which it is the responsibility of an organization to select activities and direct resources to legitimate stakeholders (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). Importantly, the study also observes a moral relationship between the SMEs and their employees (Mariappanadar, 2012). Originating from feminist philosophy, care ethics is about meeting the needs of others for whom we take responsibility (Elley-Brown & Pringle, 2021; Gilligan, 1982). This sharply contrasts with the masculine outlook that emphasizes the military metaphor of a competitive battleground, in which individual self-interest takes primacy over other concerns, particularly co-operative relations with others (Held, 2006).

Overall, SMEs are aware of the need to invest in their employees for high performance and success. However, they are also instrumental in shaping relationships and exchanges between the organization and its employees. One often overlooked part of this observation is that while social exchange exists and takes place, it is not between equal parties. SME is instrumental in defining the nature and boundary of the type of exchanges that take place in the firm. As noted earlier, social exchange, based on the norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960; Matthews & Toumbeva, 2014), is a concept that has been employed in past studies to understand the relationship between work-life provisions and employees' job attitudes (Haar & Spell, 2004; Lambert, 2000). Chen et al. (2005) note that the central notion of the concept is the reciprocation of valued resources between interacting parties. Referring to work-life provisions within an organization, past studies have found that employees perceive the receipt of work-life provisions as favourable treatment from their employers. Employees, therefore, feel morally obliged to respond in kind and recompense their employers through positive job attitudes, such as increased organizational commitment and citizenship behaviour (Bagger & Li, 2014; Matthews & Toumbeva, 2014). Nevertheless, regardless of their initial motive and principles lying behind SMEs moves to support employees (either caregiving or performance-reward exchange), all the employee support initiatives appear to contribute to the long-term sustainability of the business. The findings from the current study show that

social exchange theory is applicable in understanding the effect of work-life provisions on recipients' job attitudes; it also helps shed light on the different approaches used and things that trigger their deployment.

Therefore, the findings from this study suggest that SMEs in Malaysia should place greater emphasis on improving existing HR practices by refining systematic HR infrastructure and investing in HR expertise. However, this does not suggest that Malaysian SMEs should lose their charm in being flexible when offering ad hoc and personalized support to their employees. Rather, the social exchange mechanism featured in the empirical insights suggests that SMEs' owner-managers are accustomed to the reciprocal relationship with their employees. Consequently, they exercise their discretion when providing valuable resources (e.g., empowerment, flexibility, trust) to employees who demonstrate positive work behaviours. Lastly, under the backdrop of collectivist culture in Malaysia, the small scale and informal nature of relationships within SMEs facilitate care-based HR practices. In sum, the findings do not intend to evaluate the control or commitment-orientation of HR practices in SMEs in Malaysia. Instead, the study contributes by highlighting the importance of the local context in order to appreciate and understand the HR practices in a specific context.

## Conclusion

By analysing data from 48 in-depth interviews with SMEs, this paper explores high commitment HR practices deployed by Malaysian SMEs. Notably, specific forms of configuring HR practices surface as a crucial part of the SMEs' effort to develop of high commitment HR systems. The configuration of HR practices involves specific employer-employee social exchange relationships that foster a psychological link and reify it into specific outcomes. The study finds that at a high level of aggregation, the core constituents' HR practices deployed by Malaysian SMEs are the same as those identified in prior research, such as empowerment, involvement, training and development, creative team problem solving, etc. This suggests that the notion of a high performance, high commitment work system is universal in its existence and not just germane to developed

country settings. Therefore, it is not surprising to observe Malaysian SMEs' concern in developing HR practices that demonstrate care as part of their effort to draw employees' commitment. Second, Malaysian SMEs place much heavier emphasis on informal, personalized support mechanisms to constitute their HR practices to form high commitment work systems, unlike large firm counterparts who have the luxury of adopting formal HR practices.

Furthermore, the study found that the processes SMEs deploy in implementing HR practices are varied. The interview data identified that SMEs adopt two seemingly contrasting principles and social exchange approaches to HR practice implementation: performance-based approach and care-based approach. SMEs utilizing the performance-based exchange provide support to their employees on the basis that every cent spent should be justified by an expected return and/or benefit. In contrast, SMEs utilizing a care-based approach extend nurture and support based on personal consideration of moral responsibility derived from their religious beliefs or a sense of being "elder member of the family."

## Limitations and Future Studies

The study only gathered data from SME owner-managers and explored the phenomena through a qualitative lens. Future studies should consider a longitudinal design and ways of drawing in employees' perspectives to evaluate the veracity of SME owner-managers' assertions of care and support. This would provide a more rounded view of how HR practices are received and impact employees within the SME context.

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