An Exploratory Study on Workplace Inclusion Strategy for the Untapped Labour Pool of Ex-Offenders

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ABSTRACT

The decades-long troubling situation on the employment of foreign workers has been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Manufacturing, plantation, services, and construction sectors bear the brunt as a result of foreign workers returning to their home countries and the concurrent recruitment freeze imposed by the government. On the one hand, Malaysia is experiencing a shortage of unskilled labour in such sectors. On the other hand, there is also a looming crisis facing the country in terms of the increasing number of prisoners. Local prisons are overcrowded as they are currently being occupied by over 20,000 more prisoners than the total space is intended for. The purpose of this study is to design a mechanism in hiring ex-offenders or offenders under probation to fill the void for unskilled labour, and at the same time increase the chances of ex-offenders successfully returning to and integrated into society. Ideally, this mechanism will serve as a multi-pronged intervention to address economic and societal issues. This qualitative inquiry is designed to gain insights into the current situation of inclusion or non-inclusion of the stigmatised minority in the workplace, and capture the lived experiences of ex-offenders returning to society. Narratives by those who are involved in successfully transforming ex-offenders into functioning and contributing members of society will be weaved into the convergence of multi-sourced data for sense-making and to elucidate meaning. In practical terms, this research intends to advocate for a transformational human resource policy through the design of a workplace inclusion strategy that recognises ex-offenders as worthy workers. The main question this research seeks to answer is, "How do human resource policies influence the hiring, retaining, and the development of ex-offenders as employees?" It then seeks to gain further insights by probing about factors that enable cross-sector collaborations in the employment of ex-offenders, influence ex-offenders in securing employment after re-entry, employers' perceptions of ex-offenders in relation to their considerations of employing ex-offenders, and employers' apprehensions in investing for the career upskilling and development of ex-offenders. This study takes on a phenomenological approach to capture experiences from a variety of stakeholders as informants. The population sample will be drawn from companies there have been successful cases of ex-offender employment. Data will be collected via semi-structured interviews with successfully employed ex-offenders, their employers, and key representatives of the prison authority and non-governmental organisations. A total of twenty in-depth interviews will be conducted and interviews of additional informants shall continue until data saturation is achieved. A narrative analysis will then be carried out, followed by a triangulation exercise for an extensive process of sense-making to generate findings. It is hoped that the research findings will be used to inform policymakers in developing a robust, and sustainable integration mechanism in promoting the hiring and career progression of ex-offenders.

Keywords: workplace inclusion strategy, ex-offenders, phenomenology study, transformational, strategic human resource