How willing/unwilling are luxury hotels' staff to be empowered?

ABSTRACT

Empowerment is widely viewed as a dynamic concept to improve service quality and operational efficiency in the hospitality industry. The most effective approaches to empowering employees are not always clear. This paper contributes to the literature by seeking to understand the underlying factors that motivate and demotivate employees' willingness to become empowered. Qualitative data was collected through 22 semi-structured interviews with managers, supervisors and employees of four and five-star rated hotels in East Malaysia. In addition to the expected factors such as employees' acquired knowledge and psychological empowerment, employees' values and beliefs were also found to influence their willingness to become empowered. These findings are important in understanding employee perspectives of empowerment practices in operations contexts of East Malaysian luxury hotels.

Keywords: *Employee empowerment; Luxury hotels; East Malaysia*

1   Introduction

The dynamics of a high growth environment, competition, growing guest demands and the labour intensive nature of the hospitality industry continue to challenge both operations and research in the industry (Cheung, Baum, & Wong, 2012). With the growth and transfer of management approaches and technology globally, organisational hierarchy continues to evolve. International hotel chains as part of their growth strategy keep exploring new opportunities in new markets. As chains expand, they take with them to new markets, management techniques which could present as new experiences for local staff working at different levels in the hotels. Employee empowerment is one such practice within the context of luxury hotels in East Malaysia. For the purpose of this study 4 and 5 star hotels are referred to as 'luxury hotels'.

In 1997, Glasman suggested that research in the last couple of decades has seen the significance of empowerment not only as a new skill to be learnt but also a process which augments knowledge for efficient and effective operational outcomes that are related to customer service and service quality. Research regarding employee empowerment is scarce, but the organisational benefits of the concept are acknowledged (Kazlauskaite, Buciuniene, & Turauskas, 2012). Empowerment is still considered to be vital in hospitality organisations, as it potentially drives the following outcomes: employee satisfaction and committment, lower labour turnover and costs, increased productivity, higher service quality and increased profits (Kazlauskaite et al., 2012; Lashley, 1999, 2001; Mohsin & Kumar, 2010; Pelit, Ozturk, & Arslanturk, 2011; Raub & Robert, 2013).

Empowerment has also become popular due to the fact that organisations operate in increasingly competitive environments, where demand for service quality is intensified. Today, guests are less forgiving if they have to wait for higher levels of management to address their issues (Dickson, Ford, & Laval, 2005). To overcome such situations it is important that employees in the hotel industry are trained and empowered to make appropriate decisions quickly. This enhances service delivery and satisfies guests with a prompt response to their needs (Humborstad & Perry, 2011).

Even though many scholars have supported the benefits of empowerment e.g. (Bowen & Lawler, 1992; Fabre, 2010), others have questioned its effectiveness in practice. There is evidence to suggest that despite the claimed benefits linked with employee empowerment, the implementation of empowerment practices is not as prevalent as would be expected. Numerous employee empowerment initiatives have been unable to achieve the levels of empowerment that management envisioned (Baird & Wang, 2010). There are many claims that empowerment is implemented superficially with managers maintaining real control. The gap between empowerment as rhetoric as and practice is a further area open to criticism (Greasley et al., 2008). A number of studies have identified that, in some cases, the problems are present in name only (Baird & Wang, 2010; Honold, 1997). Even though this is not a hurdle to empowerment, it can lead to imprecise criticisms of the empowerment concept. This may lead to those who supposedly empower and those who are empowered becoming dissatisfied and rejecting empowerment as ineffective (Greasley et al., 2008)

Globalisation has also influenced organisations Malaysia. Traditionally, organisations in Malaysia have had a strong and rigid hierarchical system due to a high power distance culture (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994) where employees wait for orders and follow managers' decisions. Managers took all the responsibility for organising, making decisions, controlling and planning tasks for employees, creating considerably increased workloads for managers. However, the trend toward globalisation and the presence of multinational companies has led Malaysian organisations to adapt to modern management techniques. Several international hotel chains have started operating in Malaysia bringing with them empowerment practices with the aim to improve service quality and guest satisfaction. Such international chains include the Hyatt, Shangri-La, Le Meridian, and Hilton, and carry connotations of international practices. This empowerment approach in luxury hotels is built on the understanding that empowered employees require minimal supervision, thus eliminating the need for more levels of hierarchy and allowing supervisors to concentrate more on strategic issues and planning instead of operational activities (Mohsin & Kumar, 2010; Randolph, 1995).

It is also noted that published research on employee empowerment largely relates to the Western World (Cheung et al 2012). Study on empowerment practices in luxury hotels in East Malaysia is almost non-existent. A few studies have been conducted in Malaysia (Abdul Aziz, Awang, & Samdin, 2011; Patah et al., 2009) but they have concentrated on Peninsular Malaysia. Peninsular Malaysia consists of 11 states and two federal territories with a total population of 22.53 million (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). By contrast, East Malaysia consists of only two states and one federal territory with a total population of 5.77 million. Unlike Peninsular Malaysia which has manufacturing and agriculture sectors to depend on, East Malaysia, which consists of Sabah, Sarawak and Labuan, heavily relies on the tourism and hospitality sector for its survival (Sabah Tourism Board, 2013). According to the Malaysian Tourism Promotion Board (2012), tourist arrivals in East Malaysia increased almost 48 percent from 4,787191 to 6,955963 in the decade between 2002 and 2012. The increasing trend in terms of tourist arrival in Sabah also contributed to the rapid increase in demand for hotel accommodation and supporting activities. According to the Malaysian Association of Hotels (2013), there were 615 hotels in East Malaysia in 2013 compared to 426 hotels in 2002.

Focusing on the growth of the hotel industry in East Malaysia, which is arguably different from that in West Malaysia, this paper explores the underlying factors that either motivate or demotivate employees' willingness to become empowered. Doing so should promote an understanding of employee empowerment and advance suggestions that help to refine the employee empowerment framework in the East Malaysian context.

2   Theoretical Background

2.1   What is empowerment?

The term is used to refer to wide range of initiatives of human resource management (Lashley 1995). It is also defined as a theoretical concept, a management tool with different uses. The literature suggests that there is no single or simple globally excepted definition of empowerment (Cunningham and Hyman 1999). What seems to qualify as the general approach and use of empowerment is the improvement of individual employees' potential of for better organisational performance in terms of service quality, job satisfaction and customer satisfaction. Empowerment in its broad concept refers to training, preparing and authorising front line employees to make appropriate decisions to help customers which impacts on service quality outcomes. Ro and Chen (2011) find that empowering employees improves organisational effectiveness and guest satisfaction. This occurs as empowered employees reflect greater job satisfaction and self-esteem. Hence, empowerment, as found by Chiang and Hsieh (2012), involves offering employees the control, freedom and information to participate in decision-making and organisational affairs. According to Menon (2001), major approaches to conceptualise employee empowerment can be classified into three categories:

1. Empowerment as an act: the act of granting power to person/s being empowered.
2. Empowerment as a process: the process that leads to the experience of power.
3. Empowerment as a psychological state that manifests itself as measurable cognition.

(Menon 2001, p. 157).

Additionally, empowerment theory is currently vying for a place among those social theories that attempt to connect the individual and the organisation. In order to critically analyse the notion of empowerment in social science research, the root concepts of power and control must be considered. Numerous studies such as those by Ahearne, Mathieu, and Rapp (2005) and Kazlauskaite et al. (2012) have operationalised the concept of empowerment in two distinct constructs. Researchers have operationalised empowerment as a perceived discretionary authority at work, a type of relational construct (Chan & Lam, 2011; Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Fock, Hui, Au, & Bond, 2013). However, a growing number of researchers have suggested that empowerment is more than just job autonomy (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Spreitzer, 1995). These researchers define empowerment as a psychological construct, suggesting an intrinsic motivation, referring to the extent to which employees believe they are capable of accomplishing their job. The underlying logic of the distinction between

these two constructs of empowerment, lies in the meaning that is attributed to the concept of power (Conger & Kanungo, 1988). Moreover, the difference between the organisation and an individual may serve as another point of reference in explaining the empowerment concept. This differentiation can be made between an HRM practice of sharing power with subordinates (empowerment practices), and an individual's perception of the power that has been granted to him or her (psychological empowerment) (Kazlauskaite et al., 2012).

2.2   Significance of Empowerment

Even though many scholars have supported the benefits of empowerment (Bowen & Lawler, 1992; Fabre, 2010), others have questioned its effectiveness in practice. Bowen and Lawler (1995) state that slower or inconsistent service delivery can result from empowerment and customised services. Slower service delivery can lead to frustration or dissatisfaction. They also argued that employees with insufficient experience, training, motivation, or supervision may make decisions which are not desirable for the organisation (Cheung et al., 2012). For example, when employees are empowered to give discounts for service failure, they may offer too much discounts incurring cost for the organisation. In fact, absolute empowerment rarely occurs since it would allow employees to influence all aspects of the business (Pelit, Öztürk, & Arslantürk, 2011). There are concerns amongst some scholars that empowerment is being used to disguise work intensification. It is often argued that empowerment usually requires taking on more responsibility and more work, with no extra reward (Gkorezis & Petridou, 2008).

The research regarding employee empowerment has decreased over the past decade, although organisational benefits of this concept are still acknowledged (Kazlauskaite et al., 2012). Empowerment is still considered to be highly vital in hospitality organisations, as it can drive a number of important outcomes: satisfied and committed employees; lower labour turnover and costs; increased productivity; higher service quality; and increased profits (Kazlauskaite et al., 2012; Lashley, 1999, 2001; Mohsin & Kumar, 2010; Pelit, Ozturk, & Arslanturk, 2011; Raub & Robert, 2013)

2.3   Impact of Culture on Empowerment

According to Zimmerman (1995), empowerment is contextual. He defines it as a social construct that integrates perceptions of personal control, practical approaches to life and understandings of the socio-political environment. The triumph of empowerment as managerial practice depends on the understanding of culturally based assumptions, values and beliefs by employees (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994; Steenkamp, 2001) and therefore varies across cultures. Hofstede (1984) developed five cultural dimensions: power distance; individualism versus collectivism; masculinity versus femininity; uncertainty avoidance; long-term versus short-term orientation. He refers to power distance as the degree to which employees expect and accept that power is dispersed unequally among people and across different levels of the organisational hierarchy. Within these five cultural dimensions, Malaysia scores high in power distance. Employees within such a high power distance culture accept that power is distributed unequally (Bochner & Hesketh, 1994). They are acculturated to hierarchal structures and autocratic leadership styles, so they are reluctant to take initiative or make decisions without consulting supervisors (Cheung et al., 2012). These power differences affect the personal value of power sharing in the organisation; employees may not accept or exercise any power given by their manager or supervisor (Humborstad & Perry, 2011). However, for the past few decades, studies conducted on national culture have been criticised for being too simplistic (Steenkamp, 2001; Triandis, 2001). It is widely agreed that the richness and complexity of the culture of a society cannot be fully captured and described through such a limited set of dimensions (Schwartz, 2006; Steenkamp, 2001).

In addition to national culture, organisational culture is also often associated with empowerment. Employees at every level contribute to the culture of an organisation, and their behaviours determine what the organisation is like to work in. Organisational culture determines the shared values and assumptions that guide employee behaviour in an organisation (Brockner et al., 2001; Shim & Joo,

2010; Zafar Ul, Khan, Aslam, & Zaheer, 2012). However, organisational culture can be meaningless if it only exists in a mission statement created by a select few within an organisation and who may even have little in common (Sinclairs & Collins, 1992) . Thus espoused culture versus reality or enacted values as a general strategy may have little effect on employees as it cannot target specific individuals or groups. The idea that empowerment can be implemented by a programme is flawed, as once an employee has gone through empowerment, nothing further needs to be done. In truth, empowerment practices require continuous input and monitoring to reinforce employees' ideal attitudes and behaviours (Sinclairs & Collins, 1992). Hence, magnifying empowerment as an organisational climate construct can enhance the understanding of employee empowerment. Organisational climate has been defined as 'a set of measurable properties of the work environment, perceived directly or indirectly by employees'; it is assumed that organisational climate affects employee motivation and behaviour in the organisation (Wang, Zhang, & Jackson, 2013, p. 1430). The organisational climate has a direct bearing on the psychological atmosphere of the organisation. As such it affects the satisfaction, motivation and behavioural patterns of employees. Organisational climate and employee responses to it, continually influence each other. Over time, organisational climate has the ability to transmit the general "psychological atmosphere" of the organisation. As a result, it affects the satisfaction, motivation, and behavioural patterns of employees (Bowen & Lawler, 1992).

2.6   *Management's willingness towards empowerment*

Empowerment refers to management's willingness to share relevant authority and information as a factor that enhances job performance (Sturman & Ford, 2011). Scholars have shown however, that "empowered" employees are paradoxically subject to increasingly sophisticated systems of monitoring and control (Heery & Noon, 2008). Where empowerment intends to create an implicit trust by giving employees more responsibility and autonomy over their work, managers, by backing themselves with control systems, suggest this trust is misplaced. Critics of empowerment thus argue that it is a term used to disguise the grim reality of work intensification, job stress, and exploitation (Greasley et al., 2008; Lashley, 1999, 2001). Luthans (1992) suggests that to make employees feel empowered management should rather:

- Express confidence in employees abilities;
- Hold high expectations concerning their performance;
- Allow employees to participate in the decision-making process;
- Allow employees freedom and autonomy in how they perform their jobs;
- Set inspirational or managerial goals for employees;
- Use position power in a prudent and positive way and limit the use of coercive power.

Hypothetically, all employees can be empowered, although the type and extent of empowerment can vary considerably (Lashley, 1999). For example, empowerment for room attendants may mean nothing more than being able to greet guests in the way they choose. By contrast, hotel employees working in a call-centre, may be empowered to make credit adjustments to a certain level without seeking the guidance of their supervisors.

2.7   *Psychological Empowerment*

For the past three decades, scholars have focussed their work on empowering management practices, including delegating authority and increasing access to information and resources for individuals at lower levels of organisational hierachies (Bowen & Lawler, 1992). Against that background Conger and Kanungo (1988) have attempted to find different perspectives on empowerment that differentiate between situational attributes and employees' perceptions of those attributes. Building on Bandura's (1978)work on self-efficacy expectation, they describe psychological empowerment as "a process of enhancing feelings of self-efficacy among organizational members through the identification of conditions that foster powerlessness and through their removal by both formal organizational practices and informal techniques of providing efficacy information" (p. 474).

Following Conger and Kanungo's work, Thomas and Velthouse (1990) argue that empowerment is actually a multifaceted construct. They propose a cognitive model under the definition of empowerment as an intrinsic task-motivation resulting from a set of four task-related assessments of an individual's work empowerment: sense of impact; competence; meaningfulness; and choice. However, they do not emphasise the managers' influence on employees' task perception (Konczak, Stelly, & Trusty, 2000). According to Ozaralli (2015) at the root of psychological empowerment is the concept of employee-experienced power. The author explains that psychological empowerment is the perception that an employee has about his or her feelings of being empowered in the work place role. Summarising recent reviews Hill, Kang and Seo (2014) state that a trusting and supportive relationship with one's leader, positively influences the development of psychological empowerment: an important psychological state that reflects intrinsic task motivation.

Based on the facets construct of Conger and Kanungo, Spreitzer (1995) provides empirical support for the psychological empowerment notion as a single higher order construct, summarised in Table 1. Spreitzer argues that empowerment cannot be imposed on employees but, instead, they must feel 'psychologically empowered'. Employee psychological empowerment is thus defined as one's subjective experience of empowerment based on cognitive insights in relation to one's own work role (Spreitzer, 1995).

Subsequent to Conger and Kanungo (1988), Menon (2001) suggests that empowered employees own the 'attribute of empowerment' and are in the 'state of empowerment'. He raises several concerns with the diverse approaches to empowerment and redefines psychological empowerment as "a cognitive state characterised by a sense of control, competence and goal internalisation (p161) (refer to Table 8).

Thus, under the lenses of psychological empowerment, this paper attempts to explore:

- The critical factors that motivate willingness of employees to be empowered in luxury hotels of East Malaysia;
- The critical factors that demotivate and drive unwillingness of employees to be empowered in the luxury hotels of East Malaysia

3   Method
3.1   Data collection and Measures
Prior permission for data collection was obtained from management of participating hotels in East Malaysia. After gaining approval from potential respondents', a semi-structured interview was conducted with a proposed 22 hotel employees. This number was dependent on the interview saturation point: that is where repetition of themes became clear. At this point the presence of extra participants makes no difference to the understanding of a phenomenon (Silverman, 2011).

Potential respondents were carefully selected to ensure they came from different hotels (i.e. chain hotels, independent hotels, and resorts) and different levels (i.e. front-liners supervisors, managers and heads of departments). This was to ensure that the data represent the overall population. The luxury hotels, as previously noted were categorised as four and five-star rated hotels, but only those registered by the Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH, 2013).

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken as the basic data collection inquiry technique in a post-positivist paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Qualitative methods were engaged to drive a higher level of objectivity when collecting and analysing the data and when dealing with respondents. It also deepened understanding of the factors that motivate and demotivate employees' to become empowered,.

The questions selected for the interview were largely based on the studies done by Cho and Faerman (2010), Spreitzer (1995), Menon (2001) and Amenumey and Lockwood (2008). Since psychological empowerment is used as the focus of the current study, specific reference is made to the work of Spreitzer (1995) and Menon (2001), as shown in Table 1 and Table 2 below.

Table 1: Psychological empowerment measured by Spreitzer (1995)	
Empowering measures	**Questions construction**
Meaning	The value of an individual's own ideals or standards to a work goal or purpose.
Competence	The belief that an individual is capable of successfully perform a task
Self-determination	The feeling of autonomy or a sense of choice in initiating work actions.
Impact	The degree to which an individual believes that he or she can influence certain work outcomes.

Table 2: Psychological empowerment measured by Menon (2001)	
Empowering measures	**Questions construction**
Perceived control	Beliefs about autonomy
Perceived Competence	The sense of efficacy and feelings of personal capability
Goal internalisation	The energising power of, for instance, an organisation's vision for the future, and the individuals' association with such a vision or goal.

Other supporting questions were formulated using three industry experts:

- *Do you consider yourself to be a person who likes to take charge or follow orders? Why or why not?*
- *Are you satisfied with your current job? Why or why not?*
- *If another hotel tried to recruit you, with the same salary and benefits as the current hotel, would you go or stay? Why or why not?*
- *Are you willing to take on extra responsibility at work to fulfil the guest's satisfaction, even though you are aware that there are no benefits given?*
- *What kind of policy/practices/training/benefits does the hotel offer to encourage empowerment?*
- *Do you have sufficient information to make relevant decision that ensure better service quality?*
- *Does your supervisor/manager encourage you to become empowered? How?*

Each interview was recorded with permission, and took, on average, over one hour. After the transcribing process, written summaries were presented to each respective respondents in a short second interview. This was to validate the initial interviews and ensure that respondents' opinions were represented correctly.

3.2   Data Analysis

Data was analysed using textual analysis software, CatPac and Leximancer which are designed to read and summarise the main ideas through creating diagnoses by words and alphabetical frequencies. CatPac is considered as 'a self-organizing artificial neural network that has been optimised for reading text' (Woelfel, 1998, p. 11). According to Woelfel (1993, p.72), the underlying notions of CatPac are described as..":... an unsupervised neural network that is designed to read and "understand" text. CATPAC reads any ASCII text; discards minor words such as articles, prepositions, and the like from a prewritten exclude file; and discards additional words that fall below an arbitrary, user-set frequency of occurrence. For each remaining word, an artificial neuron is constructed that represents that word. A scanning window of user-set size is then passed through the text. Whenever a given word is in the scanning window, the neuron that represents that word is activated (its activation value is set to 1.0).

Leximancer's concept primarily based upon the nearest neighbour analysis neural network theory. According to Smith and Humphreys (2006, p.262) the fundamental principles of Leximancer are described as, " A unified body of text is examined to select a ranked list of important lexical terms on the basis of word frequency and co-occurrence usage. These terms then seed a bootstrapping thesaurus builder, which learns a set of classifiers from the text by iteratively extending the seed word definitions. The resulting weighted term classifiers are then referred to as concepts." Leximancer was used to support the findings derived from CatPac. This helped to uncover patterns of word usage and to represent the data as simple word counts and cluster analyses Results were then integrated to support what was considered a credible interpretation of participant responses. (Li and Ryan, 2015)

4   Results

4.1   Participants' Profile

The demographic characteristics of the 22 participants are presented in Table 3. The participants comprised 12 males and 10 females; 19 Malaysians, one American, one Chinese, and one Spaniard. All participants have worked in the hotel industry for more than five years and could speak English. One preferred to speak Malay during the interview. Nine of the participants were from Front Office departments, eight from Food and Beverage, four from Recreational and Spa departments and one from Human Resources. Five of the participants are currently working as supervisors, four as managers and four as directors. The other nine are rank and file employees (front office staff and waiters)

Table 3: Participants' Demographic Profile		
Gender/Nationality/Work	*Characteristics*	*Number of Participants*
Gender	Male	12
	Female	10
Nationality	Malaysia	19
	United States	1
	China	1
	Spain	1
Work experience	5 to 10 years	5
	11 to 16 years	6
	More than 17 years	11
Department	Front Office	9
	Food and Beverage	8
	Recreational and Spa	4
	Human Resources	1
Rank	Directors	4
	Managers	4
	Supervisors	5
	Other employees	9

4.2   *Factors Representing Willingness to become Empowered*

Analysis of the data generated a set of words (seen in figure 1), most frequently used by participants to describe the factors that motivate their willingness to become empowered. In descending order of frequency, they are:

1. Competence;
2. Career;
3. Control;
4. Passion;
5. Commitment;
6. Impact;
7. Experience;
8. Power;
9. Independence.

These terms in the text were drawn from an initial thematic analysis, supported by the results of the text analysis through CatPac. Leximancer analysis (Figure 2) was then performed as the two sets of analysis tend to confirm each other. The results indicated three main factors that encourage employees' willingness to become empowered. Firstly, employees' *acquired knowledge* such as 'experience' and 'education' helps to increase their willingness to be empowered. Their acquired knowledge in the industry gives them confidence to make risky decisions when serving guests. For example, participants 3 and 22 commented:

Participant 3 (Front office supervisor)
"I think education and knowledge is important for me to have the confidence on making the right decisions."

Participant 22 (Front office receptionist)
"Actually I learnt to make the right decisions through experience, especially on handling guest matters. When you have experience and knowledge, you have the confidence to make decisions and become empowered."

Figure 1: Dendogram on Factors of Willingness to become Empowered

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WARDS METHOD

C P E C P D K C C I D E F G S R I W
A A X O O E N O O M E D E U H I N O
R S P M W V O M N P P U E E O S D R
E S E M E E W P T A A C L S W K E K
E I R I R L L E R C R A . T . . P .
R O I T . O E T O T T . . . . . E .
. N E M . P D E L . M I . . . . N .
. . N E . M G N . . E O . . . . D .
. . C N . E E C . . N N . . . . E .
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Figure2: Leximancer Analysis on Factors of Willingness to become Empowered

Secondly, employees' *psychological empowerment* factors such as 'competence', 'control', 'passion' and 'commitment' also contribute to their willingness to become empowered. This is consistent with the findings of Spreitzer (1995) and Menon (2001).When employees perceive that they have a sense of control and competence consistent with their own embedded values and beliefs in relation to work roles, they are more willing to become empowered. For example, participants 4 and 17 commented:

Participant 4 (Front Office Receptionist)
"Sometimes, the question is not [whether we are] willing or not to become empowered, but if it is our job, by hook or by crook we need to do it anyway. Serving the guest is our main objective."

Participant 17 (Food and Beverage Director)
"Frankly speaking, in order to become empowered, you need to be competent and passionate about your work, especially in this industry."

The third set of empowerment factors,were *career-orientation* factors, described as 'power', 'impact', 'work', 'career' and 'development'. Career-oriented employees are more willing to become empowered as it will highlight their ability to stand out from others in their respective workplace. Participant 9 commented:

Participant 9 (Food & Beverage supervisor)
"I am willing to be empowered as I have the power to make my own decisions and perform at my job. The manager and others will take notice and it is good for my career."

4.3   Factors Representing Unwillingness to become Empowered

The analysis derived from the CatPac software (Figure 3) generated a list of words most frequently used by participant to describe factors that demotivate their willingness to become empowered. In descending order of frequency, they are:

1. Superior
2. Decision
3. Respect
4. Responsibility
5. Humble
6. Risky
7. Authority
8. Workload
9. Power

Figure 3: Dendogram on Factors of Unwillingness to become Empowered


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WARDS METHOD

A D S R R E P R D S L H N W
U E U E I X O E I I E U O O
T C P S S T W S F T V M . R
H I E P K R E P F U E B . K
O S R O Y A R E E A L L . L
R I I N . . . C R T . E . O
I O O S . . . T E I . . . A
T N R I . . . . N O . . . D
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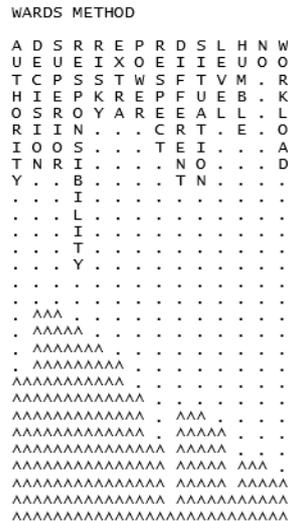
The CatPac and Leximancer analyses (Figures 3 and 4) show three main factors that influence employees' unwillingness to become empowered. Firstly, is the *uncertainty avoidance* factor, similar to one of Hofstede's (1984) cultural dimensions. This factor includes terms such as 'risky', 'decision', and 'responsibility'. Malaysia scores high on this dimension which means that people have a low tolerance for ambiguity in most day-to-day situations. They tend to be risk-averse, prefer well-structured environment and only do hard work when it is necessary. Participants 5 and 15 commented.

Participant 5 (Front Office supervisor)
"Decision[s] come with responsibility, for a crucial decision, especially involving cost, I definitely will ask my superior to make that decision, so I will not bear the cost later."

Participant 15 (Food & Beverage supervisor)
"To become empowered, it means you need to make a decision, which means you need to be responsible for that decision. In certain situation, sometime I will avoid that by asking my supervisor to make the decision so I will be safe."

The second demotivating factor to emerge from the analysis derived from words such as 'humble', 'respect', and 'authority'. These descriptors indicate the presence of Hofstede's (1984) *power distance* dimension. Participants 13 and 20 commented:

Participant 13 (SPA employee)
"It is not a question of willingness or not, but we need to respect the higher authority; they should be the one to make the decision."

Participant 20 (Food & Beverage supervisor)
"Personally, I think that, out of respect and humbleness, we need to ask our boss before making any decision. They have the power after all."

Figure 4: Dendogram on Factors of Unwillingness to become Empowered
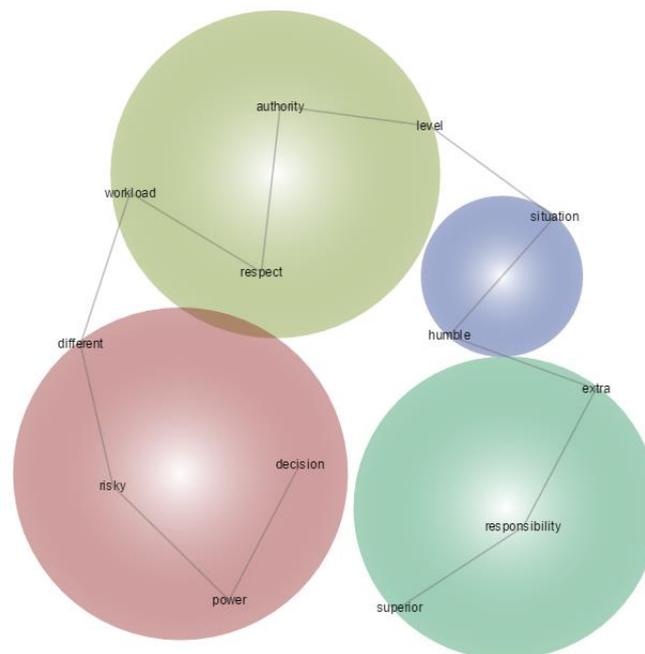
The third demotivating factor that derived from the analysis is *workload*. Employees often associated empowerment with extra workload or responsibility.

Participant 6 (Front Office Supervisor)
"When the manager gives me power to make decisions, it means I have to do everything that I have decided; I have too much work on hand already."

In summary there are three main factors motivating willingness of employees to be empowered in the luxury hotels in East Malaysia: *acquired knowledge, psychological empowerment* and *career-orientation.* There are also, three factors driving an unwillingness to be empowered, amongst luxury hotel employees in East Malaysia: *uncertainty avoidance, power distance* and *workload.* The implications of these findings are discussed below.

5   DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Empowerment continues to be an area of intense research due to the challenges and issues it faces as a management practice in different cultures. Empowerment is also recognised by both researchers and practitioners in the hospitality industry as a vital management practice which could lead to satisfied and committed employees, lower labour turnover and costs, increased productivity, higher service quality, and increased profits (Kazlauskaite et al., 2012; Lashley, 1999, 2001; Mohsin & Kumar, 2010; E. Pelit et al., 2011; Raub & Robert, 2013). From this perspective, studies such as the current one, which research empowerment across different geographical regions and different cultures, make valuable contributions to the literature.

The results indicate that in the East Malaysian context, employees of luxury hotels were influenced by their acquired knowledge and mind-set to become empowered (Figure 5). Employees' acquired knowledge mainly derived from educational backgrounds and work experience in the industry. These factors enable employees to be more confident in making day-to-day operational decisions with minimal supervision. These findings were supported by Abdul Aziz et al. (2011), who reported that employees perceived empowerment differently according to their experience. They also stated that there are relatively high levels of empowerment among the more experienced employees, due mainly to knowledge and experience at work.

The results further indicate that employees were also influenced by their cognition regarding empowerment in relation to their work (Menon, 2001; Spreitzer, 1995). Their own internally held cognitive constructs such as values (commitment and passion), beliefs (career-oriented, uncertainty avoidance, power distance) and psychological empowerment (perceived control, competence, and control) influenced their willingness to become empowered. Employees' value and psychological empowerment factors are comparable to factors emerging from existing studies of employee empowerment motivation (Humborstad & Perry, 2011; Kazlauskaite et al., 2012; Elbeyi Pelit et al., 2011; Raquib, Anantharaman, Eze, & Murad, 2010; Raub & Robert, 2013). Employees who are psychologically empowered tend to be more motivated and willing to be empowered. Figure 5 represents a summary of this discussion.

Figure 5: Venn Diagram on Employee Empowerment
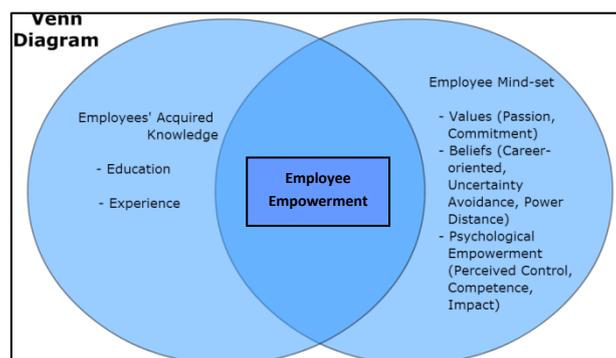
According to Hope (2004), national culture has an impact on the successful transfer of *best practice* in operations management in hotels such as those found in St. Lucia. The author identifies that cultural factors related to power distance and risk avoidance tend to create barriers to empowerment. There was a reluctance to accept any added responsibility due to risks that might result from processes or practices like empowerment.

Malaysian culture is set against the influence of British and Malay Feudal systems, and scores high in power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Spreitzer, 1995). In other words, employees tend to be more cognisant, if not respectful, of titles and/or higher ranks. More power is vested in those at the top of organisations, challenges to leadership are not well received (Boudrias, Gaudreau, & Laschinger,

2004) and employees are more reluctant to become empowered. The resulting power distance can lead to imbalances in the culture of empowerment in organisation. Uncertainty avoidance also influences employees' willingness to become empowered. In this context, different participants viewed risk differently. Employees who are career-oriented view <u>risk</u> as a positive factor they are more willing to take risk and become empowered to show their ability. In contrast, employees, who are high in uncertainty avoidance, are more likely to avoid risk and are reluctant to become empowered. The management, at times is the one who create anxiety and hesitance among employees to take initiative or make decisions. Many organisations tend to overemphasize authorizations as a way of forcing compliance through the command-and-control system (Hamel, 2009).

Emphasising the contrast between Western organisations and Chinese organisation, Cheung et al (2012) state that Western organisations see empowerment as organisational focus and as a general managerial tool applicable throughout the organisation. Chinese organisations see empowerment more in relation to the individual and the merits of that person. This is somewhat similar to the East Malaysian context.

To resolve empowerment issues, researchers and hospitality industry need to admit that the industrial age paradigm built upon the principle of standardisation, specialization, hierarchy, and control reached the limit (Hamel, 2009). The world should move on to the next phase where organisations are more humane-adaptable, creative, and empowering.

So what is the significance of this study?

Despite decades of research, much of the literature on empowerment remains confined to the Western context (Cheung et al 2012). This study, through its qualitative approach using face-to-face interviews not only generates meaningful discussions but also contributes to the literature on empowerment from an Asian perspective, specifically East Malaysia. The growth experienced in the luxury sector of the hotel industry in East Malaysia comes with the challenges of competition, operational efficiencies, service quality, staff satisfaction and profits. To meet these challenges, effective and efficient management practices are required; one such practice is empowerment. This raises some important questions. How willing or unwilling are East Malaysian luxury hotel staff to be empowered? What factors will underpin the process of empowerment?

Littrell (2007) highlights that empowerment is an attitude, opinion, or belief on the part of employees and that there will be cross-cultural differences as to what empowerment actually means to them. This raises the equally important question of how far Western conceptions of empowerment translate to other parts of the globe? The outcomes of the current study lend themselves to further comparative research fleshing out the literature on empowerment from a global perspective.

In terms of managerial implications, the findings of this study should alert international hotel chains and expatriate managers to what they may encounter when implementing empowerment practices. Hotel management needs to pay adequate attention to equality and appropriate practice of empowerment. Culturally sensitive strategies should be engaged to assess both willing and unwilling staff, ensuring that empowerment benefits all stakeholders - employees, guests and the hotel itself - to sustain operational efficiencies and profits.

The outcomes of this study should assist researchers and practitioners in the hospitality industry to understand employee empowerment motivation in the East Malaysian context. However, these outcomes are subject to limitations. The paper only reports psychological (felt) empowerment as the personal agency or construct of employees relating to empowerment, hence the current study cannot claim to be wholly conclusive. Although the findings do provide a broad platform for further research including comparative studies, the limitations of the study and the subjectivity of responses ought not be ignored.

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