

6th International Conference on Industry 4.0 and Smart Manufacturing

Managing Workplace Conflict for Enhancing Employee Satisfaction in MSMEs

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Abstract

Workplace conflict is inevitable when employees of various backgrounds and different work styles are brought together for a shared business purpose. Conflict can and should be managed and resolved. This study explores the critical role of conflict management in shaping employee satisfaction within Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs). Given the unique challenges faced by MSMEs, such as limited resources and informal structures, effective conflict resolution strategies are essential for fostering a harmonious work environment. Utilizing a quantitative approach, this research examines the impact of various conflict management techniques on employee morale and satisfaction. The findings highlight the significant positive correlation between structured conflict management and increased employee satisfaction, underscoring the importance of adopting collaborative and supportive conflict resolution methods in MSMEs to enhance overall organizational performance.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the scientific committee of the 6th International Conference on Industry 4.0 and Smart Manufacturing

Keywords: workplace conflict management; employee satisfaction; MSMEs

1. Introduction

Workplace conflict management plays a crucial role in shaping employee satisfaction and organizational success. Research in this area delves into various strategies, communication techniques, and mediation approaches aimed at effectively addressing conflicts that may arise in a professional setting. By exploring the dynamics of conflict

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resolution and its impact on employee morale, productivity, and overall job satisfaction, this scope of research provides valuable insights for fostering a harmonious work environment. Understanding how conflict is managed in the workplace is essential for promoting positive interactions, enhancing team dynamics, and ultimately improving employee retention and satisfaction.

Conflict is typically defined as a disagreement or clash arising from divergent interests or viewpoints. Scholars have characterized conflict as a form of communication that arises from disagreement, mismatch, or discord inside or between social systems. [1] defines conflict as a state of friction or struggle that occurs when there is an actual or perceived risk or disagreement in the goals, ideas, views, attitudes, or behaviors of two or more individuals. Conflict inside an organization can arise either within a specific group or between several groups. It refers to a situation when one party perceives that another party's objectives are being obstructed or adversely affected. Therefore, it is crucial to identify the underlying cause of conflict to effectively address the disharmony that arises inside an organization. Effective management of workplace conflict can provide beneficial effects on individuals, teams, and the entire organization. For example, employees can get satisfaction through several means, hence improving their performance. Conflict can potentially lead to stress, which in turn might negatively affect an employee's contentment. A recent study conducted by [2] discovered a significant inverse relationship between work-related stress and performance. Put simply, there is an inverse relationship between the level of stress that a person experiences and their work performance.

Effective workplace conflict management is crucial for Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) as it ensures employee satisfaction, leading to increased motivation and dedication toward achieving the organization's goal and mission. Malaysia's MSMEs' impressive GDP growth of 11.6% in 2022, surpassing the national GDP growth rate of 8.7%, underscores the pivotal role these enterprises play in the country's economic expansion. Their increasing contribution to the GDP, which rose to 38.4% with a value-added of RM580.4 billion, reflects their growing economic influence and success.

The significant rise in MSMEs' employment, accounting for 48.2% of the national workforce in 2022, up from 47.8% in 2021, with a 3.8% year-on-year growth totaling 7.59 million people, further highlights their critical role in the job market. The Services sector, in particular, saw substantial growth, with MSMEs' employment exceeding half of the sector's total employment at 50.1%, and expanding by 5.3% to 4.87 million people.

This rapid growth and increased contribution to both GDP and employment underscore the importance of effective workplace conflict management and employee satisfaction within MSMEs. As MSMEs continue to expand, they face greater challenges in managing workplace conflicts due to limited resources and formal structures compared to larger organizations. Effective conflict management is crucial to maintaining a harmonious work environment, which in turn directly impacts employee satisfaction and productivity.

Higher employee satisfaction, driven by effective conflict management strategies, can lead to improved labor productivity, as evidenced by the 7.5% growth in MSMEs' labor productivity, reaching RM76,433 per person in 2022. This surpasses the pre-pandemic productivity levels of RM75,625 per person in 2019, with the highest growth observed in the Services sector. Effective conflict management can reduce stress and enhance job satisfaction, thereby contributing to higher productivity and better overall organizational performance.

The impressive economic contributions of Malaysia's MSMEs highlight the need for robust conflict management practices to sustain their growth and enhance employee satisfaction. By prioritizing effective conflict resolution, MSMEs can create a more productive and harmonious work environment, thereby supporting their continued expansion and contribution to the national economy.

Conflict management establishes criteria for employee contentment and motivates employees to perform diligently according to the business or management's expectations. In addition, effective conflict management would result in a broad spectrum of employee satisfaction with the organization. High job satisfaction leads to improved employee performance, enhanced conflict management skills, and increased dedication to the organization [3].

Workplace conflict is an inevitable aspect of organizational life, particularly in MSMEs where resources and human capital are limited. Effective conflict management is crucial for maintaining a harmonious work environment and ensuring employee satisfaction. However, MSMEs often lack the formal structures and resources available to larger organizations, which can exacerbate conflicts and negatively impact employee morale and productivity [4]. There is a need to investigate the specific conflict management strategies employed by MSMEs and their impact on employee satisfaction. Understanding these dynamics can help develop targeted interventions to improve workplace harmony

and employee well-being in MSMEs. This study aims to fill the gap in the existing literature by exploring the relationship between conflict management practices and employee satisfaction in the context of MSMEs.

2. Literature Review

Workplace conflict in MSMEs often arises from various sources, including interpersonal disputes, role ambiguities, resource constraints, and management practices. Unlike larger organizations, MSMEs typically lack formal conflict resolution mechanisms, making conflicts more pronounced and potentially more disruptive [5]. The close-knit nature of MSMEs can intensify conflicts, as employees are often in frequent, direct interaction, leading to higher emotional stakes and personal involvement in conflicts [6].

Effective conflict management is crucial for maintaining a positive work environment and enhancing employee satisfaction. Strategies can be broadly categorized into avoidance, accommodation, competition, compromise, and collaboration [7]. Among these, collaborative approaches, which emphasize mutual problem-solving and open communication, are generally associated with higher levels of employee satisfaction [8].

However, MSMEs often rely on more informal and ad-hoc approaches to conflict management due to their resource constraints. This can lead to inconsistent and sometimes ineffective resolution practices [9]. Studies have shown that when MSMEs implement structured conflict management strategies, such as training in conflict resolution and establishing clear policies, they can significantly improve employee satisfaction and organizational performance [10].

Job satisfaction within MSMEs has become an increasingly critical concern due to its significant impact on productivity, growth, and the survival of firms. Research by [11] and [12] has demonstrated that organizations with satisfied employees are more likely to increase their market share and achieve their goals. These organizations, with their content workforce, produce higher-quality products and treat customers exceptionally well, which are vital elements in building a robust market base and fostering customer loyalty. Additionally, satisfied employees enable firms to navigate the challenges of operating in volatile, complex, ambiguous, and uncertain business environments, such as the one prevailing in Zimbabwe. Therefore, job satisfaction is a crucial agenda and objective in human resource management, as it has the potential to significantly influence the success or failure of an organization. Employee satisfaction in MSMEs is heavily influenced by how conflicts are managed. Effective conflict management can lead to a more harmonious workplace, reducing stress and increasing job satisfaction [13]. Conversely, poor conflict management can exacerbate tensions, leading to a toxic work environment, decreased job satisfaction, and higher turnover rates [14].

Inadequate job satisfaction leads to psychological disengagement [15], escalating operational costs, diminished customer satisfaction, and decreased profitability and efficiency. Zimbabwean MSMEs grapple with various challenges, leading to a high failure rate amid economic fluctuations and rapid technological advancements. Prioritizing job satisfaction is a strategic move for businesses as it profoundly influences employees' behavior, morale, contentment, and drive. Particularly crucial in MSMEs, job satisfaction is imperative in today's business landscape, where firms are expected to excel in knowledge, technology, competitiveness, profitability, and productivity [16]. Diminished job satisfaction in MSMEs hampers performance and strains employer-employee relations, leading to deviations from organizational norms and heightened rates of accidents, absenteeism, and turnover [17]. Recent research highlights the importance of leadership in conflict management. Leaders who adopt a participative and supportive approach can foster a positive work culture and enhance employee satisfaction [18]. In MSMEs, where leadership often plays a direct role in day-to-day operations, this relationship is particularly pronounced [19].

Workplace conflict in MSMEs often arises from interpersonal disputes, role ambiguities, resource constraints, and management practices. Unlike larger organizations, MSMEs typically lack formal conflict resolution mechanisms, making conflicts more disruptive, especially given their close-knit nature, which intensifies emotional stakes. Effective conflict management is crucial for maintaining a positive work environment and enhancing employee satisfaction, with collaborative approaches generally yielding higher satisfaction levels. However, MSMEs often rely on informal and inconsistent conflict resolution practices due to resource constraints, leading to varying outcomes. The research underscores that structured conflict management strategies, including training and clear policies, significantly improve employee satisfaction and organizational performance. Job satisfaction is vital for productivity and growth, with satisfied employees contributing to better market share, customer loyalty, and resilience in challenging environments like Zimbabwe. Poor conflict management can exacerbate workplace tensions, reducing job satisfaction, increasing

turnover, and negatively impacting organizational performance. Leadership plays a crucial role in conflict management, especially in MSMEs, where participative and supportive leaders can foster a positive work culture and enhance employee satisfaction. The study explores the perspectives of MSME employees in the next section.

3. Methodology

The study's objectives were aligned with a quantitative research strategy, which specifically focused on studying employees of MSMEs. This architecture enabled gathering data from the desired population or particular samples. The survey employed a random sampling strategy and utilized self-report online questionnaires through Google Forms. The study focused on associates employed at MSMEs in Malaysia as the target group. A sample size of 51 participants was chosen due to practical limitations. The questionnaires were sent via Google Forms on various social media and online platforms to reach the target participants. This study utilized a questionnaire comprising two distinct sections. Part A gathered demographic data, while Part B evaluated conflict management approaches and employee satisfaction using a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire consisted of 23 items, not including demographic inquiries.

The data for this investigation was classified into primary and secondary data. The collection of primary data involved the direct acquisition from participants, which was done using a self-report survey conducted via Google Forms. Survey respondents gave their approval before completing the survey. Afterward, the data was imported into SPSS v. 26.0 for analysis. The study's knowledge base was enhanced by including secondary data acquired through a comprehensive literature assessment of relevant sources such as journals, research articles, and books. The amalgamation of primary and secondary data produced the conclusive findings of the study.

4. Findings and Analysis

Demographic analysis refers to the process of studying and analyzing the characteristics of a population, such as age, gender, income, education, and other relevant factors. A total of 51 respondents completed the survey, which assessed their conflict resolution skills and job satisfaction as employees. The survey was distributed evenly among the 51 participants, with 49.0% being male and 51.0% being female. 43.1% of the sample size of 51 consisted of people aged between 32 and 43, making them the majority. The second most populous demographic consists of individuals aged 26 to 31, accounting for 31.4% of the total. Those aged 44 and above, as well as those aged 25 and younger, make up 19.6% and 5.9% respectively. In addition, the survey was predominantly completed by Indian and Malay participants, accounting for 45.1% and 41.2% of the total respondents, respectively. By contrast, the remaining races, including Chinese individuals, accounted for only 9.8% and 3.9% of the sample, respectively. The survey was mostly responded to by individuals who are married (66.7%), followed by those who are single (31.4%), and individuals with other marital statuses (2.0%) accordingly.

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Respondents

Variables		Frequency	Percentage %	Mean	SD
Gender	Male	25	49.0	1.51	.505
	Female	26	51.0		
Age	≤ 25 years old	3	5.9	2.76	.839
	26 – 31 years old	16	31.4		
	32 – 43 years old	22	43.1		
	≥ 44 years old	10	19.6		
Race	Malay	21	41.2	2.24	1.106
	Chinese	2	3.9		
	Indian	23	45.1		
	Others	5	9.8		
Marital Status	Single	16	31.4	1.71	.502
	Married	34	66.7		
	Others	1	2.0		

The study variables were assessed, and the corresponding descriptive statistics were displayed in Table 2. The mean score for the predictor variable, conflict management, was 35.196 with a standard deviation of 4.578. The average value of the observed variable, employee satisfaction, was 46.490 with a standard deviation of 8.938. According to the specified threshold, the participants exhibit a moderately elevated level of job satisfaction as employees. In addition, the variables' dependability was assessed by the approach of internal consistency. The conflict management variable has a reliability of $\alpha = .526$, indicating that it is moderately dependable. Meanwhile, the employee satisfaction variable has strong reliability, as indicated by a criteria α value of .879. [20] state that a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient value of .80 or higher is seen as indicative of good reliability.

Table 2. Summary of Variables

Scales	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach Alpha
Conflict Management	35.196	4.578	.526
Employee Satisfaction	46.490	8.938	.876

Note. N = 51

The correlation coefficient result (Table 3) indicates a substantial and positive association between conflict management and employee satisfaction, with a correlation coefficient of $r = .624$ ($p = 0.01$). The results indicate that there is a statistically significant and relatively strong link between effective conflict management by employees and higher levels of employee satisfaction. Hence, the aforementioned conclusion on the correlation between conflict management and employee satisfaction can be substantiated. The current case study confirms the previous research findings that there is a direct correlation between conflict management and employee work satisfaction [21]. Furthermore, a study conducted by [22] revealed a noteworthy and favorable association between conflict management, specifically obliging and integrating approaches, and job satisfaction.

Table 3. Pearson's Correlation Between Study Variables

Variables	Conflict Management	Employee Satisfaction
Conflict Management	1	.624**
Employee Satisfaction		1

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The regression study of conflict management and employee satisfaction is presented in Table 4. The adjusted R^2 value of .376 indicates that the independent variable accounts for 37.6% of the variation in the dependent variable. The F statistic (1, 49) = 31.191, $p < .000$, suggests a significant relationship between the variables. The results indicated that conflict management had a favorable effect on employee satisfaction ($\beta = .319$, $p < .000$), therefore supporting the previously stated hypothesis. A 1% improvement in conflict management style is associated with a 0.319% rise in employee satisfaction (β value).

Table 4. Regression Coefficients of Conflict Management on Employee Satisfaction

Variables	B	SE	β	t	p
Conflict Management	20.345	2.707		7.516	.000
Employee Satisfaction	.319	.057	.319	5.585	.000

Note. $R^2_{adj} = .376$. F (1, 49). $p < .000$

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study has revealed a significant association between conflict management tactics and employee satisfaction among the employees of MSMEs. Based on recent research, it is clear that fostering a culture of collaborative conflict resolution in organizations has a positive impact on employee satisfaction. On the other hand, adopting a dominant

management approach often results in negative consequences [23]. The survey item that measures managerial assistance in group work is particularly relevant to collaborative conflict resolution approaches. This is consistent with previous empirical research that highlights the connection between collaborative management styles and increased employee satisfaction. This highlights the crucial significance of promoting transparent and open lines of communication in dispute resolution processes, ultimately establishing a favorable atmosphere for achieving common goals and enhancing employee morale and satisfaction.

[24] study supports the idea that conflict management strategies have a significant impact on both employee satisfaction levels and organizational performance measures. The incorporation of survey questions measuring managerial acknowledgment of individuals' potential highlights the inherent drive linked to recognition, demonstrating its significant influence on optimizing individual contributions and cultivating a feeling of fulfillment and job contentment among employees. This is in line with Herzberg's two-factor theory, where recognition plays a crucial role in motivating employees, driving their internal drive, and increasing their levels of pleasure. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that organizations give priority to implementing recognition programmes and practices as a key component of their conflict management strategies. This is because such initiatives are recognized as playing a crucial role in fostering a positive work culture and improving employee engagement and retention rates.

Moreover, the study explores many aspects of workplace satisfaction, including both motivational and hygienic elements. The survey questions assessing the amiability and ease of the work environment provide insight into the crucial impact of favorable workplace conditions on enhancing employee satisfaction levels. Previous studies have continuously emphasized the importance of positive connections among colleagues and a supportive work environment in promoting increased levels of job satisfaction [25]. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the need for organizational leaders to prioritize programmes that focus on improving office settings, therefore fostering higher productivity and job satisfaction among employees. This statement is supported by a prior study conducted by [26], which emphasizes the clear link between positive work environments and increased employee satisfaction in different industries.

The study highlights two core variables which are conflict management and employee satisfaction among the MSMEs in Malaysia. The survey was applied to gather the perspectives from the respondents and SPSS software analyzed the data given by the respondents. The limitation of the study by not have different potential variables that can impact employee satisfaction and further explanation on the employee's perspectives.

It is recommended that future researchers conduct additional exploratory experiments to validate and extend the results of this study project. Researchers can obtain more profound insights into the intricate dynamics of conflict management and its influence on employee satisfaction in different organizational settings by examining additional factors and distinct sample groups. Furthermore, conducting comparative studies across various industry sectors can offer valuable insights into the contextual elements that impact the correlation between conflict management strategies and employee satisfaction levels. This information can then be used to develop customized interventions and establish best practices for creating a positive work environment that promotes employee well-being and organizational success.

To summarize, this study emphasizes the crucial importance of implementing efficient conflict management techniques in impacting employee satisfaction levels in organizational contexts. This research thoroughly analyses the connections between different conflict resolution methods and their effects on workplace morale. This not only confirms the already established connection between conflict management and employee satisfaction but also provides detailed insights into the underlying mechanisms that drive this relationship. This study illuminates the complex dynamics involved, offering organizational leader's practical insights to improve their conflict resolution procedures and create a work environment that promotes both individual satisfaction and collective achievement.

The findings obtained from this research emphasize the crucial significance of proficient conflict management in fostering a cohesive and gratifying workplace atmosphere. Organizations can reduce potential unhappiness and promote collaboration and productivity by aggressively addressing problems and establishing open lines of communication. Furthermore, this research highlights the significance of customizing conflict resolution tactics to match the organizational culture and values, thereby guaranteeing their effectiveness in tackling the distinct difficulties encountered by employees.

Moreover, this study emphasizes the need to acknowledge the varied requirements and inclinations of employees in dispute resolution procedures. Organizations can empower their workforce and cultivate a sense of ownership and dedication towards organizational goals by recognizing and affirming employees' viewpoints. Furthermore, this study

emphasizes the importance of offering employees chances to enhance their skills and receive training in conflict resolution methods, arming them with the necessary tools and resources to effectively handle difficult interpersonal relationships.

In conclusion, by applying the knowledge acquired from this research, leaders of organizations may actively foster a work atmosphere that emphasizes resolving conflicts and enhances employee contentment and welfare. Organizations can establish a strong foundation for long-term success and adaptability by allocating resources to the enhancement of effective conflict management tactics and promoting a culture that values transparent communication and cooperation. By doing this, organizations can establish a work environment that fosters a sense of appreciation, assistance, and empowerment among employees, enabling them to reach their maximum capabilities. Consequently, this will enhance the overall performance and competitiveness of the organization in the long run.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM) through TIER 1 (vot Q122).

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