

Career Satisfaction and Willingness to Contribute to Malaysian Economy: Skilled Migrants in Malaysia

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Abstract. This article examines the effects of immigrants' perceptions of their contribution to the host country, access to equal opportunities and government support on their career satisfaction. Results suggested that expatriates' willingness to contribute to the host country have a significant positive association with their career satisfaction. Expatriates' positive perceptions on equal opportunities to be successful are also significantly related directly to their career satisfaction. Results support the view that the expatriates' optimistic perceptions towards the host country will enhance the quality of their career undertakings. Government should adopt a light touch towards the problem, by providing entry relaxation for them and promoting Malaysia as an attractive working and living environment.

Keywords: *Career satisfaction, contribution, equal opportunity, government support, Malaysia*

Introduction

"The geographical circulation of intellectual elites and the transfer of knowledge", is a phenomenon of the twentieth century (Ash and Söllner, 1996). In fifty years, the movement of skilled people has gone from "brain drain" to the "international exchange of human resources". While much skilled migration was once forced by conflict or by ethnic discrimination, it now includes a search for greater opportunities, better life chances and lifestyle and the globalisation as well as liberalisation of opportunities in newly developing countries, such as Malaysia. A global labour market now exists in some occupations where a person's skill is his or her greatest asset to be bought and sold.

As a developing country and moving towards achieving the status of a newly industrialised country, the level of local technology and skills in Malaysia is relatively low as compared to countries like Singapore, Hong Kong, Republic of Korea, and Taiwan. To move up the chain value, via the ladder of dynamic

comparative advantage, Malaysia needs to produce goods based on higher value added in terms of improved product design and development which in turn, requires not only substantial inflows of foreign financial resources but also the training of higher skilled professionals and workers. Moreover it is also imperative for Malaysia economy to improve labour market competitiveness through maintaining competitive wages, and providing a sufficient supply of manpower and skilled workers. Although levies are still imposed on foreign professionals, the government is considering to offer incentives for work in the information technology industry in Malaysia as part of that country's efforts to play a central role in the information 'super-highway' (Manning, 2000).

Skilled immigrants in Malaysia

Skilled or highly skilled labour is usually defined as having university degrees or extensive experience in a given field. It includes highly skilled specialists, independent executives and senior managers, specialised technicians or trades-people, investors, physicians, business people and sub-contract workers (Steiner and Mohr, 1998; OECD SOPEMI, 1997). Individuals in these categories may seek to maximise return on investment in their education and training by moving around the world in search of the highest paid or most rewarding employment. Others seek to take their skills where they feel they will be better able to use their capabilities and enjoy superior conditions of work and existence.

In Malaysia, the flows of the highly skilled are associated essentially with the development of international business, transnational corporations and banks, and the transfer of government officials and international civil servants of one type or another. Foreign professional, technical and skilled workers working in Malaysia are commonly referred to as "expatriates" and they hold an employment pass. In the public sector, the expatriates mainly hold diplomatic posts in foreign embassies or as consultants for government agencies; while in the private sector, the expatriate managers are mostly positioned in Multinational Corporations that run business operations.

Malaysia has adopted more restrictive policies towards foreign professionals in the early 1990s. Malaysia has imposed an annual business levy of several thousand dollars in the early 1990s (Ruppert, 1999). The process of

entering Malaysia as a foreign skilled labour takes a period of time. An initial step requires that persons satisfy employment requirements before their applications for migration are assessed. Principal applicants must meet one of the three employment criteria: occupation must be on an approved general occupations list; on a designated occupations list; or they have employment in Malaysia. The movement of skilled labours is not restricted by a numerical limit but they must have pre-arranged employment with a Malaysian employer in one of the occupations covered by the agreement. Normally, they arrive as contract workers to meet shortages or as skilled transients. Skilled migrants can enter the country only as designated employees.

Records on expatriates started only in mid-1997 with an estimated 12,600 labours. There was an open entry policy by skilled labours and professionals from any country except Israel and Yugoslavia. Malaysia received expatriates from well over 100 different countries with the majority coming from the United Kingdom, Japan and India. Generally, they were found occupying top managerial and executive positions in the private sector, mostly multinationals. In Malaysia, expatriates whose professions are related to Information, Communication and Technology sector are allowed to enter into Malaysia at the age of 21 years and above as compared to other professions in which their age must be 27 years and above (Immigration Department, 2004). The expatriate may hold the post for up to ten years. Within one year of the expatriates' arrival, a training programme must begin for a Malaysian to fill the position (The Economic Intelligent Unit, 2005).

Challenges perceived by the expatriates

It is inevitable that the necessity of learning new customs and, often, a new language is a must for international migrants. As Elashmawi (2000, February 19) mentioned, expatriates tend to bring along their "culture baggage" and when cultural clashes occur, misunderstanding and misconceptions may result out of it. Living in a new environment, expatriates are bound to face challenges and make adjustments in their life-styles in order to stay and work effectively (Ward and Rana-Deuba, 2000; Zakaria, 2000). There are expatriates who find that the challenges have an influence towards their decision to reconsider staying in the host country (Aycan, 1997).

Specific institutional policies in the host country could also be important. The intake of expatriates in Malaysia has always been governed by strict criteria aimed at ensuring technology transfer and fair promotion opportunities for Malaysians. Firms are required to prove that suitable Malaysians are not available for these careers, and that Malaysians are being trained to take over. In Malaysia, a very fair share of immigrants obtains a Malaysian citizenship. It takes a very long and arduous process so much so that the immigrants interest to be naturalised wears off in the end.

Tiebout (1956) argued that if a sufficient number of communities exist to accommodate the different types of individual preferences, individuals will organise themselves into communities that provide the public good they want. In a globalising world in which citizens are highly mobile, the theorem would also be useful in explaining international migration. The quality of public domain is of vital concern to many policy makers. The institutions that govern the production of public goods and services face growing tensions arising from demographic change, globalisation, and related public policies and proposed policy reforms.

Not many studies have been done on the arena of expatriates in Malaysia. Most of the research focused on the unskilled foreign labour and illegal immigrants (Nayagam, 1992; Pillai, 1992; Athukorala, 1993; Pang, 1993; Kanapathy, 2001; Kassim, 2000). Mohd. Tahir and Ismail (2007) explored challenges faced by the expatriates and adjustments made to the challenges. In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 male and female expatriates working in various firms and institutions in Malaysia. The study highlighted the psychological, socio-cultural and work challenges. Adjustments were based on individual initiatives based on the psychological and mental strengths of the expatriates, combined with efforts of peer expatriates, parent firms and host organisations.

Surienty (2005) examined the spillover effects of work and non-work factors on Malaysia expatriate international adjustment. Findings indicate that role discretion and role conflict of work-related factors, and favourable destination of non-work factors have direct within-domain and cross-domain relationships with expatriates international adjustment. Expatriates who are high in commitment have decreasing work adjustment as role clarity increases. Culture novelty shows only a within-domain effect towards general adjustment.

Framework and hypotheses

The definition of well-being of expatriates includes but extends beyond the narrower concepts of material well-being or living standards. For example, to achieve full participation in the host society and make contribution to the host country, opportunities offered by the society and governmental support are essential aspects. In this study, perceptions of the expatriates on their willingness to contribute, equal opportunities and government support that determine their quality work life will be analyzed.

To develop a set of indicators of settlement success of the expatriates in the host country requires a conceptual framework for examining their outcome in staying in Malaysia. Career satisfaction in the host country can be achieved if the expatriates are active in economic and social participation. In other words, the expatriates show willingness to contribute to the host country economically and socially. The expatriates must be self-reliant and treated as valued members too. The sense of belonging and being accepted in the host society are important in the settlement success of expatriates. Besides that, the government also plays a crucial role in imposing legislations and regulations relating to the rights of expatriates as well as providing resources.

The processes of integrating into the existing social structures and the quality of these connections improve the career satisfaction of the expatriates. Settlement success and long-term integration into the community are hindered if expatriates are concentrated among the disadvantaged. In keeping with this approach, the expatriates' perceptions of their contributions to Malaysia, equal opportunities to make a success and governmental support are essential in the integration processes. Figure 1 shows a conceptual framework of processes of integration involving the expatriates, society and host government.

To achieve full participation in the host society, it is inevitable that expatriates need to make contribution to the host country. The willingness of the expatriates to join into the host society may have great impact in their career satisfaction. The sense of belonging to the host country may be more fulfilling for the expatriates to participate economically through their career aspect. Hence, it is presumed that the more willingness the expatriate to contribute to the host country, the more likely he or she will be satisfied with their career. This supposition is explored in H1:

H1. Expatriates willingness to contribute to the host country have a positive association with their career satisfaction.

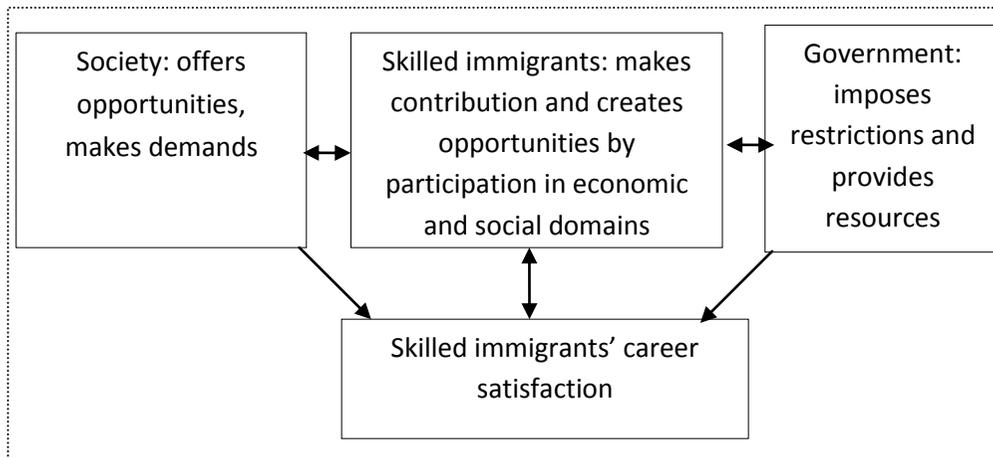


FIGURE 1: Processes of integration: A conceptual framework.

A study by Rita Mae Kelly (1998), suggests that for citizens to remain satisfied as customers, they need some broader and comprehensive information assuring that either all were treated equally, or if people were treated differently, they were treated equitably and fairly according to various criteria that are accepted for valid reasons. This implication of equal opportunities can be also applied in the arena of expatriates. Hence, expatriates who have positive perceptions on equal opportunities to make a success in the host country maybe more satisfied in their career. H2 examines this presumption:

H2. Expatriates' positive perceptions on equal opportunities to make a success are directly related to their career satisfaction.

Expatriates are attracted to cities because of career opportunities that makes the agglomeration itself of positive local amenities. Expatriates move away from environmental hazards like polluted cities is a case of migration in response to negative local amenities. In this study, the quality of public domain depends on how expatriates perceive in which (mainly government) institutions functions and the degree to which good and services produced by these institutions are valued. Perceptions of the quality of the public domain are therefore a reflection of both

the goods and the governance institutions that try to correct negative local amenities of individual action (Kaul and Mendoza, 2004). According to Asma (1996, February 16), the foreigners during their stay in Malaysia commented the issues of the local public services, cleanliness, environment awareness and restricted local media. This supposition is investigated in H3:

H3. Host government support is positively related to the career satisfaction among the expatriates.

Method

Sample

The sample was drawn from expatriates currently staying and working in the areas of Klang Valley for at least one year. With reference to a study done by Tung (1998), majority of the expatriates took six to twelve months to feel comfortable living in a new cultural setting. Around 70 per cent of the expatriates in Malaysia were concentrated in the big cities such as Kuala Lumpur, Cyberjaya and Petaling Jaya (Yong, 2006). They were professionals working in higher education institutions and Multinational Corporations (MNCs). The participants were chosen through purposive sampling, whereby it "is based on the assumption that the researcher wants to discover, understand and gain insight and therefore select a sample from which most can be learned" (Merriam, 1998). Purposive technique is widely used in exploratory studies (Cooper and Schindler, 2001; Davis, 2000) and since the current study was also exploratory in nature, the use of this sampling technique was justified.

Data were gathered through a self-administered questionnaire, which was distributed in the month of May 2006-July 2006 in the Klang Valley. A self-administered survey methodology was used due to cost effectiveness, reach and convenience of this tool for both respondents and researchers (Dillman, 2000). The survey methodology also provided the capacity to reveal quantitative differences in perceptions among subjects. Respondents were ensured that individual responses were anonymous. To ensure the quality of the data collected, all completed questionnaires were checked for completeness and consistency of responses. The interviewers were required to revisit the respondents to rectify mistakes that were detected. The global response rate was 90 per cent. A total of 121 valid questionnaires were received. The SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences)

software was used for data entry and analyses. Computer editing was carried out to check for inconsistency of responses and out-of-range codes.

Profile of Respondents

Characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1 in this section. In the sample, 81.0 per cent of the expatriates surveyed are males and 19.0 per cent are females. The sample comprises 29.8 per cent Muslims, 28.1 per cent Hindus, 26.4 per cent Christians, 13.2 per cent Buddhists and 2.5 per cent others. The majority of the expatriates (66.1 per cent) are between 21-40 years old while 33.9 per cent of them belong to the age group 41 years old and above. A total of 41.3 per cent of the expatriates originate from South Asia, 25.6 per cent come from Europe, 12.4 per cent from Middle East, 9.9 per cent from Japan while the rest from South East Asia, USA and Australia.

TABLE 1: Profile of respondents

Demographic characteristics	%	Demographic characteristics	%
<i>Age group</i>		<i>Country of origin</i>	
21-30	14.9	South East Asia	6.6
31-40	51.2	South Asia	41.3
41-50	19.8	Japan	9.9
Above 50	14.0	Middle east	12.4
<i>Gender</i>		Europe	
Male	81.0	USA	2.5
Female	19.0	Australia	1.7
<i>Marital status</i>		<i>Monthly income</i>	
Single	18.2	RM5,000 or less	50.4
Married	81.8	RM5,001 – RM10,000	24.0
<i>Religion</i>		More than RM10,000	
Muslim	29.8	<i>Years of stay since arrived</i>	
Buddhist	13.2	5 years or less	66.9
Hindu	28.1	6-10 years	25.6
Christian	26.4	More than 10 years	7.4
Others	2.5	<i>Reason of migration</i>	
<i>Languages spoken</i>		Work	76.0
English	100	Study and later work	3.3
Malay	0	Work and study	12.4
		Follow spouse and later work	9.1

All the expatriates are well versed with English but none of them speaks



Malay Language. English is the language of commerce and normally used in the working office. However, Malay is the first language in Malaysia. It is the language of instruction and almost all daily interchange in Malaysia. Therefore, proficiency with the Malay Language is an important indicator of the ability of expatriates to participate fully in Malaysian society. Restrictions upon social intercourse and the formation of friendship networks apply if a person living in Malaysia is unable to communicate adequately in the Malay language. For such people, networks will be confined very largely to people speaking the same ethnic language and English-speaking people.

About half of the sample has monthly income of RM5,000 or less. Out of this poorest group of expatriates, about 68.9 per cent of them have less than 5 years of experience upon arriving in Malaysia and majority of them aged between 21-40 years old. A total of 24.0 per cent of the expatriates has a monthly income of RM5,001-RM10,000 and these respondents are likely to have more than 5 years of working experience upon arriving to Malaysia. 25.6 per cent of the expatriates who are in the highest earning group (more than RM10,000) have more than 10 years of experience and hold top managerial position.

It is observed that the majority of the expatriates (76.0 per cent) come to Malaysia for work reason while 12.4 per cent of them come to work and study at the same time. A total 9.1 per cent of the sample are 'trailing spouse' who later find full-time career and 3.3 per cent arrived as students and later work to support themselves. Participation in education is an important component of social participations since this is likely to contribute to their integration into the labour force.

Instrument

Three categories which consisted of "contribution to Malaysia", "equal opportunities to make a success", and "host government support to expatriates" were measured on a seven-point scale. The increasing point indicated the higher the level of agreement with the statements. These items were measured using a scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Cronbach's alpha was computed to test the reliability for the three categories.

Contributions to Malaysia was measured by seven items developed by Kofodimos (1995). One sample item was "I care much and try to make Malaysia a good community to live in". This general affective measure was intended to capture the extent to which the respondents' willingness to contribute and

integrate into the host society. Equal opportunities to make a success was measured by three items and drawn from the work of Greenhaus et al. (1990). One sample item was “In general, everyone has an equal chance of getting ahead in Malaysian society”. The items measure the expression of equal opportunity to settle successfully in Malaysia. Perceptions of the local government assessed the extent to which respondents had been provided support and direct assistance by the host government, in the form of law, facilities and environment. Five indicators of host government support were included. One sample item was “The government provides basic services such as health care and legal services to expatriates”.

The quality in the expatriates work is assessed in terms of their career satisfaction illustrated over a five-point Likert scale ranging from very dissatisfied to very satisfied. Consistent with the work by Andrews and Withey (1976) and Wong et al. (2000), this study suggests a set of 4 life domains to evaluate the quality of career of the expatriates in Malaysia. Each domain of life is then rated on a five-point Likert scale by the expatriates to indicate their perception of satisfaction with that domain. The sample domains involve ‘specific career responsibilities’, ‘expected performance standards’, ‘supervisions and guidance of subordinates’ and ‘interacting with Malaysian colleagues’.

Hierarchical regression analysis was employed to examine the relationships among the perceptions of expatriates in the three categories which are ‘contributions to Malaysia’, ‘equal opportunities to make a success’ and ‘host government support’ with ‘career satisfaction’. To assess the perception of the expatriates with regard to each of the category, the means and standard deviations were computed for each item.

Results

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics. All the variables’ characteristics, including means, standard deviations, and Cronbach’s alphas are reasonable (Nunnally, 1978). It is notable that the expatriates have a mean score of career satisfaction above what is depicted as satisfied, well above the mid-level point. This may indicate that they are quite comfortable with the work environment in Malaysia. The mean for contributions to Malaysia, equal opportunities and government support are also above the mid-level point of its scale, with the nearest scale point of ‘somewhat agree’. For expatriates’ perceptions of host

government, it is even higher, almost coinciding with the scale point ‘agree’, indicating an affirmation of their optimistic in the government support.

TABLE 2: Characteristics of the variable in the sample

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach’s alpha
1. Career Satisfaction (JS) ^a	4.09	0.74	0.85
2. Contributions to Malaysia(C) ^b	4.91	1.16	0.82
3. Equal Opportunities (EQ) ^b	4.80	1.44	0.74
4. Government Support (GS) ^b	5.46	0.82	0.71

^aScale ranged from 1-5

^bScale ranged from 1-7

In addition, table 3 presents a correlation matrix among the research variables. As can be seen, most of the inter-correlations hold in the expected directions, and none of them exceeds the maximum level of 0.70, which is a good indication for the absence of multicollinearity among the variables. These correlations suggests that career satisfaction among the expatriates in Malaysia are positively related with contribution to Malaysia and equal opportunities ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.001$ and $r = 0.27$, $p < 0.05$, respectively). The results for equal opportunities are even stronger. Equal opportunities is positively related with contribution to Malaysia and government support ($r = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$ and $r = 0.41$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Government support is modestly positively related with equal opportunities ($r = 0.52$, $p < 0.001$). These findings provide initial support for the direct relationship between dependent and the independent variables. However, these relationships still need to be tested with hierarchical regression analysis to examine their importance.

TABLE 3: Correlation matrix among the research variables for the sample.

	Mean (S.D.)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Career Satisfaction ^a	4.09 (0.74)	-					
2. Contributions to Malaysia ^b	4.91 (1.16)	0.37**	-				
3. Equal Opportunities ^b	4.80 (1.44)	0.27*	0.68**	-			
4. Government Support ^b	5.46 (0.82)	0.08	0.41**	0.52**	-		
5. Gender (1 = male)	-	0.20*	0.19*	0.12	-0.04	-	

6. Years of stay in Malaysia	6.73 (15.35)	0.21*	0.09	-0.10	-0.19*	0.09	-
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Note : *p < 0.05; **p < 0.001; ^aScale ranged from 1-5; ^bScale ranged from 1-7

Since career satisfaction is a process over time, the years the expatriates had spent in Malaysia and gender are used as a control variable in the data analysis and entered first. Table 4 presents the results of hierarchical regression analysis to test the direct relationships. Expatriates' career satisfaction is regressed on the control variables (step 1). Second, contributions to Malaysia, equal opportunities and government support are added to the equations (step 2) to examine the independent contribution of each of these variables to the overall explained variance of the dependent variables.

In the first step of the equations, the control variables (gender and years of stay in Malaysia) have no significant relationship with the dependent variables. However, the second step of the regressions provides very interesting findings. Years of stay in Malaysia is significantly positive to expatriates' career satisfaction in the second step ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$). Male expatriates show more significant career satisfaction as compared to female counterparts ($\beta = 0.14$, $p < 0.05$). Step 1 shows only 4 per cent of the explained variance in expatriates' career satisfaction. The control variables have a minor effect on the analysis. Men are more likely than women to be satisfied in their work. In addition, career satisfaction is higher among those who have been staying a longer period in Malaysia.

TABLE 4: Hierarchical regression analysis for the dependent variable expatriates' career satisfaction (standardized coefficients; t-test in parentheses)

Variable	Step 1	Step 2
1. Gender (1 = male)	0.18 (1.94)	0.14(2.04*)
2. Years of stay in Malaysia	0.08 (0.81)	0.24 (3.21**)
3. Contribution to Malaysia (CM)		0.29 (2.69**)
4. Equal Opportunities (EQ)		0.56 (6.80***)
5. Government Support (GS)		0.14 (1.71)
R ²	0.040	0.540
Adjusted R ²	0.023	0.506
ΔR^2	0.040	0.034
F	2.36	15.70***
F for ΔR^2	2.36	2.00

*p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

As can be seen from the results, willingness to contribute to Malaysia is

significant and positively related with career satisfaction among the expatriates in the second step ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$, respectively). Equal opportunities to make a success is also strongly and positively related with career satisfaction among the expatriates ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$, respectively). Government support reports insignificance. This variable indicates a lack of importance for its relationship to career satisfaction. The inclusion of the three variables in the step 2 contributes to a high 54 per cent of the explained variance in career satisfaction among the expatriates. The F value is statistically significant, implying a good data fit between the regression model and the data. These findings support H1 and H2.

Conclusion and discussion

Controlling for the years the expatriates have been assigned to Malaysia and gender, the results show that the more willingness the expatriate to contribute to the host country, the more satisfied is their career undertakings. Similarly, the results also present that expatriates' positive perceptions on equal opportunities to make a success are directly related to their career satisfaction, after gender and years of stay in Malaysia variables being controlled.

The present study deals with perceptions of contributions to Malaysia, equal opportunities to make a success and host government support in the arena of expatriates in Malaysia. The main rationale for this approach is based on the idea that these views are important for a better understanding of other perceptions and behaviours of expatriates toward host government and toward the contribution to Malaysia. Expatriates' perceptions of willingness to contribution to Malaysia, equal opportunities and host government support may thus prove useful in explaining satisfaction in their career.

With the subjective method of assessment where the perceptions of the expatriates are clearly reflected, policy makers and service providers from both public and private sectors would be able to gain a better insight on the type of initiatives and services that could improve the well being of the expatriates and retain them. Efforts to improve mechanisms that promote the equality and well-being of the expatriates will encourage them to stay and contribute. Above all, a well-planned and future oriented policy consistent with the long run prospects of the market must be viewed as a strategy in increasing the inflow of skilled labour immigrants.

The findings help us to promote ideas about how to improve the management of expatriates to further contribute to our country. Another major achievement of this paper is its exploration of an alternative viewpoint regarding the study of career satisfaction of expatriates to the receiving country. The study demonstrated that a variety of perspectives need to be considered when examining the level of career satisfaction among the expatriates.

The primary data was moderate in size. A total of 121 respondents' questionnaires were collected and analyzed. However, based on the sampling technique used, the number of sample is sufficient, and indeed it is big enough to run a robust statistical analysis (Balian, 1994). The purposive method was adopted for this study because there was no sampling frame available. Though this sampling strategy is acceptable for this study, there is a possibility that the adoption of this strategy may limit the generalization of the findings, to some extent. Future research could try to replicate and extend this exploratory study. Besides asking expatriates, employers could be requested to comment on their perceptions of their performance and staff-related issues. This information is important as the employer is one of the main contacts for the foreign skilled labours.

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