

Job satisfaction of unsung heroes: A generic interpretive inquiry study on Malaysian offshore catering employees

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Abstract

The number of employees working in the offshore industry is dwindling because the younger employees are less attracted to work in this industry as most of them prefer onshore jobs. Despite the extant research on job satisfaction in urban and hypothetical organizations, job satisfaction among offshore employees especially the catering section should be investigated to devise strategies in retaining existing employees. This study aims to explore job satisfaction among offshore catering employees in Malaysia. A generic interpretive inquiry study was conducted with 13 offshore catering employees. The data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis. According to the results, the 11 themes that were determined were relationship with co-workers, salary, fairness, teamwork, fringe benefit, ability utilization, the job itself, relationship with superior, equipment and facilities, expectation and achievement. The current study provided fresh insight on a better nomological understanding of job satisfaction among the employees working in offshore catering. In conclusion, the findings emphasized the importance of these aspects in maintaining and attracting employees.

Keywords: job satisfaction; generic interpretive inquiry; offshore catering; qualitative; thematic analysis

1. Introduction

In today's competitive era, companies often overlook the importance of the workforce although they are the primary source in gaining organizational competitive advantage (Despoteris & Myloni, 2018). In other words, no organization will be able to achieve organizational or financial goals without its employees. According to Tews et al. (2012), hiring competent employees is regarded as an elementary phase in ensuring a productive workforce and effective organizational performance. In line with the statement, Tracey and Hinkin (2000) affirmed that organizational objectives can be achieved with the strength of qualified employees. Employees are regarded as a substantial asset of an organization through the lens of human resources, regardless of the industry.

Although research in unusual and challenging environments has become a central concern to some psychology scholars (Sandal et al., 2006), very little is known about the actual behavior of those working in unusual environments (Zimmer et al., 2013; Suedfeld, 1998). Kanas (1997) asserted that the study of isolated, confined and extreme (ICE) environments is of major interest to understand the concept of adaptation. Sandal et al. (2006) also added that these environments can significantly influence behavioral functioning. An environment in this context is characterized as working far from home, being exposed to dangerous conditions and social isolation, working in a narrow working space, experiencing high workload and communication

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constraints with the outside world (Nicolas et al., 2013; Tafforin, 2002; Lugg & Shepanek, 1999; Wood et al., 1999). Furthermore, offshore is considered as a part of the safety-critical organizations (SCOs) including sectors like the military, maritime, aviation, nuclear power plants, emergency services, and other high-risk industries (Bergheim et al., 2015; Nielsen et al., 2013; Nielsen et al., 2011). These sectors are associated with a high potential for injuries, accidents and stress (Rundmo, 1994; Sutherland & Cooper, 1989). Therefore, working in such a workplace could contribute to unsafe feelings (Rundmo, 1996) as it involves possible exposure to fire and explosions that might affect an employee's well-being and satisfaction (Nielsen et al., 2011). Figure 1 illustrates the overview of offshore catering.

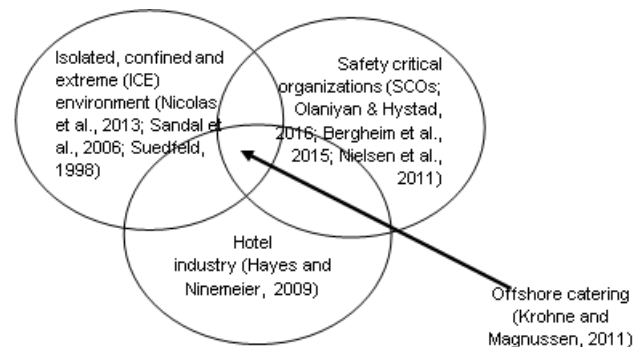


Figure 1. Overview of offshore catering

Offshore catering represents similar work characteristics to that of hotels such as cooking, baking, serving food and beverages, along with laundry and housekeeping services. However, the offshore working group presents a unique situation that needs to be explicitly addressed compared to the onshore working environment (Afzainizam et al., 2016; Ross, 2009). According to Krohne and Magnussen (2011), these employees usually perform repetitive tasks of preparing and serving food apart from providing laundry services. As such, these employees provide services to attend to the needs of other offshore employees, despite living away from home where they stay on a vessel for a minimum of 45 days.

A vast majority of job satisfaction studies on offshore employees have been undertaken primarily in Western countries. The main areas of study on offshore employees are usually related to risk management issues, health, safety, and environment (HSE), and job stress (Harun et al., 2014; Rundmo, 1992). Thus, offshore catering is relatively under-investigated compared to research focusing on other offshore jobs, reflecting the minimal attention on the importance of job satisfaction of these employees. According to Yuen et al. (2018), job satisfaction is vital in retaining offshore catering employees. Therefore, offshore catering employee's job satisfaction needs to be investigated as they work and live in an isolated environment for a prolonged period. As suggested by Veri et al. (2019), a broad understanding of characteristics associated with increased job satisfaction can help develop essential organizational changes to maintain and attract employees. Therefore, this study explores the job satisfaction among offshore catering employees in Malaysia to provide insights into maintaining and retaining the employees.

2. Literature Review

2.1 ICE environments and SCOs

Due to the limited academic studies particularly relating to job satisfaction in offshore industries, reviews of literature for this study were derived from other ICE environments including the military, Antarctica, polar stations, submarines, maritime, and space programs. Although each of the above-mentioned work environments is uniquely distinct, they share several characteristics. Hence, including ICE environments could provide a better overview of offshore settings, particularly for offshore catering.

Identifying employee job satisfaction is a crucial and relevant concern in every SCO and ICE environment. Employees working and living in such environments experience tough physical environments that pose various challenges and dangers (Palinkas & Suedfeld, 2021; Sandal et al., 2006) compared to the usual onshore working environments. Among the common threats experienced by offshore employees in these environments include social isolation, working in narrow spaces, high workload and communication constraints with the outside world (Lugg & Shepanek, 1999; Pickett & Hofmans, 2019; Tafforin, 2002; Wood et al., 1999). Nevertheless, due to the growing technological sophistication in increasing efficiency and reducing physical danger (John Paul et al., 2010; Roma & Bedwell, 2017), the number of people working in ICE environments has increased (Suedfeld, 1998).

Although the ICE and SCO environments are likely to be isolated and confined, there are differences between each unique setting. For example, astronauts deal with the effects of microgravity that impairs their performance (Krins, 2009; Negishi et al., 2017), while those working in submarines appear to live in dangerous conditions during missions (Brasher et al., 2010; Nicolas et al., 2019). Whereas, personnel in the Antarctic have to live in darkness, extreme cold weather (Guthridge, 2020; Paul et al., 2010; Sarris, 2008) and put on a bulky outfit (Leach, 2016; Sandal et al., 2006). Meanwhile, offshore catering employees are associated with significant hazards and a high potential for accidents (Bergheim et al., 2015; Hystad et al., 2017). In addition, previous studies on ICE environments displayed inconsistencies in terms of settings and participants' profiles (Nicolas et al., 2013). Therefore, despite the similarities, each setting is unique with its environment and narration of its unique characteristics.

2.2 Offshore industry in Malaysia

In Malaysia, 37 fields produce oil and 11 produce gas, whilst several others are under development (Anuar et al., 2013). Despite the challenges presented by a prolonged drop in oil prices, Malaysia remains one of Southeast Asia's most dynamic owners of oil and gas reserves and the third largest export and import of liquefied natural gas (LNG) in the world after Japan and Qatar (Kim et al., 2021). The industry remains as one of the mainstay of Malaysia's growth and has contributed approximately 49.1% to the Malaysia's total manufacturing sales (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2021).

Malaysia's oil and gas industry is generally divided into upstream, midstream, and downstream activities. Upstream activities include exploration, development, and production of oil and gas resources. Midstream and downstream activities, on the other hand, range from the transportation of oil and gas, refining, and processing through marketing and trading of end products along with catering services (Aalsalem et al., 2018; Anuar et al., 2013).

2.3 Offshore catering in Malaysia

Offshore catering is considered as a myriad of small companies (Lewis et al., 1988) that provide food and beverage for vessels and platforms in the oil and gas industry. However, the business depends on the supply of contract workers in the exploration and drilling companies (Buchan, 1985). In short, contracts are awarded based on existing offshore oil and gas exploration, installation, and drilling projects. Contracting companies are appointed to perform catering work for an agreed period at respective offshore companies (Heen, 1988). According to Derani (personal communication, March 20, 2016), a short-term contract (days, months or years) can be awarded to selected caterers to provide their services on the vessel, while long-term contracts (two- or more years) is awarded to caterers that provide services on platforms.

In offshore companies, the catering service is defined as the 'process of provision of supply, storage, handling, preparation, and disposal of food' (PETRONAS Carigali Sdn Bhd, 2011). In Malaysia, Petronas, a main player in the oil and gas industry, has the authority to release catering service contracts. At times, catering companies also provide housekeeping and laundry services to their customers. The customer here is the person-on-board (POB), which includes the general offshore workers, marine crews, visitors, company representatives, and others.

The work norm of offshore catering is similar to that of the hotel industry. According to Hayes and Ninemeier (2009), the hotel industry provides accommodations and food services for people who are away from their homes. Thus, offshore catering consists of similar work characteristics as hotels such as cooking, baking, serving of food and beverages, together with laundry and housekeeping services.

In general, there are four types of offshore catering jobs, namely food service supervisor, cook, catering staff, and cleaner (ECOS Environmental Consulting, 2004). The catering supervisor is the camp boss, whereas cooks are categorized into several positions such as chief cook, Asian cook, assistant cook, night cook, baker, and galley hand (Anuar et al., 2013). The cleaner refers to the housekeeping and laundry personnel. Therefore, the offshore catering employees, are divided into several positions as illustrated in Figure 2.

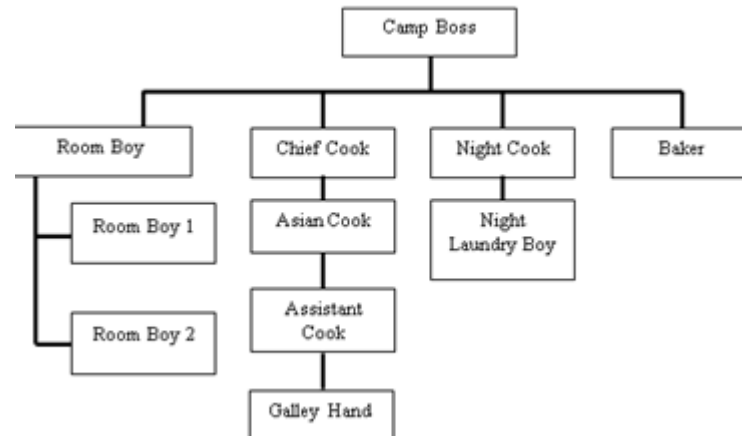


Figure 2. Organizational structure of offshore catering

2.4 The importance of job satisfaction in offshore catering

Previous studies suggested that job satisfaction can positively affect productivity and performance (Idris et al., 2020; Pang & Lu, 2018; Patterson et al., 2004; Gruneberg, 1979), negatively impact quit intention (Dickey et al., 2011; Hamermesh, 2001; Mumu et al., 2021), reduce deviance in the workplace (Abbasi et al., 2020; Diala & Nemani, 2011; Rego & Cunha, 2008; Spector, 1997), and increase organizational commitment (Kim et al., 2005; Luu & Phan, 2020; Meyer and Smith, 2001; Qureshi et al., 2016; Tekingündüz et al., 2015). So, it can be concluded that a happy worker leads to productivity. Therefore, it is important to determine employee job satisfaction in any organization.

Offshore catering is one of the important offshore sections that can directly impact the overall well-being of offshore workers. Every factor that could increase scientific levels of health, well-being, and morale of the workforce should be considered for promoting productive workforce (Afzainizam et al., 2016). One of the important factors is job satisfaction because low job satisfaction could lead to large consequences and costs for companies operating offshore (Nielsen et al., 2011). Thus, identifying efficient factors that can significantly contribute to offshore performance is valuable. According to An et al. (2020) and Yuen et al. (2018), job satisfaction has a positive influence on seafarers' performance.

Generally, lack of job satisfaction among employees may lead to poor organizational behavior. While sufficient job satisfaction among the employees may improve their level of motivation and abilities. Moreover, satisfied employees may exhibit positive behaviors such as high levels of productivity, commitment, loyalty, and dedication at work. As such, Dickey et al. (2011) revealed strong evidence that job satisfaction was a significant factor in predicting offshore workers' quitting intentions. Job satisfaction can extend an employee's intention to keep working in the industry (Li et al., 2014; Mokarami et al., 2021). Thus, job satisfaction is a vital factor in determining the well-being of offshore operations.

3. Methodology

3.1 Ethical approval

The permission to conduct the study was submitted to the Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects. Data collection commenced following ethical approval (Ethical protocol reference: JKEUPM(FSTM-P121)2017).

3.2 Interview questions

The interview consisted of 10 central questions for which probing questions were asked to explore the participants' views that required further clarification. The interview questions were adapted from Schriesheim and Tsui (1980), Andrews and Withey (1976), and Taylor and Bowers (1974) that were carefully constructed to cover the issues to be discussed. According to Silverman (2001), a standardized set of questions is considered as a part of 'good interview practice' to ensure its reliability and consistency during the interview. As presented in Table 1, the interview questions included the following main areas: (1) employees' description of their background and their involvement in the industry; (2) descriptions of their work attitudes and experiences, particularly on job satisfaction, and; (3) conclusion. The interview questions are provided in Appendix 1.

3.3 Informant election criteria

The study only included participants who are still active employees in the offshore catering industry, can communicate in either English or Malay and with working experience of more than four trips in offshore catering. Informants with experience of more than four trips were selected to ensure that each informant understood and was familiar with the job and working environment (adopted from Majid et al., 2017). Hence, this study required a certain degree of informant homogeneity because informants are selected based on shared criteria by definition of purposive sampling.

3.4 Data collection

The data was collected from 13 interviews with offshore catering employees throughout Peninsular Malaysia including urban and suburban areas in the states of Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan, Terengganu, and Perak. The participants were informed that participation was voluntary in which they could refuse to answer any question and withdraw from the interview at any point in time. Letter of informed consent was handed to the participants for their signatory as an agreement for participation. The interview ceased after data saturation achieved.

Each question was read audibly by the researchers where the informants were asked to provide their answers and to justify their opinions. When the explanation was unclear, probing questions were asked to clarify their answers based on the nature of the question. The interview sessions were conducted in a manner in which the questions were asked according to the flow of the discussion instead of a sequential flow.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Demographic profiles

All participants who took part in the study were Malay males. Their age ranged between 23 and 51 years. Of the 13, six were in their 20s, four in their 30s, two in their 40s and one participant aged 51. Seven participants (53.8%) are single, while six (46.2%) are married with child/children. As for their educational level, a majority (69.2%) possessed a diploma from various higher institutions. One of the participants had a bachelor's degree, one with a national vocational training council qualification, and two with secondary school qualification. Of the 13 participants, five (38.5%) were camp bosses (catering supervisors) and two (15.4%) were assistant cooks. The other participants included the chief steward, baker, Western cook, Eastern cook, cook/baker, and chief cook. All participants joined offshore catering between the years 1993 and 2016 and have experienced five to more than 250 trips. Six of the participants (46.2%) reside in Terengganu, two in Kelantan, and two in Selangor. The other three participants were from Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan, and Perak. Table 1 summarizes the demographic profiles of the participants.

Table 1: Participant demographic profiles

Participant	Age	Marital status	Educational level	Current position	Year joined	Approximate number of trips completed
1	24	Single	Diploma (Public University)	Assistant cook	2015	5
2	32	Single	MSC Level 3	Chief steward	2011	More than 10
3	36	Married (3 children)	Diploma (Polytechnic)	Camp boss	2011	More than 40
4	24	Single	Diploma (Public University)	Baker	2016	7
5	43	Married (3 children)	Diploma (College)		2004	More than 100

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6	24	Single		Camp boss	2015	6
7	23	Single	Diploma (Public University)	Assistant cook	2016	7
8	26	Single	Bachelor Degree (Public University)	Eastern cook	2016	5
9	31	Married (1 child)	Diploma (College)	Western cook	2012	50
10	27	Single	Secondary school		2011	More than 50
11	42	Married (1 child)		Camp boss	2007	40
12	37	Married (2 children)	Diploma (Institute)		2013	50
13	51	Married (2 children)	Diploma (Public University)	Cook/baker	1993	More than 250
			Secondary school	Camp boss		
				Chief cook		
				Camp boss		

*Note: MSC = Malaysian Skills Certification

4.2 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data collected. The analysis focused on describing the textual data explicitly with limited deliberation on its implied meaning (Sandelowski, 2010). Six phases of thematic analyses proposed by Braun et al. (2019) and Braun and Clarke (2006) with the aid of QSR International's NVivo 11 Software were considered in the analyses.

During the analyses, the coding network was monitored and new codes were identified. Initially, 96 codes were generated from the interviews. However, following several discussions and amendments, the number of codes was reduced to 70 due to redundancy and similarities among the codes. Meanwhile, the qualitative result from the 13 interviews was concluded into 11 emerging themes namely relationship with co-workers, salary, fairness, teamwork, fringe benefit, ability utilization, the job, relationship with superior, equipment and facilities, expectation, and achievement. The themes were assigned in sequence as to the flow of the interviews. Table 2 describes the description of the themes.

4.2.1 Theme 1: Relationship with co-workers

The participants stressed the importance of active engagement with co-workers in daily work to develop a relationship since they not only worked together but live together. They expressed the element that was consistent with Krohne and Magnussen's (2011) description of job satisfaction, indicating closeness among the workers. To some extent, the presence of co-workers in the environment replaces the absence of their families. Hence, once onboard, the participants considered the co-workers as family members. Participants 1 and 10 highlighted that their friends replaced their absent family members, providing a sense of closeness among co-workers in the environment:

"They are like my family. That is something rare you don't usually get at work." [Participant 1, age 24 years, experience 2-3 years]

"Offshore, friends are important because they are like family. With them, we share our problems, like our family." [Participant 10, age 27 years, experience 6-7 years].

Confined working environment encourages the participants to embrace a good relationship with their friends, during and after working hours as they spend more time together. A good relationship enables them to feel happy and at ease to cope with their physically confined working environment (Mette et al., 2019; Mokhtar et al., 2020). Based on the interviews, the participants developed strong ties and a sense of friendship within the group. Participants 5 and 11 highlighted that they spent more time with their friends:

"The working environment here, you see many faces that are familiar. Less burden, less tension, no problem. We feel happy to go to work." [Participant 5, age 43 years, experience 13-14 years].

"During working hours I'm serious about work, but after working hours we can hang out together, smoke [cigarette] together. We want all to be happy." [Participant 11, age 42 years, experience 10-11 years].

4.2.2 Theme 2: Salary

Most of the participants highlighted the salary theme of working offshore. According to Mette et al. (2017) and Alias et al. (2018), the salary was the main reason for employees to work offshore. Of the lot, Participant 6 mentioned that he was satisfied with his salary working as an offshore catering employee.

"It's all about salary. We directly talk about salary. Whatever the reason is, we need money. That is our satisfaction, our utmost satisfaction because what we want is the salary. We work to get money. Because of offshore, we can save money." [Participant 6, age 24 years, experience 2-3 years].

Participant 7 also expressed the same while comparing his current job with a hotel job.

"If we work in a hotel, our salary won't be the same as now. Even though it is quite tiring, but once we see the pay slip, we feel at ease." [Participant 7, age 23 years, experience 1-2 years].

While several participants pointed out that the salary offered in offshore catering is higher than that of the onshore jobs. Hence, Participants 4 and 6 reflected their interest in working in this sector.

"Because they will cover our risk, the allowance that we get on the sea, two weeks far from home. For me, offshore jobs are lucrative because of salary, higher than onshore jobs." [Participant 4, age 24 years, experience 1-2 years].

"My interest was driven by salary. The catch is that we know those working offshore, their pay is several times higher than the salary of onshore workers." [Participant 6, age 24 years, experience 2-3 years].

Participant 13 pointed out the huge difference in salary between offshore catering and hotel jobs. Hence, it was evident that the salary offered by offshore jobs is an important factor in choosing a career in offshore catering.

"One reason is the salary. The salary is different than onshore. If our salary onshore, we'll do the same job. For example, we cook at the hotel, a month's salary is perhaps RM2000 to RM2500. But, working on a vessel, we get between RM4000, RM5000 or RM7000." [Participant 13, age 51 years, experience 24-25 years].

4.2.3 Theme 3: Fairness

This theme was characterized by the level of impartiality in the workforce. Some participants mentioned that they received the recognition they deserve when they perform well. Participants 4 and 6 indirectly reflected the recognition they received for good work.

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“The satisfaction in this job is when we are praised. If our food tastes good, the food of our cooking is delicious, we get to satisfy others. That is satisfaction. And I will keep on working with diligence.” [Participant 4, age 24 years, experience 1-2 years].

“For me, as a cook, the satisfaction for me is when people eat my food, they say, “good, your cooking is good”. That is happiness for all cooks, which are the most important satisfaction.” [Participant 6, age 24 years, experience 2-3 years].

The participants also mentioned about being fairly treated in terms of salary and promotional opportunities. Employees generally prefer equal treatment at the workplace (Chin-Siang et al., 2014; Tung et al., 2020).

“They will appoint us as an acting cook at first. But even before acting cook, they will test you first. Test the food. After that, one or two months, once we are confirmed, the requirement is sent to the captain or to the OIM [oil installation manager] and when they say okay, they agree, we become the cook.” [Participant 3, age 36 years, experience 6-7 years].

“If the salary is low, passion won’t make the cut. That is to me. If the pay is low, even though at a place I like, I won’t work there for long. I want to work in a right place with a good pay.” [Participant 4, age 24 years, experience 1-2 years].

4.2.4 Theme 4: Teamwork

The offshore catering employees work in a team, where each of the team members has designated areas to manage, including mess room, common areas, galley, laundry room, and living quarter. It is also imperative that they help each other to finish the job in the catering line, as they need to complete the tasks within the given time frame. Hence, it ensures smooth operation. Participants 2 and 11 demonstrated their willingness to help each other after they have finished their work in the following excerpts:

“Normally, after we have finished work, we will hang out with friends in a family-like work environment. We sometimes help each other. Help others to cook, help others to bake.” [Participant 2, age 32 years, experience 6-7 years].

“After somebody has finished his chores, let’s say finished doing the laundry. If he has completed his work, he will come to the kitchen. He will help, say, to cut the fruits or tidy up or beautify the place because we implement a teamwork system. When we do it together it becomes easier.” [Participant 11, age 42 years, experience 10-11 years].

4.2.5 Theme 5: Fringe benefit

Despite the salary, the participants also shared the importance of fringe benefits in their job. The fringe benefits comprise monetary and non-monetary benefits that are acknowledged as an integral part of employees’ compensation and are the main indicators of job quality (Chin-Siang et al., 2014; Dilmaghani, 2020). The participants felt that the fringe benefits reduced their expenses. For example, all the expenses were accommodated including meals while at work. Most of the companies also offer allowances to accommodate employee transportation and necessary expenses. According to Participant 4, the allowance provided to cover his expenses going to work was an added advantage.

“Working offshore, most companies will provide petrol allowance, food allowance. When we sign on duty, we get the allowance, when we sign off duty, we get more allowances. That is the advantage, maybe. So we don’t need to spend our own money to take a bus to go back home. Everything is covered. Because signing in or signing out of duty, they will give food allowance and they will provide advance money.” [Participant 4, age 24 years, experience 1-2 years].

Participant 1 further added that the fringe benefits are unique compared to onshore jobs, where they do not have to spend anything going to work. He also mentioned that most of the expenses were taken care of by his employer including meals.

“Because our duties are different as compared to onshore duties. When we work offshore, we don’t have to spend our own money on anything related to our daily expenses. For example, when we compare to onshore people, they work from point A to point B, they must pay for many expenses, if they use a motorcycle, and they have to pay for petrol. They have to allocate a monthly allocation for the motorcycle’s maintenance. Owning a car is the same, you have to add paying toll fees as well if they have a toll that is. So, our food here is all free, everything is provided.” [Participant 1, age 24 years, experience 2-3 years].

Participant 3 also shared similar comments.

“For me, one more is from the financial aspect. What we call personal costing. When we board the vessel, we don’t use even a cent. Food is provided. Another is there’s no risk related to going to work. Our work is we go to work and we go back, at a time. That is our own risk. For 3 weeks, we stay in the same place. Meaning that, our food and drinks are taken care of.” [Participant 3, age 36 years, experience 6-7 years].

4.2.6 Theme 6: Ability utilization

Ability utilization refers to the ability of the employees to practice their experience at work. Several participants mentioned that they could apply the experience and knowledge gained in their current job to help complete the tasks for the day. Participant 3 pointed out that:

“Job satisfaction... If we talk about satisfaction, it does give satisfaction. What we learned before; we just need to recall it back. Meaning that, based on what I’ve learned about catering, I took Hotel Catering Management. Meaning to say, I’m in the field myself. What I learned previously; I can put it into practice.” [Participant 3, age 36 years, experience 6-7 years].

Moreover, employees working offshore are required to be creative. Several participants in this study mentioned that they are required to prepare meals creatively using the available raw materials provided on board. Hence, they will have to decide on a new menu and creatively produce a meal using the available ingredients. Participant 3 mentioned that he likes to be creative as he can learn new things. He illustrated the event in the following excerpt:

“Most probably, I usually do new things. I browse the internet, search for new menus, with the materials that we have, we make it. What I mean is food testing. Sometimes we cook assorted kueh. Like what we did recently, we did ‘kacang botak’. Fried peas coated with flour, we did it on the platform. So now we do it continuously. But that is all based on what materials we have. We have to be creative. We do it, then it was a success. Next time we do it again, and again. We can keep trying.” [Participant 3, age 36 years, experience 6-7 years].

He further mentioned that being able to create new dishes was an exciting experience for him. Likewise, several other participants also indicated that they were able to use their creativity in handling ingredient scarcity, especially during monsoon season. Participant 10 stated that:

“During the monsoon, during the roaring waves and materials are scarce. At that time, as cooks, we need to think creatively what to cook as materials are insufficient so what can be done. If there are no onions, we use apples, if no apples, we use fried onions, if no fried onions, we use biscuits as our ingredient.” [Participant 10, age 27 years, experience 6-7 years].

4.2.7 Theme 7: Job itself

The participants’ jobs can be challenging with various tasks, as offshore work differs from onshore work. Hence, to sustain, employees might have to perform additional tasks not included in the job description of employees working 8 hours onshore. Based on our interview sessions, most of the participants enjoy their work. Participant 8 expressed his thoughts in the following excerpt:

“The satisfaction of our job is... we like our job. Despite the pay is low, despite the fact that we have a problem with our environment or the facility we had... but in whatever situation, we still do the work in calm and perfect as possible.” [Participant 8, age 26 years, experience 1-2 years].

The concept of liking what they do was repeatedly pointed out by many participants. Participant 10 emphasized his love for the job as a cook and explained that:

“Passion... yes, I am passionate about cooking. I like working offshore, I like living on the sea, I like working in a vessel and work with new people. I like and I love it, I like cooking and learn all kinds of Malaysian cuisine, Thai, Vietnamese and Western food, Chinese food and Indian food.” [Participant 10, age 27 years, experience 6-7 years].

Although the participants work offshore for a certain period, some of them mentioned that the job gave them a sense of time balance between their jobs and family. This observation corroborated with previous studies which highlighted the length of off duty period as a major benefit for offshore employees (Ross, 2009; Parkes, 1998). Participant 12 explicitly compared his current position to a job onshore and stated that his offshore catering job provided him ample time to spend with his family when he returns home. He indicated:

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“If I work onshore, I could get my offshore pay, but I don’t have the time. It will take my holidays. For me, salary and time with family. When I work, two things I will think of [salary and time with family]. If I get then that is good. We have time for our family and good pay.” [Participant 12, age 37 years, experience 4-5 years].

4.2.8 Theme 8: Relationship with superior

This theme was characterized by their perceptions particularly on how they were being treated by their immediate superiors including the camp boss, top management, and operation manager. It encompassed work and non-work-related matters. In the oil and gas industry, a social gap between the employees and superiors was reported (Harun et al., 2014). In this study, the participants agreed that having a good immediate superior was important as it influenced their motivation to work favorably. The participants often referred to the camp boss as their immediate superior, as they have very little communication with higher-level superiors in their respective companies. The camp boss held a significant role on board, as he/she acted as a liaison between the employees and company in terms of communication and other matters (Krohne & Magnussen, 2011). Participants 4 and 9 expressed that work matters can be influenced by good supervision. They articulated their opinions about the ideal relationship between superiors and employees:

“I like a boss who is supporting, who doesn’t condemn me at all times. The one who supports our work and gives advice. Give advice, give opinions, at times when we have our problems.” [Participant 4, age 24 years, experience 1-2 years].

“I want my superiors to be in the same wavelength. If like that, it is excellent. They can work with us, we can work with them. Regarding work, and how they treat us.” [Participant 9, age 31 years, experience 5-6 years].

Furthermore, few participants commended their immediate superiors in handling and helping the employees in completing their tasks. For example, their superiors would step in to help complete a job when possible. Participant 8 expressed the effort showcased by his immediate superior:

“Not many superiors will blend in along with their subordinates. But up until now, all of my bosses helped me. They know if today I’m busy, they will come and help.” [Participant 8, age 26 years, experience 1-2 years].

4.2.9 Theme 9: Equipment and facilities

Under this theme, the participants reflected on their previous experience on the availability of equipment and facilities provided in their workplace. Whereby, working in an isolated environment to prepare meals, provide cleaning and laundry services require equipment that is in good condition to ensure that the services delivered by these employees were not affected by a lack of resources. Participants 3, 8 and 13 expressed similar views on the importance of equipment in good condition while performing their jobs. They pointed out that:

“In terms of equipment, they [the maintenance employee] will monitor and will not give any problems [of the equipment] at all.” [Participant 3, age 36 years, experience 6-7 years].

“They know that the POB [person-on-board] are many, so they must prepare ample facilities. So that, the preparation process goes smoothly.” [Participant 8, age 26 years, experience 1-2 years].

“They will prepare. That is their priority. Because people will need to eat, to wash clothes. Imagine if they can’t clean the clothes or can’t eat, how can they work on an empty stomach? That is the priority or called as critical equipment.” [Participant 13, age 51 years, experience 24-25 years].

Offshore employment also encompasses the part where employees live at their respective workplaces for a certain period. Therefore, besides providing sufficient equipment to perform their designated tasks, employees’ accommodation on board any vessel/platform is equally important. Participant 10 described the facilities provided at his workplace accommodation as being comfortable:

Participant 10: The accommodation is high class like a place meant for a VVIP. The washroom, laundry room, all fully equipped. Very comfortable. Sleep in air-conditioning, the bedroom is very luxurious. Like a hotel. The room is beautiful, spacious.

IR: Not a problem to stay in for 3, 4 months?

Participant 10: Don’t mind because it’s a comfortable stay. And there are dedicated persons doing the laundry for us.

4.2.10 Theme 10: Expectation

The participants also voiced their expectations in the job to achieve intrinsic and extrinsic elements. According to Goujani et al. (2019), the expectation is a significant element in job satisfaction. Few participants

highlighted their desires and expectations to be promoted to a higher position soon, with opportunities to think ahead and plan their future career undertakings. Participants 5 and 6 expressed their expectations:

“For me, I have my own target. To move from one position to another. The position now is a milestone to another senior position.” [Participant 5, age 43 years, experience 13-14 years].

“For now, I am still an assistant [cook], for two years and a half. I think the knowledge is adequate for an assistant cook. After this, I’m eyeing for the cook. Before this, I was a cook. That was for a small vessel previously, a supply vessel. The POB [person-on-board] was only 15, so I have the confidence to be a cook. After being an assistant cook, we need to have a dream to be a cook and when we have become a cook, we need to have a vision aiming for the chief cook. From chief cook, we target to be the camp boss.” [Participant 6, age 24 years, experience 2-3 years].

Moreover, the participants also expressed their gratitude regarding the resources provided by the management. Participants 5, 9 and 12 pointed out that their managements do their best in fulfilling their requests at work. Participant 5 explained that:

“What I request, usually I will get. Sometimes, something that we need urgently in the middle of the sea, on the spot they will fulfil what we have requested.” [Participant 5, age 43 years, experience 13-14 years].

4.2.11 Theme 11: Achievement

This theme represents the accomplishments and developments of the employees at work. Working in the offshore catering sector provides new opportunities for these employees to learn new skills and knowledge from others, especially from their camp boss and co-workers. Participant 10 explained that working offshore was unique because the valuable knowledge he gained here cannot be obtained onshore:

“The work and experience like this, we only get it in the offshore job. We can never get it onshore. It is a valuable experience we get offshore. We get a new and novel experience offshore that we will never get elsewhere. That’s why I said the offshore experience is very exciting and unique. Other people won’t get what we get. That is what is meant by knowledge is what is the most valuable.” [Participant 10, age 27 years, experience 6-7 years].

Working in offshore catering provides an opportunity for novice and experienced employees to work together. As such, an experienced employee like Participant 13 who has worked in offshore catering for more than 20 years in various companies, emphasized that:

“We can learn many types of dishes. We can learn about Western cuisine. Many types on the market. In-house training like they use to call it. We learn it from our friend beside us. For example, he is a baker, an experienced baker. We can learn from him.” [Participant 13, age 51 years, experience 24-25 years].

Besides that, several participants also expressed their delight in feeling accomplished. According to Participant 7, no complaints received from the person on-board is usually regarded as a note of satisfaction to him. He expressed that:

“To me, the satisfaction is when our work, nobody complains about it. When no complaints, we feel lucky. Feel very lucky.” [Participant 7, age 23 years, experience 1-2 years].

Meanwhile, the other participants expressed their feeling of accomplishment differently. Participant 13 perceives his job as a blessing as it benefits other employees and gives him a sense of satisfaction. Participant 13 pointed out that:

“Cooking is an honourable job, especially when we do it to give people something to eat. It is a deed, people like it, a healthy body. That is the utmost satisfaction. This work is deed. We cook it well, deliciously, people eat. We clean the toilets, tidy up and makeover the room to make it clean. That is an honourable job. We get the salary, we get the reward as well.” [Participant 13, age 51 years, experience 24-25 years].

Table 2: Themes

Themes	Total codes	Description
Relationship with co-workers	7	Social interaction with people at work
Salary	5	Pay and remuneration

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Fairness	5	Quality of being treated fairly at work
Teamwork	6	Cooperation and responsibilities among co-workers
Fringe benefit	6	Monetary and non-monetary fringe benefits
Ability utilization	7	Employees utilize their abilities at work
Job itself	10	Job tasks
Relationship with superior	6	Work and social support from immediate superior
Equipment and facilities	5	Surrounding conditions of the workplace
Expectation	7	Expectations about work-related aspects
Achievement	6	Accomplishments and self-development at work

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to explore job satisfaction attributes to promote a positive work attitude among offshore catering employees. Besides the qualitative data which revealed different layers of job satisfaction, relevant information on job satisfaction among offshore catering employees was also determined. Job satisfaction is primarily related to the relationship with co-workers and superiors, salary, fairness, teamwork, fringe benefits, ability utilization, the job, equipment and facilities, expectation, and achievement. The themes determined through the interview sessions supported previous studies documented in ICE environments (Yuen et al., 2018; Chin-Siang et al., 2014; Gu et al., 2020; Li et al., 2014; McVeigh et al., 2019; Tavacioğlu et al., 2019; Wickramasinghe, 2009; Boki & Talib, 2009; Chen et al., 2003).

This study raised several important practical implications as a pioneering research project that employed a qualitative approach. Although many studies focused on job satisfaction in offshore industries, this is one of the first attempts in Malaysia to comprehensively investigate job satisfaction among offshore catering employees. It provides a better nomological understanding of these employees' job satisfaction. Therefore, the current study is not only significant in contributing new knowledge in organizational and management research but is also providing fresh insight into the context of offshore catering employees.

On the other hand, this study serves as a scientific basis for offshore education, training and policy-making in employee management to attract new and reduce the turnover rate of offshore catering employees. Since offshore catering employees are essential for the success of the offshore industry, the inferences and benefits are multifold. Unlike other onshore industries, the nature of offshore companies does not always allow the employers to be in the same working environment as their employees. Hence, it is crucial to hire managers who understand the expectations of offshore catering employees to help employers to strategize in retaining these employees.

5.2 Limitations and directions for future research

Apart from the contributions to the body of knowledge, the extent of the present study is also limited in several aspects which should be addressed in future research. These attributes were determined based on the employee's point-of-view, hence, an industry-specific scale for offshore catering needs to be developed to statistically assess the employees' job satisfaction. Further research is also required to generalize the findings from this study on job satisfaction. Hence, we recommend a quantitative study to measure the perceptions of a larger sample group. Moreover, linking the relationship between job satisfaction and its consequences such as intention to leave and organizational commitment would provide substantial support for the current literature. It would also be interesting to investigate whether future research in other countries would produce similar findings to that of the present study.

6. Acknowledgement and Funding

The authors would like to thank the participating companies for facilitating this research by enabling access to the participants. This research was supported by the Universiti Teknologi MARA Selangor Branch Research Grant (DUCS)..

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Appendix 1

Section A

1. Please tell me about yourself
2. Please tell me about your educational background
3. Please tell me about your professional background
 - How did you become an offshore catering employee?
 - How long have you been working in offshore catering?
 - What is your current position? How long have you been in that position?

(Information was also recorded about the participant's gender, ethnicity, residences and current job wages)

Section B

1. What motivates you to start working in offshore catering?
2. What is your opinion about career in offshore catering?
3. How do you define job satisfaction?
4. How do you feel currently about the job as compared to the first day you started work? Why is it so?
5. How important this job to you?

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6. How do you generally feel about your current job?
7. What are the things that you like about your job? Why do you think it is important?
8. What influenced you to stay in offshore catering?
9. Based on your experience, can you recall any situation or particular time when you felt you were happy with the job?
10. From your point of view, what makes an offshore catering employee happy with the job?

Section C

1. Is there any other important information you would like to add especially about satisfaction with offshore catering job before we end our interview?
2. In the future, can I follow up with further questions if I need to clarify on certain information?
3. What pseudonym would you like to represent you?