

# Determining the Importance of Competency and Person-Job Fit for the Job Performance of Service SMEs Employees in Malaysia

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## Abstract

The small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have contributed to the economic growth and competitiveness of many countries. However, as the SMEs continue to grow as an important entity in many economies including Malaysia, many factors have dampened such progress. While previous studies had focused on its macro perspective in terms of firm level and industry level performance, this study attempted to address the basic issue of SMEs employees in terms of their job performance. This study is underpinned by the theory of job performance and further supported by the theory of congruence. The main objective of this research is to investigate on the relationship that may exist between three variables comprised of competency, person-job fit and the employees' job performance in the context of service SMEs. Using a quantitative method, a sample of 324 responses was collected using a mail survey from 1500 distributed questionnaires. Results show significant relationships between competency, person-job fit and the job performance of employees. Conclusions and implications of the study were discussed.

**Keywords:** SMEs, service SMEs, job performance, competency, person-job fit, job performance, Malaysia

## 1. Introduction

One of the important factors that can contribute to organizational performance is employee job performance. Employees who performed well will not only help organizations to meet strategic goals. They are also playing an important role in marinating organization competitiveness (Dessler, 2011). As such, it is important to identify the factors that can affect the job performance of employees both in large enterprises and in SMEs. The SME sector plays a vital role in both the developed and developing countries in terms of economic growth and promoting competitiveness (Caniels & Romijn, 2005). In general, 50% GDP of most developed countries comes from this sector (Kefela, 2010) while it contributed approximately 30% to 60% of the GDP of the East Asian region with an estimated 70% of employment (Hall, 2002). As such, many researchers are interested to examine the various obstacles that hinder their progress (Alasadi & Abdelrahim, 2008).

SMEs are a major sector in Malaysia. Of all the 523,132 business establishments that were involved in a Census on Establishments and Enterprises in year 2005, it was found that the majority of the companies in Malaysia is made up of SMEs. The data obtained showed that there were almost 99.2% or 518,996 SMEs in Malaysia (Department of Statistics, 2006). Thus, the significance of carrying out this study in the context of SMEs is evidenced in view of how important the sector is to the economic development of Malaysia. There are three sectors of SMEs in Malaysia comprised of manufacturing, service and agriculture (Saleh & Ndubisi, 2006).

In terms of sectoral size, 86.5% of the SMEs in Malaysia is made up of service SMEs. This figure has placed the service SMEs as the largest sector of the SMEs establishments in Malaysia (Department of Statistics, 2006). There are 2.2 million people employed in the service SMEs compared to the manufacturing sector (740,438 employees) and agriculture sector (131,130 employees) (Aris, 2007). However, labor productivity tends to be higher among the employees of larger enterprises than those of the smaller firms. In Malaysia, only RM0.05 million value-added and RM0.13 million outputs per employee were generated by SME employees as compared to those from the larger enterprises which recorded approximately RM0.1 million of value-added and RM0.32 million outputs per employee (SME Annual Report, 2007). This condition had been invoked by the prevailing problems of lack of skills and abilities among the employees of SMEs as compared to those from the larger enterprises (Reed, Walsh, & Grice, 2001). Additionally, the labor productivity between those working in the service SMEs and those in the

manufacturing SMEs have not been in proportion with the number of employment. This is because even though there is highest employment in the service SMEs as compared to the manufacturing SMEs, the labor productivity contribution from those working in the manufacturing SMEs is higher at RM64089 while those from the service SMEs is only at RM 47151 (SME Annual Report, 2007). This condition suggested that employees in the service SMEs are less skillful, and thus has affected their job performance (Saleh & Ndubisi, 2006).

## 2. Gaps in the Literature

Past researches have shown that employees in a service setting can only be effective in performing their job if they possessed the right competency. Hence, in order to deliver effective services, employees need to be skillful and trained (Zeithaml, Parasuraman & Berry, 1990). Some examples of competencies that are necessary for service employees consist of friendliness, concern, insight, communication and adaptive were noted (Hartline & Ferrell, 1996). Besides that, it is well known among the behaviorist theorists to view the importance the fit between employees and their job (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson, 2005). Moreover, the effective completion of a job can be realized where there is a manifestation of person-job fit (Edwards, 1991) and evidenced has shown that the productivity and commitment of employees can be influenced by how much fit exist between a person and the job (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1992).

Despite of evidences from the past studies on the relationship between competency and job performance lack of evidence exist in the context of Malaysia. Moreover of those studies in Malaysia that looked at the competency variable, (e.g. Deros, Yusof & Salleh, 2006; Ahmad, Ramayah, Wilson & Kummerow, 2010); Azmi, 2010) the focused issues were either related to the entrepreneurs' or the public sector employees. Similarly, studies on person-job fit were limited to those that were done in abroad (e.g. Caldwell & O'Reilly, 1990; Carless, 2005); Hecht & Alle, 2003; Erdogan & Bauer, 2005; Behery, 2009). Given the importance of both employees' job performance and the service SMEs in Malaysia, the aim of this research is to ascertain whether employee competency and person-job fit is significantly related to the employee's job performance. It is hoped that this study will add on the dearth of research concerning employees working in the SMEs sector specifically of the service SMEs in Malaysia.

## 3. Theoretical Background

Resource-based view (RBV) acknowledged that firms would be able to sustain its competitive advantage through its human resources (employees) Barney (1991). This is achievable when the employees are able to achieve a good level of job performance. Theory of performance refers to performance as what a person needs to carry out and do well when hired by an organization (Campbell, McCloy, Oppler & Sager, 1993). Based on the theory, three factors comprised of declarative knowledge, procedural and skills knowledge and motivation can influence employee job performance. A declarative knowledge includes knowledge about facts, principles, goals and self- knowledge in association with a given task. On the other hand, cognitive skills, psychomotor skills, physical skills, self-management skills, and interpersonal skills formed the procedural knowledge and skills. As for the motivations element, it is seen as the result of combining three behavioral choices that are the choice to perform, the level of effort, and the persistence of the effort (Campbell et al., 1993). Hence, the descriptions of declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge and skills are related closely to employee competency. This is based on the notion that when competency exists, an individual possessed the knowledge about the basic task requirements and the necessary abilities that reflect the motive, trait, skill, aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge that an individual uses in carrying out a task (Boyatzis, 1982). According to Barrett's (1978) Congruency theory, person-job fit occurred when the individual preferences matched the requirements of the job (which entails the knowledge, skills and abilities) (Lawrence, 2004). The existence of congruence of both the person and the job will lead to a motivational outcome (Barrett, 1978; Edwards, 1991). Hence, the research framework (as shown in Figure 1) was underpinned by the theory of performance and the theory of Congruence.

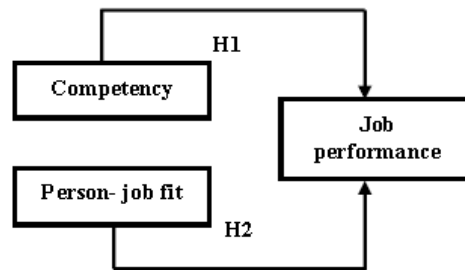


Figure 1. Research framework

### 3.1 Job Performance

There are various descriptions of employee job performance. Bohlander, Snell and Sherman (2001) suggested employee job performance is related to employees having the knowledge about their work goals and able to meet the expectations of the job target or achieving the work standard established by their organization. Alternatively, job performance has also been described as the outcome of two facets that employees may possess comprised of abilities (natural) and skills (acquired) which can be a good source of motivation for better job performance (Sarmiento & Beale, 2007).

Since performance is, what a person needs to carry out and do well when hired by organization thus only measurable actions could be regarded as performance (Campbell et al., 1993). It is important in any service setting, that employees are able to deliver excellent service and this could be done should the employees possessed the right skills (Zeithaml et al., 1990). Besides, the existence of fit between an employee and the job has proven to be important in many organizational behavior research (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) and effective deliverances of a job has long been associated with the existence of job fit (Edwards, 1991). Therefore, investigating on the predictors of job performance such as competency and person-job fit is necessary in line with the nature of the work of those working in the service SMEs.

### 3.2 Relationship between Competency and Job Performance

McClelland concluded that when predicting job performance, people must be evaluated based on their competencies (McClelland, 1973). Competency is a form of ability and the fundamental characteristics of a person, which is important for effective job performance (Boyatzis, 1982). Thus, when individuals possessed a competency, it goes to show that an individual is capable of fulfilling task requirements. Job performance and competency had found to be positively related to each other (Linders, 2001) and high level of individual and organizational performance has been contributed by employee competency (Armstrong, 2006). In an attempt to show that competencies can produce effective work, (Kagaari & Munene, 2007) conducted a study among the engineering lecturers at Kyambogo University. The result revealed that lecturers with relevant competencies were able to deliver effective work outcome. Similarly, an investigation was carried out among the nurses in Taiwan revealed that there is a significant relationship between competency and job performance (Tzeng, 2004). Additionally, Hashim (2008) carried out a study in Malaysia discovered that in order for the managers to perform well, it is necessary for them to possess various competencies such as communications, management and job knowledge. Most researches on competencies conducted on small firms were looking at firm competencies rather than on employees' competencies. In addition, the majority of the past studies focused on managers as the unit of analysis. This has therefore created a gap concerning the need to conduct studies on non-managerial employees of an organization. As such, the first hypothesis is:

**Hypothesis 1:** There is a significant relationship between competency and job performance among the employees of the service SMEs.

### 3.3 Relationship between Person-Job Fit and Job Performance

One of the common conceptualization of fit concepts is the supplementary fit versus a complementary fit approach (Muchinsky & Manohan, 1987). A supplementary fit is characterized by the similarity that may exist between a person and the organization environment or with other employees in the organization (personally-person fit) (Sekiguchi, 2003). Conversely, when the characteristics of an individual can complement and create completeness in an organization, a complementary fit is said to occur. Given that supplementary fit has to do with the match between a person and the organization environment rather than the job (Muchinsky & Manohan, 1987), it cannot be used to analyze person-job fit (Sekiguchi, 2004). As such, it is common to find the concept of complementary fit

in the past researches on person-job fit (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). The effect of person-job fit on employee job performance has yet to receive much attention of researchers, which has resulted in limited research found (Mosley, 2002). Furthermore, the concrete influence of person-job fit on employee job performance in those past researches have yet to be strongly supported given the many variations of the findings (Edwards, 1991). There were mixed results obtained from past researches on the relationship between person-job fit and job performance (Greguras & Diefendorff, 2009). Therefore, it can be concluded that past studies have yet to come to an agreement on the influence of person-job fit towards the job performance of employees (Conte, Rizzutto & Steiner, 1999). As such, the second hypothesis is:

**Hypothesis 2:** There is a significant relationship between person-job fit and job performance among the employees of the service SMEs.

#### 4. Methodology

In order to carry out this study, a quantitative research was employed using mail survey approach. Data was collected using a questionnaire that was designed using a Likert scale of 7-point. Job performance was adapted from Williams and Anderson (1991) and after testing for initial reliability; only 4 items from the original 6 items were retained. On the other hand, the instrument for competency was adapted from Bajunaid (2008) and contained 24 items. As for person-job fit it, the measurement was adapted from Lauver and Kristof-Brown (2001) and contained 6 items altogether.

##### 4.1 Population and Sampling

A systematic random sampling technique was chosen in which a sample is chosen by selecting a random starting point and then picking every  $K^{\text{th}}$  element in succession from the sampling frame (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson & Tatham, 2006). The central bank of Malaysia defined service SMEs as those firms with employees of between 5 to 50 employees (Bank Negara Malaysia, 2005). The directory of SMEs (SME Business Directory, 2011) was used as a sampling frame in order to know that number of service SMEs firms exist in Malaysia. Through the directory, there are 5527 service enterprises registered in Malaysia. The total elements of the entire population using the given definition by the central bank of Malaysia for a minimum number of employees in a service SMEs, it was estimated to be at 27635 employees (5527 firms x 5 employees). Thus, the minimum required sample size with a population of  $N = 27635$  are 379 employees (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

#### 5. Results

In order to collect the data, 1500 questionnaires were mailed to the respondents. Although there were 324 employees responded, only 300 responses can be used for analysis. Thus, the response rate for this study is 20% in line with the prevailing response rate of mail survey done in Malaysia that commonly falls in the 10% to 20 % range (Ramayah, Yan & Sulaiman, 2005). Data from 5 respondents were omitted through the Mahalanobis  $D^2$  scores outlier test. Finally, data from 295 respondents were used for further analysis. In order to test consistency, a reliability test was carried on the measurements used in this study. Table 1 shows the result of the reliability test during the pre - test study and after factor analyses were carried out. The result of the tests suggested that the measurements used were reliable given the Cronbach's alpha value had all exceeded the threshold value of 0.7 (Nunnally, 1978; Nunnally, 1983).

Table 1. Reliability statistic

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha (pretest)	Cronbach's Alpha (after factor analysis)
Job performance	0.87	0.87
Competency	0.90	0.94
Person-job fit	0.91	0.88

Factor analysis was utilized to test the construct validity of the measurements. The suitability of using factor analysis has to be confirmed prior to its use for construct validity testing. This can be done by measuring the sample adequacy using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) and to conduct a Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The likeliness for factorability is known when the value of KMO is greater than 0.6 (Coakes, Steed & Ong, 2009) and the Bartlett's test of sphericity figure is large and significant ( $p < 0.5$ ) (Hair et al., 2006). The result of KMO measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity for all the variables comprised of job performance, competency and person-job fit satisfies the threshold value of greater than 0.6 (Coakes et al., 2009) and significant at  $p < 0.05$

(Hair et al., 2006). Based on this, factorability is considered as possible.

Table 2 shows the result of factor analysis of job performance. In this study, an item will be chosen to identify with factor when the loadings are greater than 0.3 as suggested by Hair et al. (2006). A threshold value of 0.3 is considered to be moderately high (Kline, 1994). Based on the analysis, all four questions used to measure job performance are loaded onto a single factor with eigenvalue of more than 1.0. The single factor extracted 71.13 % of the total variance in response.

Table 2. Summary of factor loading for job performance

Question	Component	
	1	
JP1 completes assigned duties	0.868	
JP2 fulfil responsibilities according to job descriptions	0.878	
JP3 able to perform as expected	0.853	
JP4 meet the formal performance standards	0.770	
Eigenvalues	2.845	
Percentage of variance explained = 71.13 %		
KMO = 0.814		
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity:		
Approx. Chi-Square = 562.505		
df = 6		
Sig = .000		

Table 3 shows the factor analysis conducted on 24 items for the competency variable and 6 items for the person-job fit variable. The result of the initial factor analysis found many items with high cross loadings for competency variable. Hence, the decision was made to drop those items with cross loadings that is higher than 0.32 as suggested by (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001) and this is done based on several rounds of principal component analysis. Eventually only 15 items of the total 24 items on competency were retained while none of the person-job fit items were dropped. Hence, there were 15 items extracted from Factor 1 namely Competency and 6 items extracted from Factor 2, namely Person-job fit. The eigenvalue showed that the first factor (Competency) explained 38.3% of the variance and the second factor (Person-job fit) contributed 19.9 % of the variance. Thus, the two factors explained 58.2 % of the variance.

Table 3. Summary of factor loading for competency and person-job fit

Rotated Component Matrix <sup>a</sup>	Component	
	1	2
C1 teamwork & cooperation	.460	
C2 flexibility	.695	
C4 computer literacy	.781	
C5 conceptual thinking	.765	
C11 customer service orientation	.714	
C13 directiveness	.675	
C14 team leadership	.720	
C16 self control	.731	
C17 organization commitment	.679	
C18 ability & willingness to learn	.746	

C19 interpersonal understanding				.746
C21 personal planning & org skills				.730
C22 written communication				.726
C23 information seeking				.802
C24 achievement orientation				.744
PJ1 goof fit bet job and what being looked for				.720
PJ2 attributes looked for fulfilled by present job				.779
PJ3 job gives everything that is expected				.788
PJ4 good match between job demand and skills				.802
PJ5 abilities & training fit with job requirement				.706
PJ6 personal abilities & education match with job demand				.308
Eigenvalue		9.867		2.372
Percentage of variance explained	38.3%	19.9%		
KMO = .939				
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity				
Approx. Chi-Square =3915.334				
df= 210				
Sig = .000				

Results from the analysis of profile indicate that 53.6% of the respondents are made up of female employees while male employees made up the balance 46.4% of the respondents. In terms of age of the respondents, 46.2% of the respondents belong to those aged between 19 to 30 years old, which forms the majority while the second largest group of the respondents came from those aged between 31 to 40 years that amounted to 30.5%. The racial distribution shows that 58.0% of the respondents are Chinese while the Malays and Indians made up the 20.3% and 14.9% of the respondents respectively while the rest of them are the *Bumiputera* from Sabah and Sarawak. The job profile of the respondents shows that they are involved in various business sectors. As for employment attachment, three groups dominate the job profile of the respondents. The majority of the respondents are working in the education sector (14.9%) while 14.6% of them are the employees of restaurants and those working in the professional service business made up 14.2% of the total respondents. On the other hand, the tenure of service shows that only 11.2% of the respondents had worked less than 1 year in the firm that they are currently serving. Analysis of the educational background of the respondents shows that the majority of the respondents had completed tertiary education ranging from diploma (21.7%), bachelor degree (30.5%) to postgraduate (9.8%).

The inter-correlations of all the variables in this study are shown in Table 4. The significance level of this study is set at 5% which is a generally accepted in social sciences research (Sekaran & Bougie, 2009). The table shows that competency and job performance is significantly related ( $r = 0.552$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The same outcome is also found for the next variable in which person-job fit is significantly related to the job performance of employees ( $r = 0.478$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). However, based on the result, the influence of competency on the job performance of employees is stronger (given the higher 'r' value) than the influence of person-job fit.

Table 4. Correlation matrix of competency, person-job fit and job performance

	1	2	3
Job performance (1)	1.000		
Com_Mean (2)	.552**	1.000	
PJFit_mean (2)	.478**	.526**	1.000

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

Table 5. Multiple regression of competency, person job fit and job performance

Independent Variables	Job Performance (Dependent Variable)						
	Beta	Std Error	Std Beta	t	Sig	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	2.409	.262		9.195	.000		
Person-job Fit	.245	.052	.259	4.689	.000	.723	1.382
Competency	.363	.048	.415	7.509	.002	.723	1.382
R	0.594						
R <sup>2</sup>	0.353						
F	79.749						
Sig	0.000						

Table 5 presents the result of the multiple regression analysis. The value of R<sup>2</sup> reveals that 35.3 % of the variance in job performance can be significantly explained by the two constructs understudied namely competency and person-job fit. The Beta value of 0.415 for competency and 0.259 for person-job fit indicates that the job performance of employees could be enhanced when competency of employees is increased while those who are fit for their job may experience an elevation in their job performance. Consequently, Hypotheses 1 and 2 are supported. The result from Table 5 also shows a VIF value that is less than 10 which suggested that the model was free from the multicollinearity problem (Hair et al., 2006). Furthermore, the inter-correlations value of less than 0.7 (considered as moderately low) as shown in Table 4 has similarly suggested low chances for the occurrence of multicollinearity among the independent variables (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994).

## 6. Discussions and Implications

This study attempts to examine the relationship between competency, person-job fit and the job performance among the employees of the service SMEs in Malaysia. Based on the Pearson analysis, it was found that both competency and person-job fit is significantly related to the job performance of employees in the service SMEs. Similar findings from past researches on competency with the present study suggested that employees can only perform well in their job if they possessed the competency to do so which reflects (McClelland, 1973). Furthermore, given the significant relationship between competency and job performance, it can be concluded that in order to improve the performance of employees' job performance, serious attention must be given to issues related to their competencies. This is because, the anticipated job performance can only be achieved when the competency possessed by the employees match with the desired competency to perform a job (Agut & Grau, 2002). Additionally, this study suggested that it is necessary for firms to use competency based performance measure (Moore, Cheng & Dainty, 2002). The use of competency based assessment will allow managers to know the level of job performance among the employees, and hence able to adopt competence-based training as a technique to improve their job performance.

In addition to this, since person-job fit can influence employees' job performance, thus it can also affect the choice of job that they would like to do. Generally, it is well known that people tend to prefer job that has the element of meaningfulness as well as those that can satisfy their internal and their external needs. In other words, when person-job fit occurs, employees have the inclination to perform better in their job as they are more willing to put forth their energy in fulfilling their duties that they enjoy doing. The fact that person-job fit is being associated with employees having the right skills and abilities to fulfil job demands, it is more likely for them to be motivated to perform at a higher level and to remain on the job when fit existed (Hecht & Allen, 2003; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; June & Mahmood, 2011). Therefore the findings from this study further suggested that in order to motivate employees to meet the required job performance, it is necessary for person-job fit to exist as described by the Field Theory (Lewin, 1951). The theory explains that the interaction that occurs between the employees and their job environment will produce good working behavior. Hence, when a good person-job fit exists, employees will be able to exert greater effort to perform better. Employee effort plays a crucial role in their job performance. The idea that employees are more willing to exert their effort in carrying out their duties and responsibilities are critical to the success of any service based firms. This is because in any service setting, the level of contact between the employees with the customers is generally high. As such employees who are fit to the job that they are doing will tend to deliver higher quality of service. Due to this condition, it is suggested that the hiring of employees in the service SMEs must be based on person-job fit in order to achieve the anticipated job performance.

Given that this study able to bring forward the importance of competency in employee job performance in the service SMEs, it is suggested that future research to consider developing a model of competencies specifically tailored to those employees working in the service sector SMEs. Key-decision makers can use this as a diagnostic tool in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of employees so that a more robust training program can be developed and to meet the needs of the organizations. Additionally, future research may also consider replicating this study in the other context of SMEs in Malaysia in order for comparison to be made across the sector that will promote better understanding of the factor that can affect the job performances of employees in the SMEs sector in Malaysia. Likewise, this may allow a more concerted effort to be carried out to enhance the level of productivity among the employees of SMEs, which will help in the growth of the sector further.

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