Social intelligence and individual work performance: a mediator model of Islamic work ethics

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Abstract: The application of Islamic work ethics, especially in Islamic countries, has gained considerable attention among scholars further to analyse this variable's influence on various work outcomes. The purpose of this paper

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is to investigate the relationship between social intelligence (SQ) and individual work performance (IWP) with the mediating role of Islamic work ethics (IWEs) among Malaysian public service employees. The primary data were gathered from respondents using a self-administered questionnaire. A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed, and 174 were usable for further investigation. The purposive sampling method was applied to select the respondents. In analysing the data, we used the PLS-SEM, and the results show that IWE partially mediates the relationship between individual work performance and SQ. The findings provide insight into the critical role of IWE and SQ in improving employee's work performance. Thus, public service organisations in Malaysia should provide positive reinforcements for learning and improving IWE and SQ in the workplace.

Keywords: Islamic work ethics; IWEs; social intelligence; work performance; Malaysian public employees.

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1 Introduction

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how the government administers its everyday operations, requiring more reliable and outstanding workforces to serve the nation. Failure to meet customers' requirements and expectations will increase grievances toward the public service delivery system, adversely affecting Malaysia's reputation. A possible way of resolving problems like the absence of efficiency and poor delivery service in public sector organisations is by identifying the critical skills needed for increasing proficiency and professionalism when dealing with customers. In this sense, indoctrinating the Islamic work ethic (IWE) at the workplace is a good stimulant to enhance government servants' work performance. The federal government of Malaysia began introducing changes and executing various efficiency measurement initiatives to reinvent the general public sector (Majid et al., 2019; Salim et al., 2021). Although the Malaysian Government has invested plenty of resources and effort to enhance public service delivery quality, these procedures were deemed insufficient as they still faced criticism for inadequate services and inefficiency (Tajuddin and Ahmad, 2013). Several researchers (e.g., Zun et al., 2018; Hashim et al., 2011) have conducted studies on Malaysian public service workers from various government departments, and the findings showed that the general public was dissatisfied with the service they received. Based on these findings, we believe a study on public service employees' work performance is needed. The Malaysian federal government, which can be viewed as an enormous organisation, has undeniably needed greater acceleration on individual work performance (IWP) to increase public service efficiency.

In service-oriented organisations, employees typically involve direct face-to-face contact with clients while supplying services, and in such working environments, social intelligence (SQ) is essential for constructing reliable interaction. Bonesso et al. (2020) postulated SQ to comprise various abilities which assist individuals to relate more effectively to others. Genç and Boynukara (2017) asserted that socially intelligent individuals possess better intercultural sensitivity, which can help them to act and behave appropriately in different social contexts. Nikoopour and Esfandiari (2017) found that SQ helps develop intercultural interaction levels of sensitivity. SQ involves adjusting to complex social circumstances, showing compassion toward others, and developing meaningful relationships to ensure successful cross-cultural interaction. Hence, SQ is one of the critical capabilities that public service employees should acquire as it can help them communicate and build relationships in various social contexts successfully. On another note, dealing with increasing job requirements and attaining higher performance levels requires focus not only on enhancing the abilities and knowledge of public servants but also on instilling positive work principles and sound ethical values. IWE was introduced to ensure best practice and good governance in an organisation. Javed et al. (2020) stated that workers should be encouraged to show virtues such as patience, truthfulness, proficiency, promise-keeping, moderation, sincerity, and continuous self-evaluation through the adoption of IWE at the workplace. All these positive values are essential for personnel development, primarily when focusing on improving job performance.

In any general organisation, the imperative element for acquiring a competitive advantage is its employees. Evaluating employee work performance is crucial since it helps discuss the worth and utility that each employee adds to the organisation. In this regard, SQ is vital for an employee to accomplish his or her role in an organisation. Most

scholars have acknowledged that SQ is a crucial competency required for work success and increased job performance (Emmadi, 2019; Hartini, 2018; Mohamed et al., 2020; Sharon and Grinberg, 2018). However, in the current situation, the employee is continually forced to face ethical issues when choosing which action is ideal or wrong in uncertain working conditions.

In a complex situation like this, moral sensitivity is necessary to help individuals deal with and evaluate the ethical basis of their choices and actions. IWE as a moral compass provides employees with the internal capacity to adopt good values or ethics in their life, and thus become competent and skilled service providers. Broad empirical evidence (e.g., Raja et al., 2020; Mohammad et al., 2018; Farid et al., 2019; Zahrah et al., 2016; Dinpajouh and Zadeh, 2014) support the values of IWE as a catalyst that might improve the quality of an employee's work and efficiency. Based on this view, we believe that employees who possess and practise high levels of IWE will be more committed to completing the allotted tasks and can attain better productivity and performance. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship between SQ and IWP with the mediating role of IWEs among Malaysian public service employees.

Motivated by this belief, we tried to expand the study to investigate whether the combination of SQ and IWE could provide a higher predictive contribution to work performance. While there are a handful of studies concerning SQ and IWE, most of these constructs were examined separately to test their capabilities in predicting work performance. Some of the studies observe the IWE comparable to the Protestant work ethic (PWE), in which they have several similarities, particularly concerning work-related values. Some scholars believe that religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam seem to have similar interpretations about how ethical value is perceived in life (Raja et al., 2020). Like the PWE, a work ethic rooted in Islam inspires people to work hard, emphasising honesty, diligence, fairness, and philanthropy (Romi and Ahman, 2020). Thus, many studies in the literature on the PWE are more familiar in the investigations from the developed (western) countries' perspective (Zulfikar, 2012), discounting the perspective from Islamic countries' outlook.

Moreover, in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation such as Malaysia, attempts to examine the association between SQ, IWE, and work performance in a single model yet to be explored. From the originality and value perspective, this study is among the first to empirically test the crucial role of SQ and IWE on IWP in Malaysia's public sector.

2 Literature review

This section discusses the underpinning theories, and review of past literature on the main variables. The theoretical framework and the hypotheses derived from the literature review are presented in Section 2.5.

2.1 Social intelligence

Scholars are still debating the concept and function of SQ, which is closely linked to emotional intelligence. According to Viktorivna et al. (2020), SQ is two-person psychology derived from social experiences and interpersonal relationships. Albrecht (2006) described SQ as a person's ability to get along with others, as well as a collection of practical skills that enable them to communicate effectively in any situation.

Thorndike (1920) described SQ as the ability to comprehend others, including other people's cognitive appreciation and behavioural effectiveness. SQ, as conceived by Thorndike, consists of cognitive and behavioural elements. Expending from these notions, many of the earlier studies on SQ emphasise two main components: cognitive (understanding people) and behavioural (managing people).

However, there were several issues with bringing this concept of SQ into effect. Marlowe (1986), expanding from the previous view, suggested that SQ is multidimensional by nature, encompassing both the realm of social self-perception and the domain of social skills. According to Barnes and Sternberg (1989), SQ as a broader dimension is the capacity to decipher social knowledge. Wong et al. (1995), like other scholars, agreed that SQ is a multifaceted concept that involves social awareness, social experience, and social actions. According to Silvera et al. (2001), SQ has three dimensions: social information processing, social skills, and social awareness. Consequently, SQ is a multidimensional construct with many components designed to determine the 'understanding of others'. Furthermore, SQ's connotation is subjective, and SQ's various dimensions make it challenging to be further quantified.

Nevertheless, the value of SQ to employees has been recognised by scholars and researchers alike, where it gauges an employee's ability to handle interpersonal communication, networking, and social connections. SQ has a positive impact on success at work, where it involves social knowledge, social skills, social desirability, and social information processing (Raja et al., 2020). In this study's context, SQ is essential in the sense that most general jobs require high levels of social interaction. Some scholars also found that SQ should be viewed as an imperative skill that is necessary for the workplace (Bonesso et al., 2020; Riggio, 2020; Sternberg and Li, 2020), especially in the service sector. As public sectors offer various governmental services, a public service employee is therefore expected to maintain the highest standard of professionalism as a government representative. From a public service perspective, Eketu and Ogbu Edeh (2015) highlighted the importance of SQ when performing jobs in the service sector. Meanwhile, Adetula (2016) reported that SQ *could facilitate satisfactory performance* among public law enforcement agents via social interaction. According to Williams (2008), outstanding public workers had higher SQ because SQ competencies boost an employee's ability to lead and manage others in achieving organisational goals.

Various scholars have highlighted the importance of SQ Intelligence in cross-cultural situations. Dong et al. (2008) and Bosuwon (2017) claim SQ can help a person to deal with issues involving intercultural communication and effectively adapt to changes in new environments. Thus, this research intends to contribute to the corpus of knowledge of prior studies by analysing the association between SQ and work performance in a cross-cultural context.

2.2 Islamic work ethics

In the past few decades, IWE has been a topic of interest for researchers studying employees' attitudes and behaviours in Muslim societies. Islam, as a religion, has a comprehensive ethical system to ensure the establishment of good morals and manners within an Islamic society. In Islam, humans were created to treat one another with humanity in the hopes of receiving Allah's blessings and benefits (Wahyuni-TD et al., 2021). IWE refers to the standards of individuals' relationships with one another and their work actions in light of Islamic tenets and values. The commitment, devotion, social ties,

ingenuity, and accountability of a person are all major components of IWE (Rahman et al., 2006). Inspired by Islamic ethical thought, Ali (1988) developed a complete scale to measure *IWE*. The IWE scale has since been applied considerably in various work and organisational settings by researchers. IWE is a set of values derived from the Holy Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad's (SAW) Sunnah (Mohammad et al., 2018). *The Qu'ran and the Sunnah* together constitute the guidance that regulates every aspect of human life, which forms the basis of Islamic principles and ethics. According to Hameed et alo. (2020), IWE encourages Muslims to participate and get positively involved in their workplace by promoting positive behaviour and encouraging employees' motivation toward *work*. Furthermore, the IWE ideology urges Muslim professionals to prioritise public interest over self-interest if they must choose between the two (Usman et al., 2015).

In the context of this study, recent scholars have examined the effects of IWE on work outcomes. Imam et al. (2013b), in their research, posited that IWE plays a key role to boost and shape the performance of employees. De Clercq et al. (2019) found that IWE enhances employees' propensity to engage in helping behaviours, which triggers them *to be more engaged at work*. Hassi et al. (2021) found that workers who firmly adhered to IWE exhibited better job performance. These empirical results demonstrated that employees who strongly supported IWE values in their workplaces are more committed to their jobs. In this regard, employees who perform their duties ethically would perform their job to the best of their ability and offer customers the best services.

Prior studies have shown that IWE is a good predictor of employees' work performance. In addition, a number of researchers had highlighted the relevance of IWE in a public service context (Ali and Al-Owaihan, 2008; Kumar and Rose, 2012). Thus, there is an important need to have a better understanding of work ethics of public service employees in Malaysia. In response to this, it is relevant to explore further the concept of IWE and its significant impact on public service employee's work performance in a cross-cultural context, which has not been studied before. The assessment of the relationship between these variables in the public-service setting would be fascinating, as the majority of public service employees in Malaysia are Muslims.

2.3 Individual work performance

One definition of performance is the expectation of what people can do to contribute to an organisation's value (Darvishmotevali and Ali, 2020). While, work performance, according to Campbell (1990), is a way to attain an objective rather than the actual outcome of the actions performed inside the work environment. According to Motowidlo and Kell (2012), results are the consequence through which an employee's actions help an organisation achieve its objectives. They suggest that work performance contains activities that can have either positive or negative implications for organisational objectives. Scholars have mutually agreed that work performance is not the consequence of behaviour, but rather the behaviour itself (Zeglat and Janbeik, 2019; Ramos-Villagrasa et al., 2019). In this sense, IWP results from a series of behaviours that an employee engages in and is observable.

Performance should not only be measured by the action itself, but it should also involve a systematic evaluation to examine how well the *job* has been done (Ilgen and Schneider, 1991; Motowidlo et al., 1997). Therefore, performance should reflect actions that can be observed and measured. The reason for highlighting the differences between

behaviour and outcome is the alleged control that an individual has over them. The argument is that when an individual has control over what is assessed, only then it can be included as the construct of IWP.

The individual differences theory by Motowidlo et al. (1997) demonstrated that human beings are notably different in personality and cognitive capability. When these two elements are combined with learning experiences, it produces a variety of knowledge, skills, and work habits that help translate the properties of personality and cognitive abilities into job performance (Motowidlo and Kell, 2012). Personality and knowledge drive individuals to behave and solve problems in specific ways. Through experience, employees can also enrich their learning process and gain the knowledge required to perform their tasks effectively. In this study's context, it is expected that employees with high IWE and SQ capabilities will be able to adjust their behaviour to meet the needs and expectations of customers, which ultimately increases their work performance.

Siddiquee (2019) emphasised that it is important to assess how well Malaysian public service employees perform their work. Pandey (2019) and Diamantidis and Chatzoglou (2019) contended that an organisation's success largely depends on the performance of its employees. This means that the success of public sector organisations also depends on how well their employees perform at work. Despite the fact that public service organisations currently employ a large number of highly qualified individuals, their employees also need specific skills and competences to enable them to perform their jobs effectively. It is, therefore, crucial to have a holistic understanding of what competencies or factors could enhance the performance of public service employees in Malaysia.

2.4 Theoretical background

In this study's context, the development of a theoretical framework for analysing the relationship between SQ and IWP is based on the Individual Differences Theory proposed by Motowidlo et al. (1997). The theory posits that individual differences in personality, ability, knowledge, and skills influence an individual's job performance. Based on this view, SQ can be characterised as an important psychological factor that encompasses a specialised skill and ability that can help an individual perform tasks effectively. *The resulting effect of task effectiveness contributes towards IWP in organisation. This theory has been supported by a few* scholars in the literature, in which they found that SQ has a profound effect on an overall individual's work performance (Adetula, 2016; Eketu and Ogbu Edeh, 2015; Hartini, 2018).

On the contrary, IWE has been conceptualised through the divine command theory that uses religion as the fundamental dimension to regulate *right* and *wrong conduct*, and *God's command is the ultimate basis for morality* (Javadi, 2004; Salahudin et al., 2016). The divine command theory views an action as morally right if God allows it and obligatory if God commands it. Islam places great emphasis on work, and Muslim employees are expected to perform their work ethically (Ahmad and Owoyemi, 2012; Zahrah et al., 2016). According to Fernando and Wulansari (2021), individual abilities contain two dynamic domains: communication and teamwork. The behaviour of an employee in the workplace is determined by IWE in that such an employee who adopts ethics at work would also value hard work and endeavour to accomplish improved results at work.

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2.6 Research framework and hypothesis development

2.6.1 SQ and IWP

To remain competitive, organisations need to adopt strategic thinking (Smriti et al., 2021). Organisational learning and country-specific cultural setting can contribute to individual performance (Lim and António, 2020). SQ is pivotal in managing the complexity of human interactions and also crucial for an employee to accomplish the work role successfully in an organisation. Markopoulo (2009) asserted that socially intelligent individuals are able to engage well in social interaction, signifying that they *understand and respect* the *diverse needs of others*. In this sense, SQ is viewed as a capability that can help individuals to be fully aware of themselves, and interpret the social situation accurately. SQ is an important psychological factor that has a profound effect on an individual's ability and performance. Previous findings have demonstrated that individuals with high SQ are inclined to show better performance (Lathesh and Avadhani, 2018; Adetula, 2016; Rahim, 2014). In order to do their jobs well, public service *employees* must be able to manage *interactions* with customers positively. Thus, SQ can be proposed as a tool for successfully managing interaction so that it benefits the organisation. The hypothesis below is developed after considering the abovementioned assumption:

H1 SQ will positively influence IWP.

2.6.2 SQ and IWEs

In the workplace today, employees continuously face *ethical dilemmas when making a choice* of which action is *right or wrong*. In a complex situation like this, moral sensitivity can *help* individuals analyse the ethical basis of their decisions and actions. Jordan (2007) defined moral sensitivity as the ability to recognise moral issues and choose the best response. According to Bebeau et al. (1999), moral sensitivity is not just related to an individual's sense of what is right or wrong, but it is also about the awareness of how one's actions affect others' moral or ethical sensitivity. This seems to be closely related to SQ, as SQ is viewed as the ability to get along well with others and get others to cooperate with an individual (Goswami, 2020; Rahim et al., 2018). SQ is useful in many ways, such as when helping to build successful relationships, displaying empathy toward others, and acting in a socially appropriate manner. Positive social experiences and good relationships can *promote* the creation of an *ethical work environment*. Based on this argument, the following hypothesis is developed:

H2 SQ will positively influence IWEs.

2.6.3 IWEs and IWP

The principles and work ethics in Islam should be instilled in the public sector as it encourages hard work and *compliance* with Islamic *principles* (Usman and Mat, 2021). When an individual embraces IWEs, which is driven by the Holy Quran and Sunnah, they will perform their tasks in the best way by giving priority to organisational needs instead of personal needs. Scholars have acknowledged that the values of IWEs improve the quality of an individual's work and also performance (e.g., Hassi et al., 2021; De Clercq et al., 2019; Mohammad et al., 2018; Imam et al., 2013a; Hayati and Caniago, 2012). Abdullah and Halim (2016) advocate that strong work ethics *prevent misconduct* among civil servants, and employees will do their best to deliver *excellent service to their customers*. Thus, a study needs to be conducted to explore how IWEs could influence work performance of public service employees in Malaysia. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is developed:

H3 IWEs will positively influence IWP.

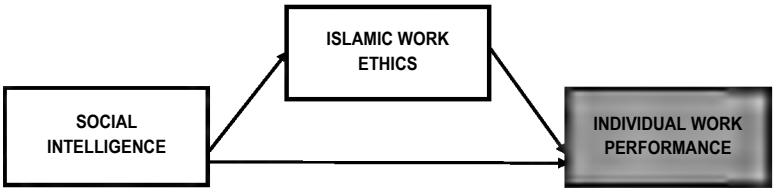
2.6.4 IWEs as a mediator of the relationship between SQ and work performance

According to Lopes and Hilal (2021), employee motivation can be obtained by allowing them to voice their ideas and opinions. Workers who adhere to the teachings of Islam and adopt Islamic ethical values have a strong tendency to find satisfaction in their work, and show a strong commitment to their company (Nasution and Rafiki, 2020). Employees who perform their duties ethically would perform their job to the best of their ability and offer the best services to customers. Past studies found IWE and SQ to be good predictors of work performance (Mohamed et al., 2020; Mohammad et al., 2018). Also, past literature indicates that SQ helps individuals to get along with others and perform their jobs in an ethical manner (Haq, 2011). Hence, it is expected that employees who adopt IWE, coupled with SQ abilities, they would be more sensitive towards others and skilful in handling the evolving environments to reach the anticipated outcomes. The company need to manage employee job satisfaction to improve productivity, trust and respect for

the leader (Hidayat et al., 2021). As shown in Figure 1, this study hypothesised that IWE would mediate the relationship between SQ and IWP as below.

H4 IWE mediates the relationships between SQ and IWP.

Figure 1 Theoretical framework



3 Methods

3.1 Sample and data collection

This research aims to examine whether the association between SQ and public service employees' work performance is mediated by IWE. This research applied a quantitative approach to test the relationship between the variables in the research model. This study is classified as a relationship study; thus, it is ideal to use the quantitative method to determine whether a relationship between the studied variables exists (Loke et al., 2020). Struwig and Stead (2013) argued that quantitative research's primary role is to examine hypothesis statements scientifically. In other words, the quantitative approach emphasises empirically analysing theory by examining hypothesis statements. In contrast to the quantitative method, the qualitative method employs an inductive approach that focuses on exploring a recent phenomenon (Curry et al., 2009). The survey method was employed because it is the best technique for collecting primary data involving a large number of samples (Hair et al., 2019). The respondents' opinions can be usefully probed by applying the survey method, where they can give their insight on their opinions, characteristics, expectations, knowledge, beliefs, behaviour, attitudes, and self-classification. The questionnaire was prepared in English. To *determine face and content validity of the research instruments*, the questionnaires were presented to a panel of experts to obtain suggestions for modification.

This study drew the sample population from two government agencies in Malaysia, and data were obtained using a structured questionnaire. 450 questionnaires were distributed to public service employees in major cities across Malaysia over a four-month period using the drop-and-collect method. At the end of the period for data collection, 202 questionnaires were received, yielding a 44.89% response rate. After the responses were screened, 174 usable questionnaires underwent further analysis. Several guidelines for estimating sample size can be found in the literature. Hair et al. (2014) suggested that 100 to 150 samples are sufficient to obtain stable maximum likelihood estimation (MLE) results. In addition, Bartlett et al. (2001) proposed that a research should exceed 100 samples in order for factor analysis to be performed. Based on the minimum sample size proposed by Bartlett et al. (2001) and Hair et al. (2013), the size for sampling should ideally be within the scale of 150 to 200. Thus, the sample size of 174 in the present study is deemed adequate. The research adopted variance base SEM (partial least square

technique) that can produce strong outcomes in smaller samples. In the variance base SEM technique, 174 is a considerably large sample and sufficient to obtain strong statistical power since the processes for validation have all been done (e.g., discriminant validity and convergence).

To choose the right respondents, the purposive sampling technique was used, given that the study's sampling frame was unavailable. A complete set of sampling frames representing the study population is compulsory in randomising the samples for probability sampling technique (e.g., stratified sampling, simple random sampling, systematic sampling, and cluster sampling). Purposive sampling is "a method of sampling where the researcher deliberately chooses whom to include in the study based on their ability to provide necessary data" [Parahoo, (2014), p.232]. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose respondents who match the sample profile, so that the data needed to answer the research questions can be obtained. There are several criteria that must be considered for the sample selection. First, the sample for this study is limited to Malaysian public sector organisations that provide assistance and services to international customers. In this study, two government agencies were chosen as both of these organisations are involved in global business dealings and transactions, where *cross-cultural interactions* often *occur*. Another criterion for selecting respondents is their nature of work, whereby only public service employees dealing with international customers as part of their job were selected to participate in this survey. A screening question, "Nature of your work requires you to interact with clients from different countries", was used to ascertain only eligible respondents could participate in the survey and also to minimise the hypothetical response biases from respondents (Foon et al., 2020).

3.2 Statistical procedure

The SmartPLS 2.0 software was used to statistically analyse the research model. In order to test the hypothesised model, a component-based partial least square (*PLS-SEM*) method is applied. According to Richter et al. (2016), PLS-SEM is primarily used for study that focuses on theory development. PLS-SEM has been widely deployed in social science disciplines such as psychology and human resource management (HRM) (Mohamed, 2021; Javed et al., 2020; Mohammad et al., 2018) to estimate theoretically established cause-effect relationship models.

PLS-SEM is a powerful statistical tool because it can examine complex models with small samples size (Hair et al., 2018). Besides that, PLS-SEM can test complex models with numerous different constructs and indicators. To be considered as a complex model, a research model should consist of more than 50 indicators (Hair et al., 2011). The structural model in this study consists of 51 indicators; therefore, PLS-SEM was used to estimate this complex model.

3.3 Measures

The scales to measure three main constructs of this study were adopted from well-established studies. To determine the measurement scales' reliability, Cronbach's alpha was calculated.

3.3.1 Social intelligence

The Tromsø social intelligence scale (TSIS) scale by Silvera et al. (2001) was adopted to measure SQ construct. TSIS comprises 21 items quantifying the three following major domains: social information processing (7 items), social skills (7 items), and social awareness (7 items). A seven-point Likert scale was used to measure each item (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 7 = 'strongly agree'). Example items are: 'I understand other people's feeling'; 'I fit in easily in social situations', and 'I find people unpredictable'. In the current study, the overall SQ provided high reliability (0.85 Cronbach's α).

3.3.2 Islamic work ethics

IWEs was assessed using a 17-items scale devised by Ali (1992). Items used included 'Laziness is a vice'; 'Dedication to work is a virtue', and 'Those who work is more likely to get ahead in life'. All items were rated on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 7 = 'strongly agree'). The Cronbach's reliability coefficient for the instrument was 0.88.

3.3.3 Work performance

Work performance was operationalised using Koopmans et al. (2013) IWP scale. The IWP scale three sets of dimensions, namely contextual performance, counterproductive behaviour, and task performance. However, the counterproductive behaviour dimension was excluded from the survey as the aim of this study was to measure positive work behaviour that contributes to superior work outcomes.

In this study, IWP consisted of 13 items intended to measure two dimensions, namely task performance and contextual performance. Task performance consists of five items (e.g., 'I can perform my duties efficiently') while contextual performance consists of eight items (e.g., 'I worked on keeping my job-related knowledge up-to-date'). Respondents were requested to evaluate their performance using a five-point Likert scale within three months of the recall periods (1 = 'seldom' to 5 = 'always'). The scale demonstrated acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.93.

4 Results

The demographic result revealed that gender distribution was 97 female (55.7%) and 77 male (45.3%). Most of the respondents were aged between 26 to 35, making up 57.5% of the total number of respondents. In terms of education, 71.8% earned a bachelor degree, and 13.8% had a master's degree or higher. The majority of respondents (37.1%) have worked for six to ten years in the organisations currently employing them. In total, 88.4% of the respondents were executives and were holding posts at the managerial level. Table 1 presents the demographic profiles of the respondents.

Table 1 Demographic profile

Respondent's profile		*Frequency*	*Percentage (%)*
Gender	Male	77	44.3
	Female	97	55.7
Age	25 years or less	8	4.6
	26–35 years	100	57.5
	36–45 years	45	25.9
	46–55 years	19	10.9
	Above 56 years	2	1.1
Marital status	Single	60	34.5
	Married	110	63.2
	Others	4	2.3
Race/ethnicity	Malay	154	88.5
	Chinese	10	5.7
	Indian	6	3.4
	Others	4	2.3
Education level	STPM or lower	8	4.6
	Diploma	17	9.8
	Bachelor degree	125	71.8
	Master degree or higher	24	13.8
Job level	Non-executive level	20	11.6
	Executive and managerial level	153	88.4
Length of service	≤ 5 years	60	35.9
	6–10 years	62	37.1
	11–15 years	26	15.6
	16–20 years	11	6.6
	21–25 years	4	2.4
	≥26 years	4	2.4

4.1 Analysis of the outer model or measurement model

The measurement model in this research was analysed by applying the SmartPLS2.0 M3 software package. The validation process for ensuring construct validity entails both convergent and discriminant validity.

4.1.1 Convergent validity

Convergent validity refers to the degree of shared variance between a construct's measures (Henseler et al., 2009). The average variance extracted (AVE) and composite reliability (CR) were evaluated to analyse the measurement model's convergent validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2011). To achieve convergent validity, the required criteria is for the value of CR to be more than 0.7, whereas the value of AVE value should be the same as or more than 0.5 (Fornell and Larcker, 1981; Hair et al., 2013; Henseler et al., 2009).

Table 2 The convergent validity assessment results

Main variable	*AVE^x*	*CR^y*	*Communality*
IWP	0.5970	0.9364	0.5970
IWE	0.6007	0.9306	0.6007
SQ	0.5430	0.9137	0.5430

Notes: CR^y = composite reliability; AVE^x = average variance extracted.
SQ = social intelligence, IWE = Islamic work ethics, IWP = individual work performance.

Table 2 demonstrates that the values for each constructs' CR exceed 0.70, signifying the reliability of the constructs. Additionally, the AVE values for all constructs are between 0.54 and 0.60, thus satisfying the rule set by Hair et al. (2013). Therefore, the measurements demonstrate a satisfactory level of convergent validity.

4.1.2 Discriminant validity

Discriminant validity was assessed to determine the extent to which each of the constructs was distinct from the other (Hair et al., 2013). The Fornell-Larcker criterion was used to assess the discriminant validity. For adequate discriminant validity, AVE's square root should exceed the correlations with other latent constructs.

Table 3 Discriminant validity of constructs

Latent constructs	*IWP*	*IWE*	*SQ*
IWP	*0.773*		
IWE	0.454	*0.775*	
SQ	0.447	0.515	*0.775*

Notes: The diagonals values represent the AVE's square root while the other entries represent the squared correlations.
SQ = social intelligence, IWE = Islamic work ethics, IWP = individual work performance.

Table 3 illustrates that the AVE's square root values (values shown off-diagonal, in italics) are more substantial than other constructs' cross-loading, suggesting adequate discriminant validity.

4.1.3 Mediation analysis

To assess the mediation model, we followed the procedures proposed by Hayes (2009). The analysis was conducted using 5,000 bootstrap data samples to estimate a 95% confidence interval (CI). The magnitude of mediation is calculated by variance accounted for VAF. The size of the indirect effects and the significance with regard to the overall impact was estimated by the VAF. The following prerequisites for the mediation effect were proposed by Hair et al. (2018): VAF exceeding 0.80 represents full mediation, VAF from 0.20 to 0.80 indicates partial mediation, and VAF less than 0.20 means there is no mediation. Table 4 presents the mediation analysis results.

Table 4 Mediation analysis

Hypothesis	*Procedure*	*Path*	*Path coef.*	*Indirect effect*	*STDEV*	*Total effect*	*VAF*	*t value*	*p values*	*Results*	*Magnitude of mediation*
H1	Step 1: Direct effect (without mediator)	SQ --> IWP	0.3813	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	*3.9460*	$p < 0.01$	Supported	Partial mediation
	Step 2: Indirect effect (with a mediator)	SQ --> IWP	0.3813	n/a		0.5050	*0.2448*	*5.2084*	$p < 0.01$		
		SQ --> IWE	0.5169	0.1236	0.0316						
		IWE--> IWP	0.2392								

Notes: SQ = social intelligence, IWP = individual work performance, IWE = Islamic work ethics.
VAF > 80% = large effect and full mediation, 80% > VAF > 20% = partial mediation, VAF < 20% = no mediation.

5 Discussion

The empirical results have confirmed that IWE partially mediated the relationship between SQ and IWP. Partial mediation occurs when an independent variable has direct and indirect effects on a dependent variable, signifying that the mediator only *partially* explains the *effect* of independent variables on the outcome variable (MacKinnon et al., 2012). In the context of this study, there was a significant association between SQ and IWP, and IWE was partially responsible for the relationship observed between SQ and IWP.

SQ can be conceived as adaptive behaviour that can enhance one's performance in different social settings. Evidence from empirical research suggests a strong relationship between SQ and individuals' performance (Lathesh and Avadhani, 2018; Adetula, 2016; Eketu and Ogbu Edeh, 2015). SQ is an essential factor that influences the development of an individual's personality and behaviour. An empirical study by Wagner and Ruch (2015) found that socially intelligent individuals could manage conflict and relationships with others successfully, which leads to positive behaviour. By developing better SQ, a conflict could be minimised, collaborations could be created, and intolerance could be replaced with better understanding. Allahyari (2015) contended that those with strong SQ were capable of understanding both their own and others' feelings; they can also articulate their values to make an ethically responsible decision or action. Based on the findings, we believe socially intelligent employees can get along and cooperate well with others and, as a consequence, they are able to *accomplish* their *tasks* effectively. Thus, SQ can be seen as a tool for successfully managing interaction to benefit the organisation in terms of employee performance.

Scholars have emphasised the importance of applying *IWE* as a *platform* for sharing employees' attitudes and *behaviour* in the *workplace*. Past studies (e.g., Al-Douri et al., 2020; Hayati and Caniago, 2012; Imam et al., 2013a; Zahrah et al., 2016) have provided strong empirical evidence that there are significant relationships between IWE and work performance. Promoting ethical behaviour in organisations allows *employees* to feel a sense of purpose and integrity in their job. By cultivating *IWE* in the organisation, *employees* are more committed to completing the allotted tasks, which subsequently results in *greater work performance*. IWE provides a standard for employees to strive for as well as articulate a special sense of responsibility; thus, it should be of integral concern in government administration and public services in Malaysia.

A clear understanding of the importance of SQ and IWE in a work setting would help organisations to develop a more positive and committed workplace culture. The findings could help employees to clarify that SQ and IWE are implicitly valued by the employer and essential for their career advancement. To promote a pleasant atmosphere and excellent service, it is essential that the organisation includes SQ and IWE as a part of the employees' work performance evaluation. A workforce that is well-trained, skilled, and knowledgeable is crucial to the success of an organisation. An organisation can be competitive and adaptable if the competency of employees is improved. This will eventually contribute to an increase in performance and productivity. The current study provided clear evidence that employees who demonstrate high levels of SQ and IWE are high performers and are able to work in a complex work environment.

5.1 Theoretical implications

This study made several theoretical contributions. First, a theoretical model was developed, which involved the application of Individual differences theory and divine command theory. The theoretical model presented in this study is useful for expanding the understanding of factors that influence employees' work performance within Malaysia's public sector settings. Next, the current study provided a holistic view of SQ's interrelationship, IWE, and work performance that could induce more research attention in this area.

5.2 Managerial implications

Several practical implications can be deduced from this study. The findings suggest that IWE is fundamental in promoting positive behaviour and directing employees' motivation toward *work*. Thus, it will be valid for public sector organisations in Malaysia to implement relevant policies and procedures to assure that all employees perceive IWE. IWE helps create a *productive* environment in which employees possess strong moral values and conform to Islamic teachings and values when carrying out their work.

Specifically, the current study has empirically proven that IWE partially mediates the association between SQ and IWP. To fulfil the great demand for a sophisticated and well-trained global workforce, HRM should focus on enhancing SQ and IWE by offering a range of courses and professional training programs. Employees should also be encouraged to enhance their competencies and skills through continuous self-learning and appropriate job experience to become more effective in the workplace.

6 Conclusions

IWE involves the inculcation of Islamic principles that positively affects the way employees do their job. Employees with a strong IWE will comply with moral regulations and strive to do their best to fulfil their workplace obligations. The findings of the present research demonstrated that there is a significant and positive association between SQ and work performance. Hence, this positive effect and significance are expected to increase when adopting IWE practices. The findings of the present research have shown that IWE has a key role in the enhancement of the association between and SQ and work performance. The current study provides a holistic view of the interrelationship among SQ, IWE, and IWP, which can induce more research attention on this area.

Several limitations of this study should be noted. First, even though this study utilised validated and usable measures, the data were collected through self-reported questionnaires, so it might pose potential problems such as common method bias and social desirability bias that could distort the research outcome. To obtain more reliable results and minimise the bias element in the data collection process, future researchers can use a combination of methods to assess employees' work performance. For example, the self-evaluation technique should be supplemented by superior and peer evaluation surveys.

The second limitation of this study was the small sample size. The results' generality may be limited as the research was conducted in two government agencies that

coordinate and promote foreign investment and international trade in Malaysia. Hence, a bigger sample size could help generalise the application of the findings. The findings need to be replicated with a larger sample by conducting research across different government ministries, agencies, or departments that are responsible for foreign affairs, diplomacy, international relations, international securities, and tourism.

Finally, the study design itself was another limitation. The model tested in the present study was based on a cross-sectional study design. *A cross-sectional study* is relatively inexpensive and less time-consuming as the data are gathered at a single moment in time without having to repeat the survey multiple times over the duration of the study. Cross-sectional study provides no information regarding the influence of time on the variables measured; thus, it lacks validity when examining the cause-and-effect relationship. Taris and Kompier (2014) posited that longitudinal research is more appropriate for examining the cause and effect linkage between variables at different periods of time. Therefore, future research should include a longitudinal study that can present more accurate evidence with regard to the linkage between performance at work, IWE, and SQ among Malaysian Government servants.

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