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Servant Leadership and Retention of IT Professionals: Does Job Embeddedness Matter?

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship between servant leadership and retention of IT professionals with the presence of job embeddedness as a mediating factor. 300 IT professionals employed in five ICT companies participated in this study. The data was collected using the survey method. It is found that job embeddedness mediates the relationship between servant leadership and employee retention, partially. This indicates that the relationship between servant leadership and employee retention is both direct and indirect, mediated by job embeddedness. Employee turnover and the resulting scarcity of talent can be bad for any business. Hence, eliminating the cost of employee attrition and understanding the importance of servant leadership and job embeddedness in enhancing IT professionals' retention would help employers to draw up effective retention strategies to prevent such occurrences. Very few studies have analyzed the relationship between servant leadership and professional employees' retention. The research adds to the current knowledge on this relationship through the mediating role of job embeddedness.

Keywords: servant leadership, job embeddedness, employee retention, IT professionals, ICT sector, Malaysia.

1 Introduction

Retention of professional employees remains as a main concern for organizations to stay competitive in an increasingly turbulent business environment [1]. Research has found that the survival of an organization relies on its capability to retain professionals who are usually the key talents who can ensure sustainable competitive advantage [2, 3, 4]. Organizations with high levels of attrition among their professional talents can lead to a loss of institutional memory [5, 6]. In certain circumstances, the loss can be harmful to the organization if the professional employees who have left the company share crucial information with a competitor company, thus leading to the possible theft of trade secrets [7]. [8] highlighted the importance of retaining the professional talents since it reduces the recruiting and replacement cost. Hence, retention of professionals has become vital for organizations as these skilled and knowledgeable employees are the central force for the organizations to function and survive in this competitive business world [9, 10].

As of today, majority of the studies perceived that the reasons for people to stay in an organization are the same with why they leave [11]. However, such an assumption has been challenged and several researchers are now asserting that turnover and retention are two different constructs [12, 13]. It is therefore crucial for organizations to take a 'proactive' measures to human capital management by studying the reasons why people remain in an organization rather than being 'reactive' and studying the reasons why they leave.

Leadership can be considered as one of the key antecedents of followers' positive workplace attitude and behaviour [11, 13, 14]. An effective leadership style is important in increasing the employees' performance, as well as satisfaction and commitment, and in turn, their retention [15, 16, 17, 18, 19]. [20] suggested that servant leaders have the mindset to serve first rather than lead first. Put differently, servant leaders prioritise the needs and development of subordinates [21, 22].

The means through which servant leadership effect employee retention is an underexplored area. In this research, while the servant leadership-employee retention relationship can be direct, we also expect an indirect relationship between both the variables, mediated through job embeddedness. Employees' job embeddedness, which is

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conceptualized as the "links" or connections employees build within their job or organization; the perception of employees' job "fit" in terms of comfortability and compatibility; and the perceived "sacrifices" of the financial and psychological benefits related to leaving the job [23], could serve as an enabler in the servant leadership-employee retention relationship [23, 24, 25). Figure I depicts the conceptual framework of the study.

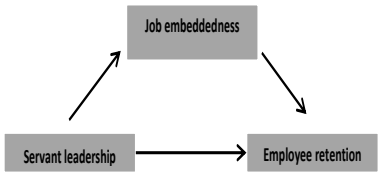


Figure I
The conceptual framework of the study

Fig. I: depicts the conceptual framework of the study.

Job embeddedness focuses on the factors that retain individuals in their jobs [26]. As one of the key on-the-job organizational factors [27], it is reasonable to expect servant leaders' strong commitment to safeguard the well-being of their employees [20], which will be highly valued by the employees and increase their embeddedness to their job and organization. This in turn, will restrain them from leaving the organization [13]. Through job embeddedness, leaders can align employees' values with the organization's expectations, thus enabling both the employees and the organization to achieve the set goals, consequently increasing the employees' job satisfaction and retention [28, 29].

Social Exchange Theory (SET) guides the model of this study [30]. The SET posits that an individual's behaviour consists of a series of interactions that influence an individual's reactions based on the principle of reciprocity [30]. Employer's positive actions would result in positive reactions from the employees [31, 32]. Under such circumstances, these employees will respond positively by being loyal to the organization. Under the reciprocity rule, the characteristics of a servant leader can enhance the followers' trust and encourage them to reciprocate with a positive work attitude, such as intention to stay in the organization [33, 34, 35, 10, 36]. To date, the SET has been frequently used to study the association between servant leadership and various employees' outcomes.

Based on the above discussion, this study examines the effect of servant leadership on professional employees' retention, mediated by job embeddedness. In doing so, we hope to make the following contributions: first, this study provides a foundation for and empirical evidence on the effects of servant leadership, in terms of the servant leadership theory; secondly, this study enhances the understanding of the antecedents of professionals' retention; thirdly, the examination of job embeddedness as a mediating variable reveals the intricate mechanisms through which employee retention at work occurs; and finally, the study adds to the literature on employee retention in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector, especially in developing countries, like Malaysia. To summarise the major contributions, our study enhances the universality of the servant leadership style in a non-western context and a different sector (i.e., ICT), thus addressing both contextual and sectoral gaps in extant research.

Further, current statistics show that there is a dire need to address the high attrition rate among IT professionals in Malaysia since it can jeopardise the aspiration of the country to become a global ICT hub through its "Digital Economy" initiative [37]. Attrition in the ICT industry is one of the highest in Malaysia [38, 39]. The National ICT Association of Malaysia [40] has highlighted the massive outflow of experienced ICT professionals to other lucrative markets, such as in the Europe and selected countries in Asia, which pose additional challenges to the survival of the ICT sector in Malaysia. Thus, by studying the factor that contribute to job embeddedness and IT professionals' retention in the Malaysian ICT sector, this study offers useful knowledge into how the Malaysian ICT industry can retain ICT professionals.

This study also offers interesting insights into whether or not and to what extent the servant leadership theory is context-sensitive, for example, the culture context [41]. Researchers likes [42] and [43] pointed out that cultural differences influence the values and behaviour of people. The current study is based in Malaysia, which has a collective culture and a high power distance score [44]. Consistent with this premise, it is reasonable to say that leadership style differences exist in different cultures [45] and can influence employee outcomes.

[46] noted that Malaysian employees expect their leaders to demonstrate compassion towards them, and in return, they will respond positively at work. This means that if employees see humane benefits accruing to the family, community and nation, it seems to suggest that existing human resource and management practices designed for a 'power distance' culture, like in Malaysia, needs to be viewed from a different perspective to address the employee retention issue. Although job stability, job satisfaction, managerial support, job opportunity, career adaptability, engagement and talent management practices, have been proposed as possible antecedents of turnover among ICT professionals in the Malaysian context [47, 48, 37, 49], as mentioned earlier, research on how the servant leadership style and job embeddedness impact ICT professionals' retention, is scant.

Theoretical Foundation and Hypotheses

Servant Leadership and Employee Retention

Several empirical studies have shown the positive influence of servant leadership on employee behaviour and attitude. From the individual-level of analysis, positive relationship found between servant leadership and work performance [27]; proactive work behaviour [50]; innovative behaviour [51]; and decrease in turnover intention [13]. From the team-level of analysis, servant leadership had positive effects on team performance [52, 53]. At the organizational-level, there is evidence of a positive association between servant leadership and organizational citizenship behaviour [54, 55] firm innovativeness [56]; and organizational commitment [57].

The role of leadership as a vital factor in the retention of employees has been documented in studies [58, 59, 60, 9, 61, 62, 11]. It is widely accepted that an effective leader will create a supportive work environment that will influence employees to continuously loyal to the organization even when other job opportunities arise externally [11]. According to the SET, a servant leader's commitment to fulfil followers' needs and well-being will be perceived by followers as meriting a reciprocal response [33]. The "payback" for a positive social exchange [63], thus will be demonstrated through followers' commitment to remain in the organization rather than quit. Hence:

H1. Servant Leadership positively related with Employee Retention.

Servant Leadership and Job Embeddedness

Embeddedness within the firm or job that induce individuals to stay with an organization is known as job embeddedness [64]. It is also known as social web employees have developed within their networks in organizations, with other employees, and groups. Such networking may hinder turnover [64], and can have three primary influences on employee retention as follows: first, links, which refer to the relationships between the individual and organization; second, fit, related to match with the organization and environment including the community in which he or she resides [26]. Third, sacrifices, refers to opportunity cost of monetary and other psychological gains that may be sacrificed by leaving the organization [65].

Studies have confirmed that leadership style positively enhances job embeddedness among followers [66, 67, 29, 68, 69]. Servant leadership is parallel with the 'fit' aspects of job embeddedness [70], and with the focus on well-being of followers, we believe servant leadership is also consistent with the 'links' dimension [13]. Such behaviour strengthens employees' identification with their leader and enables a team-oriented mindset [71]. Employees would be making a huge sacrifice if they leave leaders who are genuine in developing them over their own interests [72]. Based on the SET, we contend that servant leadership will be highly valued by the followers and "payback" through job embeddedness can be expected as a result of the positive social exchange [63]. Therefore:

H2. Servant Leadership positively related with Job Embeddedness

Job Embeddedness and Employee Retention

Fundamentally, the job embeddedness theory does not only focus on why employees leave their current job, but also on the factors which enable the employees to stay in their job or organization [73]. Studies have proven that job embeddedness can enhance employees' retention in an organization [28, 23, 74, 75, 73, 67, 76, 24, 25]. Employee retention in recent years has been investigated through the role of job embeddedness as it better predicts employee retention compared to other commonly studied traditional variables [28, 73]; and serves as a guide for managers to devise employee retention policies [77].

Past research and the theory of job embeddedness have clearly shown the relationship between job embeddedness dimensions and turnover intentions [13]. For example, being socially "linked" into the social network aspect of job embeddedness could reduce turnover intentions among followers [78]. The fit aspect is highly valued by the followers since it involves valuable investment in the form of time and energy to find an ideal individual-organization match in all aspects of the job [64]. When the fit and link aspects are highly appreciated, leaving the organization becomes a great loss [64], leading to fewer employment search behaviour among followers [13]. As the SET posits, quality relationship between the organization and employees responded favourably by the employees by being highly embedded in their work because of favourable reciprocal exchanges [63]. Under these conditions, they maintain their membership in the organization. Therefore:

H3. Job Embeddedness positively related with Employee Retention

Job Embeddedness as Mediator

In order to have greater understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, [79] recommended to conduct both direct and indirect relationships. Accordingly, we contend that job embeddedness could mediate the relationship between servant leadership and employee retention, consistent with the work of [80] who found that job embeddedness mediates the relationships between job factors and employee attitude or behaviour. [81] provided further strong justification that job embeddedness intervenes the relationship between leaders and employees, which ultimately, impacts workplace outcomes.

Servant leaders lead their employees with strong commitment toward their well-being, development and

success [20]. Such behaviour promotes a stronger leader-follower relationship as employees trust the leader [57], which in turn, would increase their sense of attachment [82], as well as embeddedness to their organization. The more an employee embeds, the higher the probability that it will restrain him or her from quit the firm [83]. Consistent with the SET [30], the positive behaviour of servant leaders will create an obligation among the employees to reciprocate by staying longer with the organization. Hence:

H4. *Servant Leadership and Employee Retention is mediated by Job Embeddedness*

2 Methodologies

In this quantitative research, the data were collected through a survey questionnaire. A total of 361 questionnaires were sent to IT professionals in five ICT companies in Kuala Lumpur (KL), comprising multinational companies (MNCs), locally-owned companies and government-linked companies (GLCs). Having representatives from these companies availed a greater insight into the effect of servant leadership on job embeddedness and retention across different types of business models/ownership in the ICT services sector. KL was selected as it has the highest number of ICT workers, constituting 48% (98,980 employees) of the overall distribution of ICT workers in Malaysia [84]. In addition, the attrition rate has been reported to be high in this region. The data collection process took place between April 2018 to May 2018.

Measurement and Scales

The independent variables of the present study are servant leadership and job embeddedness. The outcome variable is employee retention. Respondents' agreement with each statement was assessed on a Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7).

Employee Retention. We used the 11-item Employee Retention Questionnaire [9] to measure employee retention. Examples of items are, "I see a future for myself within this company" and "I love working for this company". The internal consistency value was 0.716.

Servant Leadership. We used the 7-item Servant Leadership Questionnaire (SL-7) to measure servant leadership [85]. Examples of items are, "I would seek help from my supervisor/manager if I had a personal problem" and "My supervisor/manager puts my best interests ahead of his/her own". The internal consistency value was 0.868.

Job Embeddedness. We measured job embeddedness using the 9-item Job Embeddedness Questionnaire [86]. Examples of items are, "I feel like I am a good match for my organization" and "I am a member of an effective work group". The internal consistency value was 0.912.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was performed using SPSS version 23. Descriptive analysis was performed to describe and assess the goodness of data, while inferential analysis was executed using the regression analysis and bootstrapping method to test the hypotheses of the study. According to [87], the bootstrapping method can replace Sobel test for mediation analysis. The bootstrapping method in this study was executed using PROCESS Macro for SPSS. Model 4 (simple mediation path analysis) of PROCESS was used to analyse the mediation effect in this study [88].

3 Results

Demographic Profile

As mentioned above, a total of 361 questionnaires were distributed across five ICT companies in KL and 321 questionnaires were returned. Due to incompleteness, 21 questionnaires were removed from analysis. Hence, 300 usable questionnaires were finalised, representing a response rate of 83%. The respondents included 53.7% male and 46.3% female. Those aged below 40 years (79.3%) forms the majority. In terms of education, majority have a Bachelor's degree, representing 57%, followed by 26% diploma holders and 14% Master's degree holders. As for the respondents' position in the organization, Managers comprised 22%, Executives at 23.3%, Systems Analysts/Developers at 24%, Engineers at 19.3% and Technicians at 4.3%. In terms of the respondents' work experience in the organization, the majority have one to three years' (31.3%) experience, followed by 23% in with four to six years and 16.3% with less than a year. Finally, in terms of company profile, 48% of the respondents are with MNCs, 36.3% with locally-owned companies and 15.7% with GLCs.

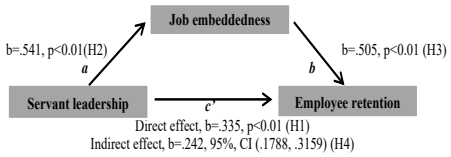
Descriptive Statistics

As depicted in Table I, the results shows the following mean value and standard deviation: servant leadership (M=4.60, SD=1.18); job embeddedness (M=4.91, SD=1.10); and employee retention (M=4.65, SD=0.67). As shown in Table I, Pearson correlation coefficients show that the tested relationships are in predicted directions. Servant leadership is positively related with employee retention (r= .478, $p<0.01$) and job embeddedness (r= .583, $p<0.01$). Job embeddedness also positively related with employee retention (r = .669, $p<0.01$). The results indicates that a higher level of servant leadership may contribute to greater job embeddedness and employee retention among IT professionals in Malaysia. The results also suggest that job embeddedness may lead to greater employee retention.

Table I
Descriptive Statistics (N=300)

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3
1. Servant leadership	4.60	1.18	(0.868)		
2. Job embeddedness	4.91	1.10	.583**	(0.912)	
3. Employee retention	4.65	0.67	.478**	.669**	(0.716)

Notes: Coefficient alphas are presented along the diagonal
**Significant at the 0.01 level



Note: H1-H4 (Hypothesis 1- 4)

Figure II
Model of servant leadership as predictor of employee retention mediated by job embeddedness

Hypothesis Testing

Table II depicts the multiple regressions and mediation analysis results. H1 posited a positive relationship between servant leadership and employee retention. Model 2 of Table II shows that servant leadership is positively related to employee retention (β=.335, p< .01), thus supporting H1. H2 stated that servant leadership is positively associated with job embeddedness. Model 1 of Table II shows that servant leadership is positively related to job embeddedness (β=.541, p< .01), hence supporting H2. H3 posited a positive relationship between job embeddedness and employee retention. Model 2 of Table II shows that job embeddedness is positively related to employee retention (β=.505, p< .05), thereby supporting H3.

Figure II shows that all the paths are significant as hypothesized. Using the bootstrapping method, this study found a 95% confidence interval (CI) of indirect effects based on 5,000 bootstrap resamples. Results of the mediation analyses as shown in Table II suggests the mediating role of job embeddedness in the servant leadership - employee retention relationship (β=.242, CI=.1788-.3159), hence supporting H4.

Table II
The mediation analysis (N= 300)

	Direct relationships		
	Model 1	**Model 2**	
Independent variables	Job embeddedness **ß (SE)**	Employee Retention **ß (SE)**[a]	
Servant leadership	541 (.044) ** (H2)	.335 (.036) ** (H1)	
Job embeddedness	-	.505 (.033) ** (H3)	
R^2	.340	.229	
	Indirect relationship		
Bootstrap indirect effects of servant leadership on employee retention (through job embeddedness) [b]	**ß (SE)**	**LL 95% CI**	**UL 95% CI**
Servant leadership	0.242 (.035) ** (H4)	.1788	.3159

Note: H1-H4 (Hypothesis 1- 4)
CI = Confidence Interval; LL = Lower limit; UL = Upper Limit.
[a]Direct and total effect. [b]Bootstrap sample size = 5000.
*p < .05; ** p < .01

As shown in Table II, the bootstrap percentile of CI for the entire path is 95% and the bootstrap estimates not including 0. The results also shows that despite controlled for job embeddedness, the direct effect of servant leadership on employee retention still significant (β=.335, p< .01), thus suggesting partial mediation. It indicates that job embeddedness only mediated part of the effect of servant leadership on employee retention. Servant leadership looks like had some residual direct effects even after the mediator (job embeddedness) was added in the model.

4 Discussions

The positive relationship between servant leadership and employee retention indicates that the higher the servant leadership, the greater the intention to stay in the organization among the IT professionals in Malaysia. Consistent with the SET, it can be said that when leaders are perceived as genuine and trusted in their effort to safeguard the well-being and fulfil the needs of the followers, the followers will reciprocate such behaviour by demonstrating their commitment to remain in the organization rather than quitting [30, 89, 57, 33, 41, 13]. The finding of this study is aligned with the results of past studies [e.g. 90, 91, 92).

Secondly, the outcomes of this study also suggest that the characteristics of servant leadership positively affected the job embeddedness of the IT professionals in Malaysia. In other words, the more the others-oriented approach to leadership qualities displayed by the servant leaders in serving the followers [41], the greater the job embeddedness. Again, based on the SET, the focus of servant leaders on the employees' needs and development, induces the fit, links and sacrifice facets of job embeddedness [63, 82, 13]. [13] reported similar findings on the servant leadership-job embeddedness link.

The positive relationship found between job embeddedness and employee retention suggests that the higher the job embeddedness of the IT professionals, the greater the tendency to remain in the organization. The finding is aligned with the premise of job embeddedness theory [64], which postulates that employees who are embedded in their job by means of links, fit and sacrifice established through social connections, will develop a greater sense of attachment [82]. This in turn, will enhance retention of employees in the organization. The findings of the current study similar with the results of the past research [93, 24, 25].

Finally, the partial mediation indicates that servant leadership style demonstrated by leaders can influence IT professionals' retention directly and indirectly, mediated by job embeddedness. The direct effect suggests that servant leadership passed directly to employee retention. As for the indirect effect, servant leaders' undivided concern for followers' well-being and development as well as their focus on fulfilling their needs [20], promoted a greater sense of job

embeddedness. Consistent with the SET, job embeddedness motivated individuals to reciprocate meaningful and rewarding leader-follower relationships [81], with followers remaining in the organization. The support for our finding can be found in several previous studies [e.g. 81, 94, 70, 13].

Implication

Theoretical Implications

Following is several theoretical implications. First, although a number of previous studies have investigated the influence of servant leadership on employees' positive workplace outcomes, most of the studies are based in West. Our study has brought forth new perspectives into the significance of servant leadership in relation to job embeddedness and professional employees' retention in emerging economies, like Malaysia. Interestingly, as evident in this study, relational-based servant leadership has been accepted in the Asian context and has been found to influence voluntary workplace outcomes, such as job embeddedness and employee retention among professional employees, which was once predominantly autocratic-based, and common in power distance cultures, like Malaysia [95, 96]. The findings of this study therefore could enhance the validity and universality of the servant leadership style in a non-Western context [97].

Secondly, this study fills the gaps in leadership literature which lack the element of stewardship [98, 99]. As such, this study provides an useful insights to study leadership and employees' attitudinal and behavioural outcomes. Thirdly, by conducting the study in the ICT industry, this study contributed to the current literature base. Research on this sector has been largely neglected despite its significant contribution to economic growth of nations, like Malaysia, which is poised to be a digital-first economy [37].

Finally, the findings of our study add to the rapidly expanding leadership-employee retention research stream (59, 60, 9, 62, 11, 100], by testing a mediation in this relationship. The present study suggests that through job embeddedness, servant leaders can motivate their employees to reciprocate the positive leader-member exchange by staying in the organization. It appears that job embeddedness serves as a process variable in the servant leadership-employee retention relationship.

Practical Implications

In practical terms, the present study makes note-worthy contributions. First, as suggested by [64], leaders are instrumental in helping employees expand their links to the organization, which is an important force that can prevent individuals from leaving the organization [33, 13]. Therefore, the ICT companies should urge managers to apply a servant leadership style since doing so is a way forward to increase employees' embeddedness.

Secondly, as employees often assume leaders as a personification of the organization, their behaviour and attitude such as focus on the well-being and professional growth of employees are important to create a positive perception among employees of the organization. This will be instrumental for employees to retain their membership with the organization. Hence, providing servant leadership training and mentoring programs will help ICT managers to understand the importance of acting as stewards, which can directly bring about a positive perception of organizational leadership among followers and influence their job embeddedness and retention in the organization.

Limitation and Future Research Recommendation

Limitations of the study as follows. Since the data for this study were collected from the employees of five organizations in KL, the findings, consequences and the conclusions drawn may not be generalizable to all organizations across Malaysia. Besides that, this study only focused on the ICT services subsector. As other subsectors might have different business objectives, different organizational culture and different leadership styles, a study incorporating these subsectors is recommended. Even though a comprehensive review on servant leadership and job embeddedness has revealed that both variables play important roles in IT employees' retention, inferring causality from the findings of this study is not advisable. This is because the present study is cross-sectional in nature. The conclusion of the study could have been different if the research design had been longitudinal in nature.

As the for future studies, we suggest that similar study be extended across other regions in Malaysia to accomplish the generalization of this research. Instead of assessing the diverse categories of the organization, future studies could focus on each category of the organization (either MNCs, locally-owned companies or GLCs). Alternatively, using the same research framework, an exploration of the differences in response from the diverse groups of people and demographics is also recommended. For instance, a comparison between the employees from different ICT subsectors, such as ICT Trade, ICT Manufacturing and eCommerce subsectors, or a comparison by ethnicity in Malaysia, can be considered by future researchers. Future researchers could also consider extending the sample subjects to senior management staff who are the decision-makers of the organization to have better insights into this phenomenon.

5 Conclusions

The survival and sustainability of an organization mainly depend on the efficiency of its leadership team together with effective organizational strategies to manage the capabilities of its talented employees and retain them. Hence, this study concludes that servant leadership, with its focus to serve the

employees and ensuring their growth, along with the mediation of job embeddedness, play a critical role in enhancing the IT professionals' retention in Malaysia. The outcomes of this study also confirm that the western theories of servant leadership and job embeddedness are still applicable in explaining the role of Malaysian IT professionals' retention despite differences in cultural settings.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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