

## Research Article

### **Boundaryless Career Attitudes, Employability and Employee Turnover: Perspective from Malaysian Hospitality Industry**

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**Abstract:** This study aims to develop a research framework for examining the relationship between boundary less career attitudes and employee turnover intentions and whether employability mediates these relationships. From the literature reviews, the authors found a notable gap in the boundary less career literature and established employability as a mediating variable between boundary less career attitudes and employee turnover intentions. High employee turnover within the hospitality industry has become one of the major concerns to researchers and practitioners. However, limited studies have been devoted to the understanding of the causes. Also, within the careers literature, there is a traditional sentiment that boundary less career attitudes indicate an increase in employee turnover. Little work, however, has examined how these career attitudes of employees may trigger their intention to turnover and eventually bring about the decisions toward turnover.

**Keywords:** Boundaryless career, emotional stability, employability, turnover intentions

## INTRODUCTION

Employee turnover is a global phenomenon. In particular, voluntarily turnover is a major problem for many Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan (Chang, 1996). In fact, in a recent study by AON Hewitt (a human capital consulting and outsourcing firm) entitled “APAC Year on Year Attrition Rate (2009-2011)”, Malaysia is placed sixth in the Asia-Pacific in 2011 for staff turnover with a 15.9% attrition rate (AON Hewitt, 2011). This phenomenon of high voluntarily turnover is without exception in the hospitality industry. The hospitality industry in Malaysia is constantly experiencing the challenge of personnel shortage due to high employee turnover rates (Hemdi and Nasurdin, 2006; Rahim and Hemdi, 2011). Indeed, in a recent survey on executives from a total of 143 companies across various sectors nationwide, conducted by Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) in 2011, shown that non-manufacturing sector has the highest annual average turnover rate, in which hospitality industry is in the top three accounted for 32.4% among the other 10 non-manufacturing industries.

The issue of high voluntarily turnover, regardless of the industry, has raised a deep concern at the national level that it is adversely affecting Malaysia’s competitiveness. This is in fact reported in the popular press highlighting the costs and disruptions associated with high voluntarily turnover and job-hopping (The

Star, 2012). However, though facing with the challenge of coping with the issue of labour shortage in the hospitality industry, Malaysian government has placed strong emphasis to the hospitality and tourism industry, by allocating RM358mil (42% increase from 2011’s allocation of RM250 mil) under Budget 2013 in conjunction with Visit Malaysia Year 2013/2014. Moreover, the ministry has also targeted 26.8 million tourist arrivals in 2013.

All these moves and directives are in placed because the hospitality industry is seen as one of the most promising industries in Malaysia, with its numerous contributions to the national economy, employment opportunities, provision of alternative and added income for the rural population and supporting the growth of secondary activities (Awang *et al.*, 2008). The hospitality and tourism industry has been and will continue to be a key economic sector in Malaysia. This is evident by the increasing amount of arrivals and receipts of tourists to Malaysia over the years as shown in Fig. 1 and 2.

Also, according to a compiled list of World Tourism Organization, Malaysia is ranked number nine the most visited tourist destinations in the world in 2011. The above data indicates that the hospitality industry in Malaysia is on the rise. It is bringing in significant income and employment opportunities to Malaysia and its people. Thus, it is crucial to give careful attention on managing human resources especially on rectifying the issue of high employee

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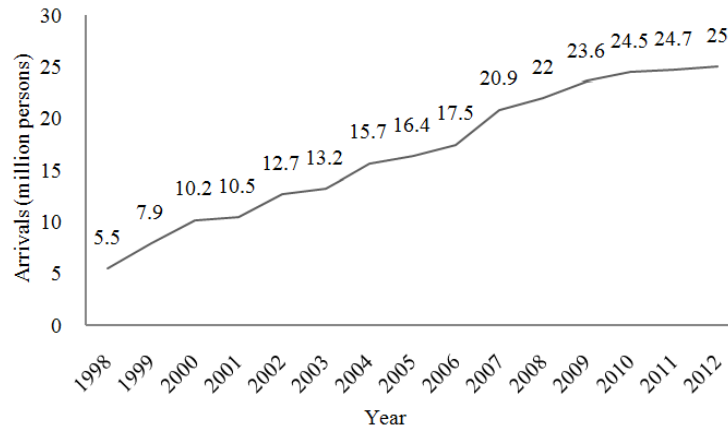


Fig. 1: Tourists arrivals to Malaysia 1998-2012 (Tourism Malaysia Corporate Website, 2013)

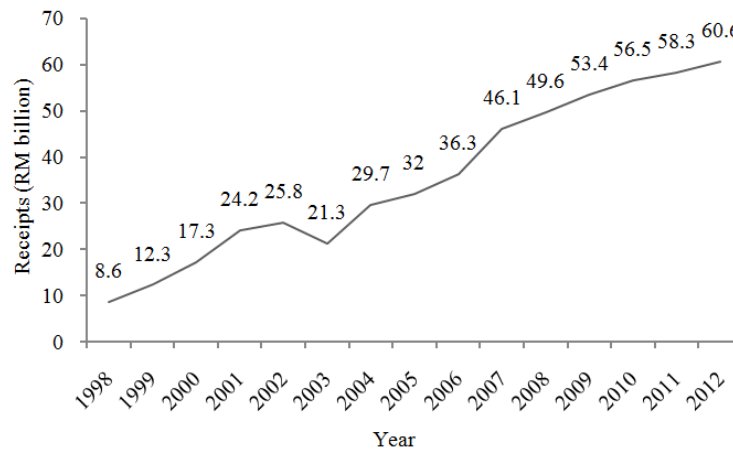


Fig. 2: Tourists receipts to Malaysia 1998-2012 (Tourism Malaysia Corporate Website, 2013)

turnover in the hospitality industry. Nevertheless, this cannot be achieved without proper understanding of the causes of employee turnover.

### RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

Most studies on causes of employee turnover have mainly concentrated on job-related variables (e.g., role overload, working conditions, job tasks and autonomy) and demographic variables (e.g., gender, age, tenure and education) as predictors of employee turnover or turnover intentions (Lum *et al.*, 1998). Moreover, despite high labour turnover reported globally, studies on turnover intentions within the hospitality industry are limited and have been conducted mainly in the United States and the Western world (Hemdi and Nasurdin, 2007).

The focus of the studies on employee turnover intention in Malaysian hospitality industry is mostly on leader-member exchange, organisational commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour and employment relationship (Hemdi and Nasurdin, 2006). Little work, however, has examined how career attitudes of

employees may trigger their intention to turnover and eventually bring about the decisions towards turnover. Additionally, previous literatures on turnover intentions have focused heavily on affective attitudes (e.g., job satisfaction and organisational commitment) as the mediating variables toward turnover intentions (Aryee *et al.*, 1991; Price and Mueller, 1981). To the best of our knowledge, no study has examined the linkage between boundary less career attitudes and behavioural intentions (i.e., turnover intentions), mediated by perceived employability.

Furthermore, within the careers literature, a popular concept of career called “Boundary less Career” has emerged. It is argued in the careers literature that there has been a significant change in the nature of careers over the last few decades (Sullivan and Baruch, 2009; Sullivan *et al.*, 1998) as a result of the changing work environment. This is due to the increasing volatile economy (Direnzo and Greenhaus, 2011) which has forced companies to become leaner in order to adapt, respond and compete in a turbulent economic environment (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1994). Consequently, to remain flexible and competitive in

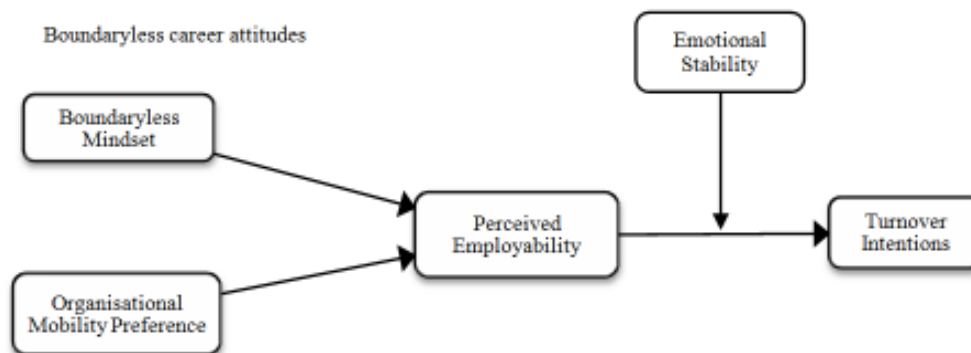


Fig. 3: Conceptual framework

turbulent times, organisations have become hesitant to invest in long-term relationships with employees (Greenhaus *et al.*, 2008).

As such, employees no longer anticipate long-term employment with a single employer (Cappelli, 1999). As opposed to expecting long-term employment with a single employer, today's workers anticipate working with numerous organisations throughout their careers in transactional relationships that may enable them to remain employable and valuable to future employers (Fugate, 2006). All these arguments have in fact increased scholarly interest in individuals as agents of their own career destinies (Inkson, 2006).

Despite its recent popularity in the careers literature, several authors argue that this new career model need to be examined empirically (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006; Pringle and Mallon, 2003) as most literatures on boundaryless career are conceptual and qualitative in nature. So far, the existing literature failed to provide a theoretical model that explains how boundary less career attitudes may influence the intentions to turnover. Rather, most studies pertaining to the boundary less career have been focusing on the nature of the constructs, its operationalization and measurements (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006) and the motivations, inclinations and individual attributes that cause the adoption of these career attitudes (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006; Segers *et al.*, 2008).

Moreover, there has been a traditional sentiment that the boundary less careers indicate a decline in employee intention to remain (Sturges *et al.*, 2002; Sullivan *et al.*, 1998). Without being tested empirically, it is still ambiguous whether employees with these boundary less career attitudes are less likely to remain in an organisation. Thus, this study intends to address the research gap in the careers literature by examining the relation of boundary less career to employee intention to turnover. In addition, some conceptual studies (Forrier *et al.*, 2009) often mention employability alongside with boundary less careers. However, limited empirical study exists in examining the direct relationship between these career attitudes and perceived employability. More so, most of these

studies have not considered the psychological processes that link perceived employability to the outcomes of boundary less career.

As such, this study aims to develop a research framework for examining the relationship between boundary less career attitudes and employee turnover intentions and whether employability mediates these relationships. Specifically, this study seeks to develop a model that incorporates perceived employability that link boundary less career and turnover intentions (Fig. 3). This study is organised into four sections. The first section introduces the background of the study. Second, we provide the statement of the research problem, accompanying with research objectives. Third, we explain the relationships between the constructs, alongside with hypotheses formulation and then we propose employability as the mediating variable and emotional stability as the moderating variable, followed by the development of a research framework. The last section concludes the study. The reviews are carried out based on extensive careers literature published throughout the world. Several keywords were used for the literature search, such as "boundary less career", "employability" and "turnover intentions". Literature reviews were drawn from established journal articles from the online databases such as Science Direct, Wiley-Blackwell, Emerald, Proquest, EBSCO host, SAGE, Springer, Taylor and Francis and Google Scholar.

## LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

The concepts of boundary less career are especially relevant in today's evolving economy and work environment. The outcomes of those who embark in these career attitudes deserve further conceptual and empirical inquiry. This study offers a mediated and moderated model in which boundary less career attitudes influence perceived employability, which, in turn, affects turnover intentions. The strength of relationships between perceived employability and turnover intentions is proposed to be moderated by

emotional stability. The proposed model and the conceptual rationales for the linkages among the variables are presented in the following section.

**Boundaryless career:** The “boundary less career” concept was developed in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and it has becoming increasingly relevant in today’s uncertain and rapid changing economy and work environment. The concept was first coined in a conference theme (Arthur, 1994) and subsequently popularized by Arthur. Arthur (1994) defines boundary less career as the career that is independence from the traditional organizational career principles and arrangement. It is a form of career that is neither bounded to a single employer, nor represented by an orderly sequence (Arthur and Rousseau, 2001). It is characterized by the shift from stable employment to dynamic employment, focusing on inter-organizational rather than intra-organizational phenomena. In other words, boundary less careers are opposite of the organizational careers, which is often described as having less stability and more mobility across organizational boundaries. As such, an important aspect to be successful in a boundary less career is often related to employability-related variables (Fugate *et al.*, 2004).

Although the boundary less career concept has invited extensive discussion within the career literature, there is little consensus on a generally acceptable conceptualisation. Specifically, there are several notions for boundary less career, which include: less structure (Kanter, 1989), fewer organisation-based values (Bird, 1994) and higher autonomy in knowledge creation (Bird, 1994). Due to the lack of consistency among definitions, empirical research on the boundary less careers was hindered and remained rather stagnant.

As such, scholars have suggested that, instead of attempting to define the boundary less careers, it is more useful and accurate to view the concept as a psychological orientation influencing individuals to particular career behaviours (Inkson, 2006). In line with this, Briscoe and Hall (2006) equate protean career as an attitude which provides guidance to action. Specifically, it is a form of career mindset or attitude that reflects freedom, self-direction and making choices based on one’s personal values.

Briscoe *et al.* (2006) have proposed and tested empirically two dimensions of the boundary less career attitudes, namely the boundary less mindset and the organisational mobility preference. The boundary less mindset, according to Briscoe and Finkelstein (2009), indicates one’s preference for working with other people and organisations across organisational boundaries, while the organisational mobility preference refers to one’s inclination towards working for multiple organisations, not just a single employer.

**Employability:** Employability is a broad term and can be studied from different perspectives (i.e., individual and contextual) and at different levels such as

individual, organisational and industrial (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006). As such, its definitions can be particularly distinct, depending on the perspective from which the concept is examined. For instance, from the individual perspective, employability construct has been addressed from the notion of psycho-social (Fugate *et al.*, 2004; McArdle *et al.*, 2007), competency-based (Benson, 2006; Van der Heijde and Van Der Heijden, 2006; Van der Heijden *et al.*, 2009) as well as dispositional approaches (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008; Nauta *et al.*, 2009; Van Dam, 2004).

As a result, there is little consensus regarding the definition of the construct. For example, prior studies on employability have considered a wide range of definitions including, but not limited to, adaptability (Fugate *et al.*, 2004), mobility (Van Dam, 2004), career development (Sterns and Dorsett, 1994), maintaining one’s position internally and externally (Rothwell and Arnold, 2007) and occupational expertise (Van der Heijde and Van Der Heijden, 2006). Specifically, Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) define employability as “continuous fulfilling, acquiring, or creating of work through the optimal use of one’s competences”.

Corresponding with the major shift of responsibility for career management from employers to employees, Fugate *et al.* (2004) offer a definition emphasising on person-centred career adaptability. Fugate and his colleagues suggest that employability “enables workers to identify and realise career opportunities” (2004). It comprises three related but distinct dimensions: career identity, personal adaptability, social capital and human capital. Lately, Fugate and Kinicki (2008) have revised their original conceptualization of employability and introduced dispositional employability to the literature, comprises six dimensions: career identity, proactivity, career motivation, openness to changes at work and work and career resilience. This new dispositional employability stresses the importance of employees’ ability to “(pro) actively adapt to their work and career environments” (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008). All these conceptualisations entail some notion of the individual resources that can positively influence career and work-related outcomes. Hence, employability, as opposed to job insecurity, increases individual value in the workforce, providing greater security and opportunities for career growth and success.

In this study, we focus on the subjective dimension of individual employability, i.e., on employees’ perceived employability (Fugate *et al.*, 2004; McArdle *et al.*, 2007; Van der Heijde and Van Der Heijden, 2006). It is this perceived employability that makes people interpret their situations the way they do (e.g., in terms of their ability to adapt and respond to the changing work environment) and that motivates them to

take their respective actions such as by searching for a new job and eventually leave the current employer.

In keeping with Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden (2006) original conceptualisation of employability and by integrating Fugate *et al.* (2004) elements of career adaptability, this study includes two key dimensions of employability, namely expertise and flexibility, into explaining the concept in this boundaryless era. Expertise refers to an individual's knowledge, skills and abilities needed to adequately perform various tasks and carry responsibilities within a job. Flexibility refers to an individual's adaptability to changes in the internal and external labour market (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2008; Fugate *et al.*, 2004; Van Dam, 2004; Van der Heijde and Van Der Heijden, 2006).

In addition, this study addresses employability from an individual perspective. We focus on how an individual career attitude may influence his or her employability and in turn affect employee turnover intentions. Also, we propose perceived employability as the primary conduit between boundary less career attitudes and employee turnover intentions.

**Boundary less career and turnover intentions:** Individuals who process boundary less career attitudes would prefer a career that moves across organisations (Briscoe *et al.*, 2006). We therefore expect that individuals with boundaryless mindset would likely to demonstrate higher turnover intentions.

**H1:** Boundaryless mindset is positively related to turnover intentions.

In the same vein, as organisational mobility preference reflects an individual's inclination to be mobile and to work for multiple organisations, we suppose that higher mobility preference would likely to prompt the intentions to quit. Accordingly, we hypothesise the following:

**H2:** Organisational mobility preference is positively related to turnover intentions.

**Boundary less career and perceived employability:** The boundary less career has been described as a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses both the physical mobility and psychological mobility (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). Individuals high in psychological mobility may tend to belief that it would be relatively easy to move across organisations and thus sustain high expectations towards their own employability (Sullivan and Arthur, 2006). A qualitative study by Clarke (2009) found that those who have attitudes towards change and focusing on developing themselves for the future will be more confident in their employability and more optimistic about the future. Furthermore, as boundary less career attitudes involve willingness to learn new

things and to explore opportunities beyond a bounded work setting, we posit that individuals with boundary less mindset will be able to adapt easily and anticipate quickly to changes in his or her work environment, which in turn contribute to higher employability. Building on the discussion above, we expect that an individual's boundary less mindset towards career will transmit the positive effects into his or her perceived employability.

**H3:** Boundary less mindset is positively related to perceived employability.

Similarly, individuals who prefer mobility across various organisations will consider a broader spectrum of opportunities leading towards higher perceived employability. Thus, we propose that the organisational mobility preference will predict one's perceived employability.

**H4:** Organisational mobility preference is positively related to perceived employability.

**Effect of perceived employability on turnover intentions:** De Cuyper *et al.* (2011a) state that there is a commonly assumed relationship between perceived employability and turnover intentions because employees may be more inclined to quit when they believe they can quit without substantial losses. In contrast, less employable workers may be less likely to consider quitting as acting upon their intention carries the risk of unemployment. Also, the changing work life has induced feelings of job insecurity among the workers (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2008; Forrier *et al.*, 2009). Some of these workers feel they can no longer rely on their employer to provide on-going employment. Instead, they have learned to manage their own career and to become "employable" (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2011b). These employees do not any longer feel obligated to be loyal in exchange for the security offered by the employer, which may invite the intention to leave the organisation when new opportunities come along. Accordingly, we formulate a hypothesis concerning the interaction between perceived employability and turnover intentions.

**H5:** Perceived employability is positively related to turnover intentions.

**Emotional stability's effect:** Emotional stability or neuroticism is one of "Big Five" personality dimensions. Emotional stability refers to a person's ability to remain stable, balanced and less easily upset. Zimmerman (2008) found that the trait of emotional stability best predicted (negatively) employees' turnover intentions. Thus, we incorporate emotional stability as a potential moderator of the relationship

between perceived employability and turnover intentions as follows:

**H6:** The positive relationship between perceived employability and turnover intentions is weaker for individuals who are high in emotional stability than for those who are low in emotional stability.

**Perceived employability as the mediator:** In this study, we propose perceived employability as the mediator between boundary less career attitudes and turnover intentions. In the previous sections, we have discussed the direct link between boundary less career attitudes and turnover intentions and the relationship between perceived employability and turnover intentions. As discussed earlier, boundary less mindset is expected to elicit turnover intentions and an increasing employability provides greater control and influence over such intentions. Thus, perceived employability is expected to mediate the relationship between boundary less mindset and turnover intentions.

**H7:** Perceived employability mediates the relationship between boundary less mindset and turnover intentions.

Similarly, individuals who have high mobility preference will not hesitate to consider leaving organisations as a result of the perceived ability to adapt to the external labour market (perceived employability). Also, increasing employability (either perceived or real) provides greater control and influence over such intentions. In view of that, perceived employability serves as the conduit between the preference for organisational mobility and turnover intentions.

**H8:** Perceived employability mediates the relationship between organisational mobility preference and turnover intentions.

In summary, this study examines whether boundary less mindset and preference for organisational mobility relates to turnover intentions through the enactment of positive self-perceived employability, moderated by emotional stability. These relationships are illustrated in Fig. 3.

## CONCLUSION

Although literatures on boundary less careers consistently speculate positive relationships with employability and employee turnover intentions, these assumptions await empirical testing. By looking at the mediating role of employability in the career attitudes-turnover intentions relationship, this study hopes to provide a more dynamic picture of how different career

attitudes (e.g., boundary less mindset), shape individuals' intentions and behaviours. Specifically, this study will contribute to the theory by developing a theoretical model to test empirically the relationship between boundary less career attitudes, perceived employability and turnover intentions. Also, emotional stability is incorporated in the model as a potential moderator, enabling greater conceptual and empirical clarity among these constructs.

This study contributes empirically to practice as it emphasises the need for employers to give attention to the changing career attitudes as a result of the changing work environment, which may influence employee turnover intentions. With the better understanding of how employees' career attitudes may influence their turnover intentions, this study hopes to provide insights into a potential antecedent of employee turnover which will enable employers to give better care and attention to the employees' career needs. This will also hope to allow organisations to improve the employer-employee relationship that contribute to performance and organisational success.

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