Job Quality, Affective Commitment and Intention to Migrate: A study of ICT Employees in Malaysia

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Abstract

The paper is based on the concern that the rate of employee turnover in Malaysian ICT sector is very high. Coupled with that the situation of skilled workers migration is quite alarming and calls for policy intervention to arrest the problem. With a focus on ICT sector the study examined the role of job quality as the push factor and affective commitment as the pull factor for employees’ intention to migrate. The sample consisted of 243 ICT employees drawn from a mix of industry. The data were collected with the help of standardised instruments. SEM was used to analyse the data. The results indicated a significant negative relationship between job quality and intention to migrate. Additionally, the relationship between job quality and affective commitment was strong and positive and affective commitment fully mediated the negative relationship between job quality and intention to migrate. Findings have strong policy implications. It lends support to the argument that creating better quality jobs and developing measures that improve employees’ loyalty and commitment should be given serious consideration by industry leaders and the government to reduce the problem of talent migration.

Key words: Job quality, affective commitment, talent migration, ICT employees

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Introduction

Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector is among the vital industrial sectors to Malaysia’s economic development. Since 1990s, ICT has been identified as a key economic driver in the country’s effort towards becoming a knowledge-based economic nation. Apart from being one of the twelve targeted NKEAs (National Key Economic Areas), ICT is also seen as a crucial enabler in helping the enhancement of productivity, efficiency and competitiveness of other sectors such as manufacturing, agriculture and services. According to the National ICT Association of Malaysia (PIKOM) (2015-2016) report the share of overall ICT industry to the economy expanded from 16.5% in 2010 to 17.6% in 2015 and is on track to reach 20% by 2020. PIKOM report further highlighted that the underlying growth in the industry arose from 11% at RM70.2bil in 2015 and projected to reach RM77.5bil in 2016. The ICT sector alone contributed up to 6.6% of GDP in 2015 and is projected to reach 7% by end of 2016.

However, Malaysia faces the serious issue of talent migration that includes ICT sector. According to the study conducted by the World Bank (2011) “Malaysia’s rate of brain drain is elevated: the skilled diaspora is now three times larger than two decades ago. Migration has increasingly become the preserve of the skilled. (p. 2)”. It is estimated that for every ten skilled Malaysian born in Malaysia, one of them elects to leave the country. This is double the world average (The World Bank, 2011). The present study was conducted in this backdrop. The objective was to examine the issue of intention to migrate among ICT workers in Malaysia using the framework of job quality and affective commitment as the contributing or debilitating factors.

Job quality may be defined as “the extent to which a job has work and employment-related factors that foster beneficial outcomes for the employee, particularly psychological well-being, physical well-being and positive attitudes such as job satisfaction” (Green, 2006). Employment plays a significant part in people’s life and since most of people's daily life is being spent at work, it is clear that the more crucial question is not about what kinds of jobs people do for a living but is the job of a good quality? In a very broad sense, job quality can be reflected by the aspects of jobs which contribute to the well-being of a person and has impacts on the person’s living standard as well as the person’s quality of life at work. Job quality has been associated with positive outcomes such as reduced employees’ turnover and improved organizational performance (Oxford Research, 2011).

One of the possible factors that should determine the relationship between job quality and intention to migrate is affective commitment. This is defined as “employee’s emotional attachment to, identification with and involvement in the organization” (Meyer & Allen, 1991). In other words, employees with affective commitment continue to work with the same organization out of their own willingness to do so and also because of ‘the desire to maintain membership in an organization’ (Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002). Among the three organizational commitments identified by Meyer and Allen (1991), it is affective commitment that often becomes the focus in studies that link organizational commitment with work outcomes such as intention to stay with the organisation (Feng & Angeline, 2010). This relationship could also be extended to the intention to migrate or not to migrate to other countries.
Literature Review

Job Quality

People do not simply want job, they want good quality jobs. Therefore understanding what makes a job of good quality cannot be over emphasised. More so because job quality affects employees, firms and labour market outcomes. At the individual level job quality affects decision on whether to stay or quit the job as well as how much to contribute in the job.

Job quality is a complex multidimensional construct that consists of both objective characteristics such as levels of earnings and subjective elements such as meaning in the job (Kalleberg & Vaisey, 2005). While doing research on job quality economists would focus on pay, sociologists on skill and autonomy, and psychologists on job satisfaction and wellbeing (Findlay, Kalleberg, & Warhurst, 2013). However, as noted by Knox, Warhurst, and Pocock (2011) there is some consensus among scholars that good quality jobs offer financial and employment security, good utilisation of skills and autonomy and control. In addition to that such jobs also provides workers opportunity to have their voices heard, participate in decision making and prospects of career advancement. One can generally assume that job quality comprises of work and employment attributes which affect worker’s well-being (Clark & Postel-Vinay, 2009).

Some good idea of what constitute job quality component come from the Work Orientation Waves of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) in 1989, 1997, and 2005. The importance given to these dimensions of course would vary from person to person. The survey collects cross-country information on (a) what workers think is important, and (b) what they actually get. The job dimensions consisted of pay, hours of work, future prospects, hard work including working in dangerous conditions, job content, and interpersonal relationships with management and co-workers. Clark and Postel-Vinay (2009) reports that the findings of ISSP survey on the values given by workers to these job dimensions have neither changed much over the years nor any significant gender differences are found in their responses. Job security and an interesting job obtained highest ranking, followed by autonomy, and high income. Other dimensions followed next.

Several positive and negative consequences of good and bad quality jobs have been reported. Good quality jobs were found to be correlated with job satisfaction, commitment and individual wellbeing (Clark & Postel-Vinay, 2009; Gallie & White, 1993; Loughlin & Murray, 2013). Labour productivity in sectors with high quality jobs ranges from 110 percent to 130 percent whereas productivity in sectors with low quality jobs ranges from 85 percent to 55 percent (Siebern-Thomas, 2005).

Low quality job results were found to be associated with several negative consequences. In a study conducted in Australia it was found that low quality jobs leads to worse mental health outcomes than those with no jobs at all (Butterworth et al, 2011). Individuals in low quality jobs are twice more likely to withdraw from labour market than those in high quality jobs (Siebern-Thomas, 2005).

Which job quality best predict employee’s turnover has not be adequately investigated. However, the British Households Panel Survey (Clark & Postel-Vinay, 2009) provided some indication. According to this survey, job security was the strongest predictor
followed by pay, use of initiative, the nature of work, hours of work, relations with others, and promotion opportunities in that order. These findings have policy implications for organisations. Improving any job dimensions need cost benefit analysis. If they could find out the dimensions that matter most for employees and the same time is least costly then it could be mutually rewarding both to the employees and the organisation.

Affective Commitment

Employees who are affectively committed to their workplace would remain with their organisations because they wilfully want to do so (Allen & Meyer, 1996; Gill, Meyer, Lee, Shin, & Yoon, 2011; Karim & Noor, 2006; Meyer et al., 2012). An individual who believes to be attached with the organisation for its own sake without considering the instrumental worth as such is considered to be affectively committed (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979). In other words when an employee’s goals and objectives are aligned with that of organisation, the phenomenon is known as affective organisational commitment (Rhoades, Eisenberger, & Armeli, 2001). Herrbach (2006) argues that affective commitment is not limited to employees’ alignment of goals but also involves his feelings and emotions including his/her interests, attitudes and intense regard for organisation. Therefore, the factors that motivate employees to be intrinsically involved in an organisation, will contribute to the development of affective commitment (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001). Meyer et al. (2012) also regarded affective commitment a combination of factors that help individuals to recognize the value of associating with organisation and to derive their identity from this association.

While affective commitment comes from the value congruence between the individual and the organisation, some work related features may facilitate this relationship. In discussing about the antecedents of affective commitment, Meyer and Allen (1991) mentioned that work experience is among the four categories of affective commitment antecedents. Meyer and Allen considered work experience as referring to both subjective and objective characteristics of jobs. They also asserted that work experience variables (in this sense) can be roughly categorized into (1) comfort-related and (2) competence-related. While the former category refers to variables that could psychologically and physically satisfy employees’ need to be comfortable in their organizations, the latter category refers to variables that could help them feel competent in their jobs. The variables in the comfort category include organizational support, role clarity and supervisor’s consideration while variables in the competence category include autonomy, opportunities for advancement and fair performance-based rewards.

Intention to Migrate

The world has seen drastic changes mostly in recent times where a large number of human population has moved from one place to another for several reasons – a phenomenon we generally name as migration (Plane, 1992). Human migration has been a subject for centuries as it premises from various factors including human wants and needs, resource availability, environmental and political reasons etc. (Jabbour & Santos, 2008). Though several authors have defined differently (keeping in view their contextual differences), there is no conclusive definition of migration as it varies from one context to the other. Several factors have been discussed in the literature which influences individual decision making to migrate. These factors include job and educational scope, search for better income, quest for better standard of living and social benefits, acquisition of public good etc. (Stark, 2003). As a construct intention is likely to translate into actual behaviour hence it can be considered as the most
proximal variable to understanding actual migration. Large number of studies on intention to turnover supports such an assumption (Meyer et al. 2002).

Another type of migration is talent migration which at the national level is a negative outcome as it reduces the supply of human capital both in quantity as well as quality. Talent migration results into the best and the brightest typically leave first. Quite reasonably, Malaysian firms have been raising the quality of skill base as their top concern (The World Bank, 2011). The overall phenomenon of employees’ migration results in brain drain – an issue that is not limited to Malaysia but should be addressed earliest. The country needs to turn the table in its favour by identifying the causes and finding solutions. Several push and pull factors work together. According to the World Bank report, the key factor that motivates Malaysians to move abroad include differences in earning potentials, career prospects, quality of education, and quality of life. Discontent with Malaysia’s inclusiveness policies is another prime reason given by non-bumiputeras (not son of soil) who make up the bulk of this group (The World Bank, 2011).

In an organisational context, quality of job, work conditions, legal environment and commitment towards work also influence employees’ intention to migrate (Al Ariss, 2010; Syed, 2008). Though the intention to migrate for pecuniary aspects may have a significant role, the quality of job can be another notable reason for employees to migrate. Some other attractions could be working for the employer of choice, working in a place that values diversity, an opportunity to grow and learn from talented peer group, and opportunity to collaborate and experiment with new ideas with talented people.

Since the study aimed to determine employees’ intention to migrate, their level of affective commitment and job quality can serve as important determinants in pursuit of the research objective(s). Employees’ level of affective commitment is discussed to be negatively related with their intention to migrate. That is to say, employees with higher level of affective commitment tend to have lesser intent to migrate (Bonney, McCleery, & Forster, 1999; Fornes, Rocco, & Wollard, 2008). Similarly, Studies suggest that job quality has also an inverse relationship with employees’ intention to migrate (Yankow, 2003). Better quality of job ultimately reduces employees’ intention to leave and to migrate in search of better employment opportunities (Sarvimäki & Hämeläinen, 2016). Based on above literature review of job quality, affective commitment and intention to migrate, four hypotheses were proposed for the study;

H1: Job quality is positively related to employees’ affective commitment.
H2: Affective commitment is negatively related to intention to migrate.
H3: Job quality is negatively related to intention to migrate.
H4: Affective commitment mediates the relationship between job quality and intention to migrate.

Methods

Sample

A sample of 243 employees working on Information and Communication related jobs participated in the study. They were selected on the basis of the following criteria (a) the employee provided ICT related services and (b) has at least a diploma in ICT related subjects at the tertiary level. Using a purposive and convenient sampling method they were selected from a variety of organisations located around Kuala Lumpur.
Measurements

The data was collected with the help of following instruments.

Job Quality (JQ). The job quality scale consisted of 70 items that was adapted from the previous work of van Dun et al. (2012). The scale consisted of five dimensions, namely, (1) Pay & Autonomy (PA), (2) Appreciation & Advancement (AA), (3) Communication & Superior’s Feedback (CSF), (4) Teamwork & Empowerment (TE), and (5) Working Conditions (WC). Sample items were: (1) I receive sufficient pay (2) I have enough autonomy in my work (3) I have sufficient growth opportunities with my company (4) My company is honest towards its employees (5) There is teamwork within my department (6) I have to do task without having the authority to do so (7) I feel secure with my employment in this company. The scale yielded a composite reliability score of .90.

Intention to Migrate (ITM). A 3-item scale consisting of two items from Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1979) turnover intention scale and one additional item (I am considering to migrate to another country for a better job prospect) was used to measure this construct. Respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they feel like leaving their organization and intend to migrate to another country. The scale obtained Alpha reliability value of .91.

Affective Commitment (AC). Affective commitment was measured in terms of how attached an employee was to his/her organisation. This construct was measured using a scale developed by (Ganesan & Weitz, 1996). Example of item included: I always think of quitting my current job. The Alpha reliability value for this scale was .93. Responses on the above instruments were obtained on 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

Results

Respondents’ demographic background

The sample had a good representation in terms of gender, age, educational qualification, job position, and work experience. Respondents belonged to a variety of organisations that consisted of Manufacturing, IT consultancy, Business Processing Outsourcing, Telecommunication and other services. A total of 58% percent of respondents were males, 46% belonged to the 20-30 age group, 37.4% percent belonged to 31-40 age group, and only 14% and 3% respectively were between 41-50, and above 50 age groups. In terms of education nearly 60% were graduate degree holders, and another 15% had a Master degree. In terms of job position the largest number (53.5%) were executives/professionals, 17.3% were senior executives, and the rest belonged to further higher job levels, namely, manager, senior managers, and the top management. In terms of work experience almost half of the respondents had 2-5 years of experience, while nearly 17% had less than one year of experience. Rest were having more than 6 years of experience. The respondents belonged to several industries. Larger number came from IT consultancy (28.4%), Telecommunication (21.4%), Business Processing Outsourcing (12.3%), and others such as education (26.3%).

Model testing using structural equation modelling (SEM)
After conducting data screening and descriptive statistic, the analysis was sequenced in a way to examine individual latent constructs with a subsequent holistic view of multiple variables at one point of time. For this structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to test individual and combined relationships between the variables (Byrne, 2001). Similarly before hypotheses testing, first order CFA was conducted for two variables i.e. affective commitment (mediating variable) and intention to migrate (dependent variable) whereas both first order and second order analyses were conducted for multidimensional variable i.e. job quality (independent variable). It provides a strong baseline approach to test various hypotheses with utmost validity and reliability. Later, through measurement and structural models, mediation was tested as well.

**CFA for Job Quality (First and Second Order)**

Five different dimensions of Job Quality were tested in which strongest covariance was found between communication and teamwork whereas the dimensions like work conditions and teamwork were most weakly co-varied. The model fitness values (CFI = 0.907, RMSEA = 0.064 and Normed Chi-square = 1.993) were in order. Similarly, second order CFA was performed. All dimensions were significantly related to the latent construct of Job Quality, except one namely, teamwork and empowerment. However, the overall model fitness was achieved with CFI = 0.904, RMSEA = 0.065 and normed chi-square = 2.019 – all satisfying the minimum requirement of goodness of fit.

**Measurement and Structural Models**

Figure 1 displays measurement model with all three variables; job quality, affective commitment and intention to migrate. The covariance values between the three constructs reflect significant relationships. The covariance between Job_Qual (job quality) and AC (affective commitment) was 0.85, between AC and MIG (intention to migrate) was -0.49 and between MIG and Job_Qual was -0.37. Furthermore, it indicated that job quality and affective commitment were positively related whereas affective commitment was negatively related with intention to migrate. Similarly, intention to migrate was found negatively related with job quality. The model fitness was also achieved as values for CFI, RMSEA and normed chi-square were 0.900, 0.065 and 2.017 respectively, satisfying the threshold criteria. To measure significance of the relationship and hypothesis testing, structural model was evaluated.
Figure 1: Measurement Model

Figure 2 displays structural model Table 1 highlights the estimates of three different paths. The result indicated that two paths (AC ← Job_Qual, MIG ← AC) were significant whereas one path (MIG ← Job_Qual) was insignificant. Each path was later tested individually. In the structural model, the strongest relationship was found between job quality and affective commitment (.85). An opposite but significant relationship was found between affective commitment and intention to migrate with path coefficient value of -.64. However, the relationship between job quality and intention to migrate was insignificant (p>-.05). According to several researchers, one of the criteria of a significant relationship is to examine the value of critical ratio (C.R) (Kline, 2011). A significant relationship should have a critical ratio above 1.96 which was not obtained between MIG ← Job_Qual.

Figure 2: Structural Model
Table 1

Estimates for Structural Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Estimate</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>C.R.</th>
<th>P</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC ← Job_Qual</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>9.21</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIG ← Job_Qual</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>1.18</td>
<td>0.237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIG ← AC</td>
<td>-0.87</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>-4.32</td>
<td>***</td>
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Individual Hypothesis Testing

**H1:** Job quality is positively related to employees’ affective commitment. It was evident from the structural model (Figure 2), that the standardized estimate for AC ← Job_Qual path was 0.85 (p<.000). However to confirm the findings, this path was examined separately as well which confirmed this significant positive relationship as the CR values 9.21 was well above the threshold value of 1.96. Hence the hypothesis was supported.

**H2:** Affective commitment is negatively related to intention to migrate. The path coefficient of AC → MIG was -0.64 in the structural model which confirmed a significant negative relationship between the two variables (p < .001). Also, the individual testing yielded the path coefficient of -0.49 (p<.001).

From above hypothesis testing, where all measures of goodness of fit are achieved, it is evident that if employees are committed to their organisation, the intention to migrate elsewhere is significantly reduced.

**H3:** Job quality is negatively related to intention to migrate. As noted before, the relationship of job quality and intention to migrate was found insignificant in the structural model. Therefore, an individual test was required. This yielded a significant negative relationship (Estimate -0.68, S.E .13 = C.R -5.01, p<.00). The result confirmed a significant negative relationship between job quality and intention to migrate. The fit indices both in overall path analysis and individual hypothesis testing met the minimum threshold criteria – lending support to the hypothesis.

Mediation Test

**H4:** Affective commitment mediates the relationship between Job quality and intention to migrate. The hypothesis testing discussed so far reflected single path analyses where cause and effect relationships were observed. However to test mediation, multi path analysis was required. As shown in the structural model (Figure 2) the direct path between job quality and intention to migrate was 0.18 whereas the path coefficients of indirect paths (Job_Qual → AC and AC → MIG) were significant with values 0.85 and -0.64 respectively. Table 2 displays mediation results for both direct and indirect paths whereas Table 3 highlights indirect paths only. The results shown in Table 2 depict the structural path between job quality and migration being mediated by affective commitment. The standardized regression weight of the indirect path between job quality and affective commitment was 0.85 whereas the relationship between affective commitment and migration indicated standardized regression weight of -0.64.
Table 2

Mediation Estimates

<table>
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<th>S.E.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC ← Job_Qual</td>
<td>1.063</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>9.208</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIG ← Job_Qual</td>
<td>0.297</td>
<td>0.252</td>
<td>1.182</td>
<td>0.237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIG ← AC</td>
<td>-0.876</td>
<td>0.203</td>
<td>-4.327</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, the standardized regression weight of the direct path between job quality and migration was 0.18 which is insignificant – that reflects full mediation. Another approach to confirm existence of mediation is to multiply the two indirect path coefficients. The result comes out to be 0.544 (0.85 × -0.64) which is greater than 0.08, that indicates mediation exists (Hair, Anderson, Babin, & Black, 2010). Figure 3 represents indirect path analysis to confirm mediating effect of affective commitment between job quality and intention to migrate.

![Figure 3: Mediation – Indirect paths only](image)

Table 3

Mediation Estimates without direct path

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Estimate</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>C.R.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AC ← Job_Qual</td>
<td>1.061</td>
<td>0.115</td>
<td>9.190</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIG ← AC</td>
<td>-0.663</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>-7.438</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The estimates for indirect paths (excluding direct path from analysis) are given in Table 3. The standardized coefficients of both indirect paths are significant at p < 0.001. In order to confirm whether it is a full or partial mediation, structural model need to be referred back (Figure 2). The direct path as shown in structural model confirms that the relationship between job quality and migration is insignificant when all paths are taken together – though it becomes significant when tested individually. Since direct path is not significant and indirect paths are significant as well as multiplication of their regression coefficients is greater than 0.08, full mediation is confirmed.
Discussion and Conclusion

The study attempted to examine the issue of job quality as perceived by information & communication technology employees in Malaysia and how job quality was associated with their intention to migrate. It also tested the mediating role of affective commitment in the relationship between job quality and intention to migrate. It was hypothesised that job quality and affective commitment have inverse relationship with intention to migrate and affective commitment mediates the relationship between job quality and the intention to migrate.

The results were in the expected direction. Better quality of job facilitates employees’ retention not only within the organisation (Hassan, Juhdi, & Mustafa, 2017) but also reduces the intention to migrate to other countries. The findings are in line with studies showing negative relationship between job quality and intent to migrate (Yankow, 2003). The measure of job quality included employees’ perception of adequacy of pay and fringe benefits, equity in reward distribution, autonomy and discretion in work, appreciation and advancement, communication and feedback, teamwork and empowerment, job security, meaningfulness of work, and good working conditions.

The result also indicated a positive contribution of job quality on employees’ affective commitment and a negative relationship between affective commitment and intention to migrate. Additionally, affective commitment mediated the negative relationship between job quality and intention to migrate. The finding is similar to the one established in the context of affective commitment and turnover intention relationship. For instance Meyer et al (2002) reported, on the basis of meta-analysis of studies examining the relationship of the three forms of organisational commitments with the turnover intention, that it is affective commitment which is the best predictor of intention to stay with the organisation.

All this evidence suggest that it is now time to look at the issue of talent migration (including those of ICT workers) from job quality perspective. Good quality jobs not only contribute to employees’ affective commitment, it significantly reduces the problem of talent migration. More research in this area is needed to test this model on diverse groups of professionals such as scientists, engineers, accountants, medical professionals etc.

The findings have implications for human resource management in the context of increasing globalisation and challenges associated with organisational sustainability. In a forceful argument for sustainable organisation, Jabbour and Santos (2008) maintains that organisations need to maintain as well as reproduce capabilities. Organisations should not only think of profitability. They need to think of talent shortages, unfavourable demographic dynamics of workforce, and increasing awareness of employee-welfare.

More specifically, in the context of ICT industry in Malaysia it is imperative that management should work on developing quality in jobs that promote employee commitment and ensure their stay with the company. Moreover, the findings from this study can be used to develop relevant guidelines to monitor and improve the quality of jobs in the ICT industry in Malaysia for the benefits of every stakeholder involved.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

There were few limitations to this study. First, the study employed a cross sectional design thus limiting the causal explanation between job quality, affective commitment, and
the intention to migrate. Second, the study should have used multiple sources of data. For instance, the measure of job quality should have included objective data such as pay and benefits, work hours etc. to reflect the prevalent standard. Finally, the measure of intention to migrate needs further refinements. Future studies should take into account these limitations.

Study of job quality in various sectors of Malaysian economy is urgently needed in order better understand the characteristics of good and bad jobs and their consequences on individuals, organisation, and the society.

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