

The Role of Job Crafting in Mediating the Effect of Servant Leadership and Employee Engagement: An Empirical Study of the Service Sector in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, there has been relatively little empirical study on servant leadership, particularly in relation to job engagement and job crafting. Research has found that leadership has a significant impact on employee engagement, which in turn influences organizational performance. In order to better understand how servant leadership affects employee engagement, this study looks at how job crafting, as mediating factor, influences the former two variables in the Malaysian service industry. An online survey was used in this study to purposively sample 154 employees of the service industry in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Servant Leadership Measures (SL-7), Work Crafting Questionnaire (JCQ), and Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) are the respective instruments utilized in this study to assess servant leadership, job crafting, and employee engagement. The data was analyzed using the partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) method, and the findings demonstrated that servant leadership and job crafting significantly increase employee engagement in the service industry. A partial mediation analysis of the link between servant leadership and employee engagement showed that job crafting mediates this association positively. The results indicate that servant leadership is a successful leadership style that raises employee job engagement and nurtures their enthusiasm for work through job crafting. The study's findings are significant in that they give practitioners and organizations insight into the need for the servant leadership idea in various circumstances. This is due to its capacity to promote organizational and employee growth. In addition to fostering great team

dynamics, servant leadership has the power to completely reshape cultures and organization.

Keywords: Servant Leadership, Job Engagement, Job Crafting

INTRODUCTION

The concept of employee engagement is "the harnessing of organizational members' self to the work responsibilities," where engaged employees would use and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally in carrying out their roles [1]. This idea of employee engagement was then further supported by Schaufeli [2,3] and his associates who agreed to define engagement as a consistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfillment in employees that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Since evidence suggests that engaged employees exhibit positive work outcomes, such as high retention, increased profitability, improved productivity, enhanced sales, and better customer service [4], organizational behavior scholars and practitioners continue to conduct research to better understand the antecedents and predictors of employee engagement [5–8]. Employees with dynamic engagement are more likely to give their all at work [9,10], which improves their output and performance [11,12] as well as their dedication and satisfaction [13]. On the other hand, disengaged workers can disrupt the work process and diminish the work outcomes of the engaged workers [14], thus truncating the organization performance. Among the studied predictors of employee engagement are task characteristics, transformational leadership, perceived meaningfulness in work [15], job satisfaction [16]; trust in leadership, work satisfaction [8], shared values [10], perception of social context and self-efficacy [17]. Service industry is a customer-focused industry that interaction with clients. Service industry such as hotel industry staff are given the authority and responsibility of making decisions to meet client needs and increase customer satisfaction [71]. In line with the claims made by Amah [18] and Mozammel and Haan [19], this study will further examine the part that servant leadership and job crafting play in illuminating workers' levels of job engagement in service sector.

Organizational effectiveness greatly relies on the performance of employees. Meanwhile, leadership strategy is thought to influence employees' productivity and the fulfillment of the organization's goals and objectives. Effective leadership style is essential to engage employees towards organizational effectiveness. As a result, leadership has been highlighted as a key factor affecting employees' performance and the success of the company. Leadership, according to Hartzler-Weakley [20], is the process of persuading and working with others to accomplish corporate goals. Additionally, the work experience and dedication of employees have a big impact on how well leadership styles—like transformational, transactional, and authentic leadership—affect the organization. However, effective leadership depends on employee involvement to boost an organization's performance [21]. Due to its enormous influence on the level of employees' job engagement in an organization, which may boost performance and market share of the company, leadership is essential in establishing and maintaining an engagement culture.

A servant leader "begins with the natural emotion that one wants to serve, to serve first, then to lead," according to the definition of the leadership style [22]. Instead of focusing on the methods and outcomes, servant leaders placed a higher priority on developing deep, long-lasting bonds with their followers. This encouraged employees to have a positive outlook on

their work [23,24]. In addition to being able to lead their followers, servant leaders are compassionate and supportive of their staff members on an emotional level. They also offer workers support and employment resources [24,25]. With the prioritization of employees as the main goal, servant leadership is compatible with job crafting. Servant leaders are expected to support their employees in adjusting and redesigning their job tasks, thereby increasing employees' job engagement [24]. Strong engagement induces employees' job satisfaction, reduces employee turnover and improves organizational outcomes, such as profitability and organizational performance [26,27]. In hospitality literature, servant leadership is given significant consideration [79]. This is due to the fact that servant-leaders can nurture a positive work environment and stimulate positive emotions and psychological resources at the workplace. Job crafting takes place when workers are driven to adjust their work roles to fulfil specific personal needs including coping at work, gaining more control in their work, and upholding a positive self-image [28]. It creates a positive work experience and promotes employee engagement. Leaders who empower and trust their followers are more likely to promote job crafting [28]. The focus on the growth of the employee makes servant leadership compatible with job crafting. It highlights the link between the leader and the team by urging team members to develop new abilities for improved self-management [24]. With respect to service sector, the level of work engagement and various job crafting attitudes displayed by service employees in a retail banking service setting have been found to have a significant impact on both customer satisfaction and loyalty [74]. In particular, the attitudes of service employees towards job crafting involve enhancing structural job resources while reducing their workload [74]. The development of job requirements and management of job resources affect the working environment for employees [13,29]. Workplace pressures and obligations, such as a heavy workload, can lead to burnout among employees [24]. Job crafting encourages job engagement, as it promotes workers' involvement in job redesign [30], whereby employees initiate and adjust their work tasks or work boundaries according to their capabilities, beliefs and intentions, and interest [29,31].

Employee engagement is important in the service industry, particularly in promoting in-service delivery, whereby employees are expected to communicate well and build a relationship with customers. This interaction contributes significantly to the realization of customers' satisfaction [32]. Buchman et al. [33] claimed that employees' engagement is important to ensure a positive customer's experience towards better restaurants' image and customers' loyalty. This emphasizes the crucial part that leaders play in fostering a high level of employee engagement. Presbitero [72] discovered that employee job engagement is considered as a significant tool, especially for the service industry, because employment aspects like HRM practises influence employee engagement. Kang and Sung [73] examined South Korean service sector employees and concluded that the internal communication process was the main predictor of employee engagement, which led to higher performance. Corresponding to the above-mentioned factors, this study examines the impact of servant leadership on workplace engagement as well as the mediating function of job crafting in the Malaysian service industry. In Malaysia, there has been relatively little empirical research on servant leadership, particularly in regard to job engagement and job crafting. Examining the function of servant leadership is necessary, according to Liden et al. [34]. The concept of servant leadership is important because it promotes both individual and organizational development, which has the power to completely alter cultures and businesses and generate a healthy team dynamic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers frequently utilize the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model to forecast engagement. The JD-R paradigm has two key components: job demands and job resources [35]. Job resources are features of a job that help employees achieve their goals, lower work expectations, and foster employees' growth and advancement [35]. More employee involvement will arise from the availability of employment resources [36,37]. On the other hand, job demands refer to work qualities such as high workload and uncertain positions that require continuous physical, mental, and psychological efforts [37]. Leadership, autonomy, coworker support, and job content all contribute to a better degree of engagement and are considered to be job resources [37,38]. It's important for job resources to have leadership and job crafting skills [39] since they could boost workers' work engagement [40].

According to self-determination theory, the three fundamental human needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness must be met [41]. Through satisfaction, these basic needs would increase workers' motivation and engagement [38]. Autonomy occurs if individuals can control their actions, decisions and thoughts; competence refers to an accomplishment feeling resulting from the application of ones' skills; and relatedness is the ability to interact and connect with others [41]. Job crafting, a type of work behavior where employees can change and vary their intended work scope, might satiate these requirements by giving them control over their work in a way that may afterwards boost their self-efficacy [42]. Job crafting requires support and empowerment, which corresponds with the attributes of servant leadership [42,43].

Servant Leadership and Job Crafting

Servant leadership emphasizes the importance of respecting others, listening, and training subordinates [44]. According to Liden et al. [34], servant leadership is centered on developing long-term relationships with employees and maintaining personal integrity. Servant leadership is a crucial leadership style to teach positive behavior into employees, such as job crafting, as it is a people-oriented strategy that encourages compassion [23]. Self-determination theory Ryan and Deci [41] holds that servant leaders provide a supportive environment for followers to boldly redesign their career [24].

Due to its focus on the empowerment and development of its followers, servant leadership facilitates the job crafting [12,43]. According to Bavik et al. [45], servant leadership enables employees to improve their job resources and change their intentions. Giving employees more freedom to craft their own jobs could increase their competence [46]. As per Harju et al. [43], servant leadership helps with job crafting. With that, employees can make adjustments and take on increasingly difficult responsibilities as they see fit. Yang et al. [24] discovered that servant leadership has a strong beneficial impact on job crafting (among – who are the respondents, industry, country note: should be from different industry/country). Therefore, the study proposed the following hypothesis:

- H1: Greater perceived servant leadership has a positive influence on employees' job crafting behavior.

Servant Leadership and Work Engagement

Servant leaders foster interpersonal relationships with their staff members and assist them in achieving their needs and goals [10,47]. Employees are more likely to value their leaders and remain highly inspired and motivated when these wants and goals are met. As a result, the

employees will demonstrate a greater level of interest, improved working relationships, and commitment. According to Sharma [48], there is a strong correlation between servant leadership and employee engagement as well as other favorable work outcomes including job satisfaction and organizational accountability. Servant leadership, according to her, boosts workers' levels of job engagement and enhances overall organizational performance. In New Zealand, employee engagement at work is positively impacted by servant leadership, as per research by Haar et al. [49]. Additionally, servant leadership was seen to have a favorable impact on company culture and raise employee engagement levels through staff empowerment [50]. This was accomplished through both the servant leaders' actions and displays of humility [51]. Based on the aforesaid empirical evidence, this study postulated that:

- H2: There will be a significant positive relationship between servant leadership and employees' work engagement.

Job Crafting and Work Engagement

The favorable impact of job crafting on employees' work behavior, including work intervention intensity, involvement, employee well-being, etc., has been supported by prior studies [52–54]. Employees' level of work engagement will increase if they are given the freedom to craft their job demands and employment resources in accordance with their preferences and needs [36]. Bhargkavi [53] shown that job crafting has a favorable impact on the level of work engagement among teachers, increasing structural job resources and reducing burdensome job demands.

The negative consequences of job demand, such as burnout, were found to be reduced by job crafting, which also increased work engagement [52,55]. Job crafting is especially advantageous for service employees since it raises their level of work engagement and boosts customer satisfaction and loyalty [56]. Therefore, the study formed the following hypothesis:

- H3: Job crafting has a positive effect on employees' work engagement.

Servant Leadership, Job Crafting and Work Engagement

Positive relationships, empowerment and support, and job satisfaction are three crucial aspects that affect how engaged individuals are at work [40]. These factors all support the use of servant leadership and job crafting. Due to their moral, hospitable, and empowering nature, servant leaders have a favorable impact on their colleagues' job engagement [12,51]. Through person-job fit in job crafting [36,57], employees become motivated and believe their work is more important [42,43,53].

Job crafting, according to Yang et al. [24], mediates the association between servant leadership and job engagement. They contended that the notion of giving employees priority and the desire to serve allowed them to assume more responsibility and change the nature and scope of their work. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

- H4: Job crafting meditates the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a non-probability convenience sampling method and focused on respondents who worked full-time in the service sector in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. There were 154 responses to an online poll that was conducted to gather data. Cohen [58] advised that the minimal sample size for social and behavioral science research be 107. This number

was obtained using G*Power 3.1 [59], and it is based on the power of 0.85 and an effect size of 0.15. The sample size used in the study is appropriate given the 154 data responses collected. The measurement scales that were utilized in the study to measure the variables were taken from previous research. The servant leadership measurement (SL-7) scale, which was adapted from Liden et al. [60], consists of seven questions that address seven different aspects of servant leadership, including emotional healing, generating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowerment, assisting followers in growing and succeeding, ethical behavior, and placing followers' needs and interests first [61,62]. When it comes to servant leadership at work, SL-7 can help assess how employees feel about their supervisors [62]. This study also used Slep and Vella-Job Brodrick's [63] Crafting Questionnaire (JCQ) to gauge job crafting among the participants. Task crafting, cognitive crafting, and relational crafting are the three characteristics of work crafting that are measured by the 15-item questionnaire. Besides, this study used the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) [64] to gauge employee engagement levels among participants. The UWES-9 consists of nine closed-ended questions that concentrate on the vigor, devotion, and absorption elements of involvement. A 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) was used to rate each measurement item.

The Web-Power statistical power analysis was used to examine the data's multivariate normality. The p-value of Mardia's multivariate skewness and kurtosis coefficient was less than the threshold of 0.05, indicating that multivariate non-normality is the nature of the data obtained for this study. PLS-SEM with SmartPLS version 3.2.8 was used to analyze the hypotheses [65]. PLS-SEM is a multivariate statistical technique that evaluates the measurement (validity and reliability) and structural models (the relationship among variables).

DATA ANALYSIS

The respondents' demographic, comprising employees of the service sector in Klang Valley, Malaysia, is shown in Table 1. Of the 154 respondents in this sample, majority (73.4%) were female (73.4%), while 26% were male. Almost half (48.1%) of the respondents were youth with age range from 26 to 35 years old, while more than half (54.5%) of the respondents obtained a bachelor's degree. Almost one-third (31.8%) of the respondents had 1-3 years of working experience, followed by 20.1% of the respondents who had work for more than 15 years.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	41	26.6
Female	113	73.4
Age		
16–25 years old	32	20.8
26–35 years old	74	48.1
36–45 years old	26	16.9
46–55 years old	9	5.8
Above 55 years old	13	8.4
Ethnicity		
Malay	134	87.0
Chinese	10	6.5

Indian	7	4.5
Others	3	1.9
Education level		
SPM	16	10.4
Diploma	41	26.6
Bachelor Degree	84	54.5
Master Degree	13	8.4
Working experience		
1–3 years	49	31.8
4–6 years	27	17.5
7–9 years	18	11.7
10–12 years	17	11.0
13–15 years	13	7.8
More than 15 years	31	20.1

With SEM-PLS analysis, firstly the measurement model of internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminant validity were accessed. Internal consistency is measured to determine whether the results obtained are consistent across items of the same variables [66]. The outcomes of the measurement of the internal consistency, composite reliability (CR) is shown in Table 2. The items' factor loading and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were both higher than the benchmark of 0.5, and the CR was also greater than the threshold (0.7) as suggested by Hair et al. [66]. This indicating that the convergent validity of the constructs is satisfactory. However, nine items (JC2, JC3, JC4, JC5, JC13, JC14, JC15, WE9 and SL1) were removed due to low outer loading.

Table 2. Convergent Validity

Construct	Item	Factor Loadings	CR	AVE
Work Engagement (WE)	WE1	0.800	0.917	0.580
	WE2	0.759		
	WE3	0.861		
	WE4	0.44		
	WE5	0.760		
	WE6	0.744		
	WE7	0.704		
	WE8	0.709		
Job Crafting (JC)	JC1	0.710	0.899	0.528
	JC6	0.634		
	JC7	0.805		
	JC8	0.733		
	JC9	0.791		
	JC10	0.758		
	JC11	0.724		
	JC12	0.635		
Servant Leadership (SL)	SL2	0.859	0.899	0.600
	SL3	0.624		
	SL4	0.770		
	SL5	0.836		
	SL6	0.841		
	SL7	0.690		

The Heterotrait-Monotrait ratio (HTMT) criterion was used to establish the discriminant validity of the data (see Table 3). The HTMT values met the threshold of <0.85 recommended by Hair et al.'s [67]. This suggests the absence of correlation within the constructs and between the constructs, thus the discriminant validity of the model is confirmed.

Table 3. Discriminant Validity (HTMT Criterion)

	Work Engagement	Job Crafting	Servant Leadership
Work Engagement			
Job Crafting	0.784		
Servant Leadership	0.622	0.557	

Structural Model

In the structural model, path coefficients determine the significance and relevance of the relationships, R^2 indicates the predictive accuracy of the model, Q^2 denotes the predictive relevance of the model and f^2 determines the significance of exogenous variable towards endogenous variable [66]. Before the structural model analysis, the presence of multicollinearity was examined. The VIF values of the constructs range from 1.565 to 3.612, which were below 5. This indicates the inexistence of multicollinearity between the constructs in the research model.

Table 4. Structural Model (Hypothesis Testing on Direct Effect)

Hypothesis	Std Beta	Std error	t-value	p-value	BCI LL	BCI UL	Decision	f^2
H ₁ : SL → WE	0.269	0.063	4.301	0.000	0.177	0.380	Supported	0.130
H ₂ : SL → JC	0.509	0.065	7.885	0.000	0.378	0.605	Supported	0.396
H ₃ : JC → WE	0.566	0.058	9.735	0.000	0.458	0.640	Supported	0.557

Bootstrapping was conducted to determine the significance of the path coefficient statistics. Using 5000 subsamples, the bootstrap analysis (one-tailed) measures the beta coefficients, t-values, p-values and bootstrapped confidence interval, thus facilitating the testing of hypotheses and the direct effect of the relationships [66].

Table 4 shows the relationship existent in the proposed hypotheses in the study. Servant leadership (SL) was found to be significantly positive influence on work engagement (WE) (H₁: SL → WE, $\beta = 0.269$, $t = 4.301$, and $p\text{-value} < 0.01$), thus validating H₁. Also, the H₂ of a significant positive effect of servant leadership (SL) on job crafting (JC) was confirmed (H₂: SL → JC, $\beta = 0.509$, $t = 7.885$, and $p\text{-value} < 0.01$). Lastly, job crafting has a significant positive effect on employees' work engagement (H₃: JC → WE, $\beta = 0.566$, $t = 9.735$ and $p\text{-value} < 0.01$), thus corroborating H₃.

The effect size as measured by the R^2 value can be affected by the elimination of specified predictors [67]. According to Cohen [58], f^2 values of 0.35, 0.15, and 0.02, respectively, denote high, medium, and small effect sizes. As shown in Table 4, the effect size (f^2) values for H₁, H₂ and H₃ are 0.130, 0.396 and 0.557, respectively. This indicates that servant leadership has a moderate to large effect size on work engagement and job crafting, while job crafting has a large effect on work engagement.

Table 5. Results of R² and Q²

Variable	R ²	Q ²
SL		
JC	0.277	0.123
WE	0.564	0.312

As shown in Table 5, the predictive accuracy of the structural model was identified using the coefficient determination (R²), and it was found to be 0.277 and 0.564 for job crafting and work engagement, respectively. The R² value of 0.277 indicates servant leadership accounted for 27.7% of the variation in job crafting, and the R² value of 0.564 indicates that 56.4% of the variation in work engagement was explained by job crafting and servant leadership. Through the blindfolding procedure, the predictive relevance (Q²) was determined to be 0.123 and 0.312 for job crafting and work engagement, respectively. The Q² values are above 0, indicating that the model has an appropriate predictive relevance [58].

Table 6. Results of Indirect Effect Mediation Analysis

Hypothesis	Std beta	Std error	t-value	p-value	Decision
H ₄ : SL → JC → WE	0.288	0.049	2.893	0.000	Supported

Table 6 shows the results of the mediation analysis of H₄ (the existence of an indirect effect of SL on WE). The result revealed that the significant effect of servant leadership on employee engagement was mediated by job crafting (H₄: SL → JC → WE, $\beta = 0.288$, $t = 2.893$, $p\text{-value} < 0.01$), thus supporting H₄.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study revealed that servant leadership significantly enhances job crafting. This is in line with the finding of past studies [43, 24] that the positive traits servant leaders can help employees craft their jobs in an effective and positive way. The traits of servant leadership, which emphasizes the notion of “serving first” and “employee first,” are compliant with job crafting, and may effectively lead employees to redesign their scope of work [24] and improve the relationship between employees at the workplace [31]. Furthermore, the high value of leader-member relationship may result in a higher degree of job crafting [68].

The study found a significant positive relationship between servant leadership and work engagement as predicted, thus confirming the findings of past studies [12,24,48,49]. This suggests that servant leadership, characterized by true concern for the career development of others through provision of support and guidance, is a crucial factor in determining work engagement [34]. Servant leadership will help to build a favourable work environment and build a cordial relationship between employees, thus preventing disengagement and minimizing turnover intention [69].

Job crafting was found to have a positive effect on employees' work engagement is consistent with our hypothesis and the findings of previous studies [24,53,55,56]. The JD-R model states that job crafting allows employees to craft or tailor their job demands and job resources according to their preferences [53]. As the servant leaders' encouragement for their subordinates' advancement, the subordinates are able to modify their work and create the resources and demands of their jobs as desired. Additionally, giving employees' possession of

autonomy leading to better balance job resources and job demands promotes their job engagement [55].

The study also revealed that the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement was mediated by job crafting, which is in consonance with the findings of past studies [24,45,43] that leadership is important in engaging the employees in work, as it improves the working environment of employees and subsequently their well-being [35]. Servant leaders improves job resources for their subordinates by mentoring and empowering them to craft their job [24,35]. Due to access to basic needs such as better social support and autonomy over work, employees are more likely to be more engaged with their job through job crafting and will also be able to handle work challenges better [35], as posited by the self-determination theory [70].

This study contributes to the limited literature on servant leadership, job crafting and employee engagement, particularly in the context of developing countries including Malaysia. The study showed that servant leadership is an effective type of leadership that increases the engagement level of employees and promotes their job satisfaction through job crafting, thus fostering a better workplace environment that discourages employees' disengagement. Therefore, organizations should adopt servant leadership by emphasizing employees' proactive personality traits. Empowerment of employees enhances organizations' comparative advantages and increases employees' creativity.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Data in this study was collected from a single point in time. The cross-sectional design of the study makes it hard to affirmatively conclude the direction of the causal link. Thus, it is recommended to undertake the longitudinal method for future research. Also, the study has a relatively small ($n= 154$) sample size and only focuses on the service industry; thus, future research can be carried out by focusing on other sectors, such as the public sector and manufacturing sector. Future research may also consider investigating the relationship between servant leadership and job crafting with other job outcomes such as job performance and job satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this research confirms the mediating role of job crafting between servant leadership and engagement among employees of service sector in Malaysia. Furthermore, servant leadership was found to positively and directly affect job crafting and employee engagement, similar to the findings of previous studies. Using PLS-SEM technique, we also verified the hypothesized significant effect of servant leadership on employee engagement and job crafting. The mediation analysis also proved the significant role of job crafting in mediating the influence of servant leadership on employee engagement. The study revealed servant leadership and job crafting have an impact to enhance employee engagement in corporate settings. Hence, the management of organizations should emphasize on the adoption of servant leadership to increase the work engagement of employees and eventually improve their organizational performance and outcomes.

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