Exploring the Perceptions of Malaysian Employers Towards Hiring Ex-Offenders.

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Abstract

There is much support for hiring ex-offenders, but employers are unwilling to hire ex-offenders due to several reasons. In Malaysia, there is a paucity of research exploring employers' perceptions toward hiring ex-offenders. This qualitative study aimed to collect in-depth data from employers on their perception of hiring ex-offenders in Malaysia. In addition, the employers also stated their views on how support can be provided to the ex-offenders. This study was based on interpretivism philosophy, and an inductive approach was considered more appropriate. In this qualitative study, data in words and voice was collected from eight employers by using semi-structured interviews. A thematic analysis was carried out to identify the themes that emerged from the collected data. The first question explored employers' perception of hiring ex-offenders, and the themes that emerged encompass rationale, perceived risk, the severity of crime, skills and knowledge and personal characteristics. The themes showed that hiring decisions are conditional. On the second question concerning the support, the three themes that emerged include fair treatment, mental support, and financial support. The study results provide an understanding to employers and HR managers on the perceptions of hiring ex-offenders into the workplace and providing support.

Keywords: perception, ex-offender, employer, hiring, support

1. Introduction

A large number of prisoners are held in prisons, but the support and job opportunities provided to ex-offenders are considered low. Based on statistics by Walmsley (2018), there were around 10.74 million prisoners worldwide. In December 2021, the number of prisoners worldwide increased to more than 1.5 million. More than 2.1 million prisoners are serving their sentences in the United States alone. China comes in second place with around 1.65 million prisoners, excluding the unknown numbers of other forms of detention that were not disclosed (Statista, 2021). Walmsley (2018) also mentioned that the number of prisoners is growing. The average growth of the world prison population is around 3.7% compared to the national population growth, which stands at 3.0% only. The concern is the problems prisoners face when they are released, and statistics show that the severity of the problem is alarming.

Every year, more than 600,000 people are released from state or federal prisons in the United States. Housing companies occasionally engage them to meet building demand due to an apparent "labour scarcity," particularly in the skilled labour market (Durden, 2017). According to Waldmeir (2018), due to the great need for labour, many ex-offenders have been recruited without application discrimination due to the "ban-the-box" rule, making it easier for these persons to get work. However, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, an estimated 27% of ex-offenders were unemployed in 2017, and some academics believe the number is significantly higher (Couloute and Kopf, 2018). Couloute and Kopf (2018) also stated that the first two years after release have the highest unemployment rate since many ex-offenders have yet to reintegrate into society

According to a report by the Institute for Crime and Justice Policy Research, Birbeck University, the world prison population rate is 140 per 100,000. The median rate for countries in south-eastern Asia is 171. In Malaysia, the number of prisoners was around 69,500, and the prison population rate was 212 per 100,000. The concern is that there is a high growth of prisoners in Malaysia (Fair and Walmsley, 2022). Another research by Mohamad et al. (2017) also revealed that the number of prisoners in Malaysia continued to increase from 2012 to 2016. According to Habibullah et al. (2014), the increase can be attributed to unemployment, which led to a hike in the crime rate.

The government of Malaysia has supported hiring ex-offenders to resolve the issue of labour shortage in several sectors in the country (New Straits Times, 2019). Some companies have started looking at hiring ex-offenders to cope with labour shortages (Chu, 2020). However, this is still a problem because ex-offenders find it difficult to find employment after their release from prison (Gross, 2017). Hisamudin (2020) added that close to 11,000 former convicts have been released and are looking for jobs. Unfortunately, only 120 of these individuals have been employed. They faced multiple challenges in finding a job after serving their sentence (Rukus, Eassey, & Baldwin, 2016). This situation may be due to the stigma they carry or other limitations such as low level of skills, low education and low level of training (Brown, 2011).

Employers are hesitant to hire ex-offenders for a variety of reasons. According to Jung (2015), numerous firms are attempting to avoid the risks of hiring ex-offenders and are taking cautious measures to offset those risks. According to a report by Schmitt and Warner (2010), numerous employers are unwilling to hire ex-offenders, preferring to hire welfare clients instead. According to Goodstein (2019), businesses may not have a valid justification for refusing to hire ex-offenders on the job, but these individuals have been stigmatised by society. One of the most significant impediments to employers hiring ex-offenders has been a lack of trustworthiness (Obatusin and Ritter-Williams, 2019). Brown (2011) further added that employers view the ex-offenders as individuals with flawed or bad characters, and this causes other individuals surrounding the ex-offenders to react negatively towards them.

Past studies on hiring ex-offenders are either too general or based on quantitative methods and analysis. The Malaysian study by Khasni et al. (2021) was a quantitative study based on an application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. This research is a qualitative study that can provide more in-depth and richer data. This qualitative study will provide a flexible approach to gathering meaningful and rich data that can allow more informed decisions. This qualitative study will provide an understanding of the why behind barriers to employment of ex-offenders and how employers can support the government-led initiative to support ex-offenders. Through flexibility and subjective questioning, this qualitative research will enable employers to provide an explanation relating to the rationale behind their behaviours, thus informing authorities and society on how to support ex-offenders. This paper will add to the current body of knowledge, and future academicians can replicate or extend more studies on ex-offenders employment.

This study was focused on answering the following research questions.

Research Question 1: What is the perception of employers towards hiring ex-offenders?

Research Question 2: How can employers provide support to ex-offenders in the workplace?

Literature Review

Hiring ex-offender

The intention to hire ex-offenders can be associated with the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen 1991). According to the Theory of Planned Behaviour, the three predictors of intention are attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. Researchers and scholars have utilised the predictors specified in the Theory of Planned Behaviour to predict the intention of employers to employ ex-offenders. McDonnall & Lund (2020) used the Theory of Planned Behaviour to examine the relationship between the predictors in the theory and the intention to hire ex-offenders. A higher level of attitude is expected to increase the intention toward a behaviour attitude (Ajzen, 1991; Han, Hsu, & Sheu, 2010). Subjective norms that refer to significant others, such as family members, friends and colleagues, motivate a person to be engaged in a particular intention or behaviour. Perceived behavioural control looks at the difficulty or easiness with which a person can experience a particular behaviour (Ajzen, 1991). The perception of a person's level of control over the factors can determine the action the person takes in a particular situation (Han et al., 2010). Therefore,

attitude, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control influence the employer's perception of hiring ex-offenders.

Past studies have examined the perception of hiring ex-offenders and revealed contradictory findings (Chui and Cheng, 2013; Rade et al., 2016). The study by Chui and Cheng (2013) pointed out that ex-convicts are often stereotyped, labelled or discriminated against because the convict has a long-lasting stigma or mark that continues even after being released from prison. According to Link and Phelan (2001), ex-prisoners are significantly affected by these perceptions, which are frequently considered a type of "invisible punishment." According to Rade et al. (2016), ex-offenders are frequently treated differently due to their position as convicted persons. Discrimination against these people takes a more subtle form, such as social distancing. This is especially subtle, according to Wiltshire et al. (2012), when ex-offenders have a history of significant crimes, such as sexual offences.

According to studies, the employer's risk assessment of the offence and the characteristics of ex-offenders determines whether or not these persons will be hired in the workplace (Young and Powell, 2014; Flake, 2015). According to Bainbridge et al. (2008), the employer's assessment of the decision to hire an ex-offender will be influenced by the stigma of the ex-previous offender's offence. Employers are also impacted by the risk of hiring ex-offenders, according to HaslewoodPCSIK et al. (2008). The risk encompasses response from the public. Associated with risk is trust. The study by Obatusin et al. (2019) revealed that the hiring decisions by employers were associated with perception and trust. There is also the potential risk posed to other employees, customers, and the safety of ex-offenders. Employers acknowledge that ex-offenders require support with basic workplace skills, according to Obatusin et al. (2019). On the other hand, employing ex-offenders raises the risk of negative customer perceptions. As a result, the decision to hire ex-offenders and the risk involved will impact the relationship between ex-offender applicants' perceptions and hiring decisions (Young and Powell, 2014).

Researchers have also found other factors that affect employers' perception of the hiring decisions of ex-offenders (Obatusin and Ritter-Williams, 2019; Holzer et al., 2003). Ex-offenders have three main barriers to employment, according to Holzer et al. (2003): a lack of education and cognitive abilities, a lack of work experience, and physical or mental health problems, as well as substance addiction. According to Zakaria et al. (2018), ex-offenders who have been unable to find work may be due to the demand-side, which includes external factors beyond the individual's control, such as employer attitudes, government laws, and the country's economic situation. The study by Obatusin and Ritter-Williams (2019) explored the factors affecting employers' perceptions of hiring ex-offenders. The perceptions have been divided into several categories that encompass perceptions of ex-offenders securing a job, employer's concerns, and employer's experience in hiring ex-offenders. These preconceptions and a lack of employer support for hiring ex-offenders can make it difficult for ex-offenders to find work after their release. This includes a lack of prior work experience as well as the technical capabilities required. This will make it much more difficult to find work, as most businesses will expect ex-offenders to submit details about their previous convictions (Tewksbury and Lees, 2006). The individuals

will be labelled as "ex-prisoners" in the eyes of the employer and society as a result of their exposure to information. Ex-offenders will find it more difficult to find work as a result of this stigma.

Furthermore, a study by Schnepel (2017) revealed that most employers in the United States would prefer to hire applicants with lower skills and are unwilling to accept any potential employee with a criminal record. Similarly, Schmitt and Warner (2010) stated that employers would rather employ welfare recipients instead of ex-offenders. However, some employers are forced to hire these ex-offenders as opposed to their will. This action can be due to the shortage of human resources, especially during a crisis (Straits Times, 2020). Compliance with legislation is another reason why employers will hire ex-offenders. In the United States of America, a law called the Second Chance Act aims to help ex-offenders reintegrate into society by providing financial assistance to them and their families (US Department of Justice, 2018). Despite the presence of a higher level of education and government incentives, employers are hesitant to hire ex-offenders, according to Albright and Denq (1996). If the crime committed is classified as significant, the employer's desire to hire will be harmed once the criminal record has been revealed. According to Piquero and Hirschfield (2010), the majority of the labelling received by these ex-offenders causes them to have a higher probability of relapsing into undesirable behaviour. The negative stigma will cause severe psychological stress on these individuals to have the will to rebuild a new life.

Support for ex-offender

Scholars, researchers, and the government have discussed increasing the chances of employment and support (Shivy et al., 2007; Haslewood-PÓCSIK et al., 2008). For instance, the Workforce Singapore (2020) stated that the employment support programme for ex-offenders provides employers with an alternative pool of trained and skilled workers. It was highlighted that employers employing ex-offenders would be given more government support in the form of wage offsets through the Jobs Growth Incentive (JGI) scheme (Kai, 2022). Shivy et al. (2007) stated that vocational training provided by correctional centres could increase the chances of employment. Training in technical and business skills for ex-offenders before their release can increase their chances of employment (Trimbur, 2009). Lawrence et al. (2002) added that effective programmes must focus on educational instruction, vocational training, prison industries and employment service training to support ex-offenders in securing a job. A survey among employers in England by Haslewood-PÓCSIK et al. (2008) showed that personal support was the most highly acceptable construct when considering employing ex-offenders by both employers and ex-offenders. The study added that guidance on risk assessment and management procedures should be made available to enable employers to make informed decisions.

However, despite the existence of legislation and correctional evidence for the importance of employment of ex-offenders, the programs to support employment have achieved little success (Sunyoung, 2009). Sunyoung (2009) pointed out that the traditional society has yet to accept these individuals after their release and is often denied various employment opportunities alongside other basic human rights due to the negative stigma surrounding them.

The attitude of employers is a critical factor in support of ex-offenders (Lukies et al., 2011). The study by Lukies et al. (2011) looked at the effect of organisational context variables on employer attitudes toward the employability of ex-offenders. The study found that organisational context variables had a more significant and positive effect on employer attitudes than employer personal characteristics. Therefore, more focus should be placed on organisational context variables.

Ex-offenders require a lot of support and help, according to experts. According to research, almost 70% of the 16,000 offenders incarcerated in the Los Angeles County jail system will commit new crimes after being freed. The cycle will continue because these individuals have no idea where to turn for aid once released (Holmes, 2019). Furthermore, Eurosuccess (2017) identified six participating countries and the best national approach to social and job inclusion for released prisoners, with the exception of Cyprus, which was found to be the most lacking in having good strategies for these individuals when compared to countries like the United Kingdom, Poland, Spain, Italy, and Lithuania.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative research aims to explore the employers' perceptions of hiring ex-offenders in Kuala Lumpur. The research design process would be explained using the "Research Onion" structure consisting of multiple process layers suggested by Saunders et al. (2016). The research onion specifies the various stages in research, starting from research philosophy. By referring to Research Onion, the researcher has embraced the interpretivism philosophy, and induction approach through a case study strategy that was used in this research approach as the methodological choice of this research is a qualitative study. A cross-sectional time horizon was chosen to collect one 'snapshot' of primary data through open-ended questions and semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was done to identify the themes that emerged from the data collected.

Research Philosophy and Approach

This research pursues a more in-depth collection and analysis of data on employers' perceptions of hiring ex-offenders in Kuala Lumpur. This research endorses an interpretivism paradigm which upholds an empathetic stance in the social world as it believes that it is necessary to understand the differences between humans and objects (Saunders et al., 2016). It is argued that the interpretivism philosophy is suitable for research in business and management, specifically in organisational behaviour, marketing, and human resource management (Saunders et al.,2016). Since this research uses the qualitative research method, the data analysis approach was inductive. Saunders et al. (2016) mentioned that an inductive approach is suitable for a qualitative study.

Research strategy and methodological choice

The research strategy is basic qualitative, where interviews would be carried out. Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions provided flexible questioning that

was targeted only towards a certain number of selected participants with the intention to elicit rich data from the participants by probing for more information. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) also defined this research strategy as a way for participants to interpret their own experiences by the way the participants make sense of their lives and experiences. This strategy showed how meanings are being constructed through one's experiences, and the primary goal of this strategy is to uncover and interpret these meanings from the participant (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). In this research, the primary goal was to uncover the perception of employers toward hiring ex-offenders on a deeper level. Therefore, the qualitative research choice was appropriate for this research. Qualitative research reports are richer with descriptions that come from the participant's experience, allowing readers to understand the subject matter better (Creswell, (2013).

Instrumentation and data collection

In this study, semi-structured interviews were the main method of collecting in-depth data to provide answers to the research questions. Due to the restrictions imposed by the government, the interviews were online via either Zoom or Microsoft Teams. The open questions were asked based on Patton (2014)'s guidelines alongside Strauss, Schatzman, Bucher, and Sabshin's (1981) four major categories of questions: hypothetical, devil's advocate, ideal position, and interpretive questions. Sekaran and Bougie (2016) explain that the data source for this research is a semi-structured interview. The data collection requires the researcher to have a conversation with one participant at a time by asking open-ended questions and often accompanied by follow-up questions of why or how, as the conversation can meander around the research subject rather than just rigidly following a standardised survey question. As stated by Newcomer et al. (2015), the interview was conducted in a relaxed and engaging manner within one hour. Privacy and confidentiality were maintained.

Sampling

This research used the non-probability sampling method and judgemental sampling technique. Purposive or judgemental sampling was chosen to be used in this research and is focused on qualified individuals (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). For the determination of sample size, there is no specific rule of thumb for qualitative research. Scholars and researchers claim that there are no specific rules for determining suitable sample sizes in qualitative research. Creswell (2013) suggested that a range from 5 to 25 sample sizes will be sufficient for this research. Between 5-8 participants for a homogeneous were recommended by Kuzel (1999). Parse (1990) suggested that 2-10 participants achieve data saturation. Charmaz (2014, p.345) explained that the saturation point is the point at which the data reveals no new properties nor yields any further theoretical insights. By considering the various suggestions, this research collected data from 8 participants.

Data processing and analysis

The data collected from interviews were transcribed and processed using thematic analysis. The interview would be recorded for transcribing purposes. The researcher opened a new empty document and transcribed it word by word for each participant. Once completed, the

researcher started the coding and analysis process. The six steps by Braun and Clark were followed. The steps began with familiarising with the data, generating initial codes, searching for the themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report (Creswell, 2013). The coding process for all the data was conducted to explore the qualitative text by categorising, meaning, and marking similar text strings with a code label. Based on the coding, categories of codes were identified. After that, codes were grouped into themes. Each theme was named appropriately. This action involved formulating the meaning of each theme to develop a greater understanding of the data.

4. Result and Discussion

In this research, data were collected from eight participants who are employers and owners of small and medium-sized businesses in Kuala Lumpur. The participants' ages range was between 25-64 years old. From these interviews, it was found that the participants had different perceptions and beliefs about hiring ex-offenders. Due to the ethical principle of privacy and confidentiality, participants' name was replaced by random initials.

Table1. List of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Type of Business
Participant 1	Female	25	e-Commerce
Participant 2	Female	31	e-Commerce
Participant 3	Female	50	Retail
Participant 4	Female	64	Engineering
Participant 5	Female	60	Engineering
Participant 6	Female	29	Retail
Participant 7	Female	60	Food and Beverage
Participant 8	Female	32	e-Commerce

Research Question 1: What is the perception of employers towards hiring ex-offenders?

Rationale

The participants stated that they would look at the ex-offender reasons or intentions that cause a particular set of actions. This points to conditional support for hiring ex-offenders. Five participants stressed the importance of being an employer to understand and get to know the entire story or rationale behind the act of committing the crime that leads to imprisonment. All five participants believed that there were always reasons or rationale that led to the commitment to crime. This may be desperation or self-defence without any real preconceived intention to commit the crime. The participants believed that, subject to the rationale; the ex-offender should be given an opportunity to repent and live a normal life. This includes an opportunity to be hired.

Participant 3: *"I will ask them these questions; "why do you want to commit such a crime back then?" "what have you learned from this lesson?" and "how can you improve if you get this job offer?"."*

Participant 6: "Firstly, it is important for me to understand the crime they have committed

and the reason."

According to Holzer et al. (2004), only 7% of employers had hired an ex-offender. Most of the employers who answered "depends" have suggested that personal factors such as rationale for committing the crime, how recent the individual was released, the nature of the offence and even work experiences pre and post-prison will all be taken into consideration while deciding to hire. This theme is a theme that emerged from this study. Past studies focused mainly on the risk and seriousness of the crime.

Perceived Risk

Some participants were reluctant to hire ex-offenders due to the perceived risk. They stated that they believed that there were risks associated with ex-offender hiring. The trust issue was stated where the perceived high risk of hiring ex-offenders. Some stated that

there could be more potential future risks or dangers, whether related to the previous crime or potentially a new crime. The participants also expressed concern about ex-offenders' relapse or returned to their past behaviour. They also expressed that they prefer not to take the risk of hiring ex-offenders.

Participant 5: "Again, if I knew that person earlier but that person has a bad personality, I will not consider it either because I felt there could be some risk of relapsing."

Participant 7: "If they relapsed, it would be on them, not my issue. For example, if they take drugs, it is their personal issue. The police will go after them and not after me."

Past studies support this theme. Haslewood-PÓCSIK et al. (2008) also highlighted that employers are affected by the risk of hiring ex-offenders. Flake (2015) also highlighted that the past history of an ex-offender influenced employers' attitudes. The employers perceive the ex-offender as a risk, even in the absence of re-offending. There is also the potential risk posed to other employees, customers, and the safety of ex-offenders. In addition, employers may not want to be associated with legal liabilities that may arise later (Zakaria et al., 2018).

Severity of crime

Seven participants mentioned the severity of the offence committed by ex-offenders. This showed that the severity of crime sculpted the perceptions of employers. The participants were willing to hire ex-offenders with minor crimes, but the definition of "minor crime" was not clearly stated. Although all participants stressed getting to know the reason behind committing the crime, and even those who committed serious crimes will also be given a chance to be hired, the participants have shown giving those with petty crimes more consideration than the offender of the serious crime.

Participant 1: *"If for these types of petty crimes like drug and stealing, I will have more consideration on this kind of crime than those serious crimes."*

Participant 5: *"I think I will determine the crime on serious and petty crimes to help me in my decision making."*

The findings of this study are in line with some past studies. Gurchiek (2018) mentioned that most employers are willing to overlook certain types of criminal records when hiring. Some of the crimes employers are willing to overlook include substance-related, misdemeanour and even property-related crimes compared to those that fall under a more violent category such as assault, financial crimes, and sexual assault. Kennedy's (2018) study also showed that employers have lesser willingness to hire individuals that committed serious crimes. However, information about the crime committed may further increase the level of difficulty in securing a job as most employers will require the ex-offenders to provide information regarding their prior convictions (Tewksbury and Lees, 2006). This disclosure of information will result in the individuals being labelled as "ex-prisoner" in the eye of the employer and society.

Skills, knowledge and experience

Some participants stated that they might hire ex-offenders to fill positions requiring their skills and knowledge. However, they stated that precautionary measures would be taken to hire and monitor such employees. In addition, if the crime is related to a past job, the participant will not hire that individual ex-offender

Participant 3: *"However, the second reason is, if the ex-offender did not commit any serious crime, then we will ask for their past job experience and try to figure out whether the crime is related to the past working experience. If there is a connection between these two factors, then we will not take the risk of hiring them. For example, if the ex-offender is an accountant and the crime committed is embezzlement. Of course, I will not hire them as an accountant in the company."*

Participant 6: *"I will also look back into their experience and skill set that I required, and I will consider it."*

Past research has also stated that employers sometimes hire ex-offenders to tap on their skills and knowledge. Haslewood-PÓCSIK et al. (2008) stated that necessary work-related skills and characteristics such as honesty and reliability were the most significant factors for employers that were considered when employing ex-offenders. The research done by Wiafe (2021) highlighted that those ex-offenders who possess a higher level of education and even the right skillsets that employers require would likely be given priority in the hiring process. Governments are also promoting the hiring of ex-offenders with skills and knowledge.

Personal Characteristics

Some participants stated that the personality and characteristics of the ex-offenders can play a major role in their decision-making to hire ex-offenders. Employers shun unpleasant personalities or characteristics such as dishonesty, greediness and even ungratefulness. For instance, an ex-offenders willingness and sincerity to be a better person can be crucial in hiring.

Participant 5: *"I believe that if the ex-offender can take up the courage to try to get a job, there it shows some willpower and willingness to be a better person as compared to ex-prisoners who do not even try to get a job; they show that they are not so willing to restart*

their life."

Participant 7: "I would say "if it's not you, other people could have done it as well", so why bother if that person is really an ex-offender, there are too many ex-offenders in the society anyway, and you would not know. Plus, if an ex-offender can take up courage and have the confidence to seek a proper job, we should be proud of them for doing so because it is not an easy task to fit back into society."

Due to the negative stigma and labelling of an "ex-offender", many of these individuals are serving an "invisible life-long punishment". In addition to proving work capabilities and skills, ex-offenders need to prove their positive characteristics, such as honesty (Obatusin and Ritter-Williams, 2019).

Research Question 2: How can employers provide support to ex-offenders in the workplace?

Fair Treatment

This theme emphasises treating the ex-offenders like other normal employees with equal rewards and opportunities. This includes non-discriminatory practices, respect, privacy, and chances that any other employees are given. All participants expressed the importance of providing fair treatment in the workplace regardless of who the employees are.

Participant 7: *"I will not provide anything extra or special for them if my other employees do not have it."*

Participant 8: *"I will treat time like any other normal person."*

The study by Baur et al. (2018) showed the association between stigmatisation, labelling, stereotyping, and discrimination in the employee-observer relationship. This leads to a drop in performance and employee satisfaction. The study also offered strategies that ex-offenders can utilise to mitigate their stigma and the related organisational practices that may assist employers in reducing negative outcomes for ex-offender employees. Therefore, fair treatment can lead to more positive outcomes. Exell (2006) also mentioned that the importance of providing fair treatment in the workplace for ex-offenders and employees alike is a crucial aspect in helping to reduce the relapsing and building a new independent life post-prison.

Mental Support

The participants mentioned that mental support is important for ex-offenders. The participants emphasised providing mental support by motivating and providing proper guidance for the ex-offenders either by themselves or by having a buddy system so that the ex-offenders can assimilate back to society more easily and more independently.

Participant 1: *"So, I believe in guiding them to be independent to solve all these issues themselves rather than just always waiting for help if they want to be treated normally. I want them to stand on their feet as quickly as possible because I think that is the best help they should get"*

Participant 8: *"By treating them with dignity, guiding them well or even providing the right mental support they needed, they could be the best employee I ever had.*

In a study by Haslewood-PÓCSIK (2008), most employers stated that they would find

personal support such as mentors and counsellors for ex-offenders. Cunningham (2017) mentioned certain re-entry programs designed to provide in-work support that includes certain types of support besides that more physical assistance like accommodation. The support encompasses the provision of career planning support and job-seeking support, and mental support. Access to employer support, such as a nominated contact person, can also be useful.

Financial Support

The participants also mentioned the provision of financial support for ex-offenders, especially the newly released offenders. The financial support also includes benefits or temporary special arrangements through accommodation and financial aid for the hired ex-offenders in the workplace. However, these benefits are meant as a temporary measure only.

Participant 3: *"If I hire this person, of course, I will provide accommodation or financial aid if they ever need it. So, it really depends on their needs at that moment. I will not keep providing all these necessities for the long term because they will have to learn to be independent and not to keep relying on the employer for help all the time."*

Participant 5:

"Is not an issue for me to help them to find a place to stay and such. If that person is hardworking and doing well, I can consider even helping with a couple of months of rental for them, especially at the beginning to let them settle down."

Past studies have highlighted the financial problems faced by ex-offenders. Shivy et al. (2007) mentioned that ex-offenders often have issues with finances and accommodation. The situation can be worsened when there are children involved in the entire re-entry process. This shows that the ex-offenders require more support to reenter back into society.

Implications

The findings of this research have practical implications. The practical implications are on employers and the authorities responsible for managing the re-entry of offenders into normal life and the workforce. The main perception of employers towards hiring ex-offenders encompasses understanding the rationale of the crime, the perceived risk factor, personal characteristics of offenders, skills, and severity of the crime. In addition, this study also uncovered some of the support that employers can provide. This includes fairness, mental support and financial support. The finding can be useful for ex-offenders who are applying for jobs, human resource managers and the authorities responsible for managing ex-offenders. Ex-offenders will have a better understanding of the perception of employers. Job applicants should be honest and seek assistance from the relevant bodies responsible for supporting ex-offenders. Secondly, human resource managers will have a better understanding of hiring

ex-offenders. Generally, the research findings and recommendations will reveal the difficulties ex-offenders face in securing a job post their prison life, especially on employers' perceptions when hiring these individuals in the workplace.

There are also theoretical and academic implications from this study. Drawing from in-depth interviews with employers' the study uncovered themes related to perception towards hiring of ex-offenders. The themes include rationale, perceived risk, the severity of the crime, skills of ex-offenders and personal characteristics of ex-offenders. To the researcher's knowledge, this is the first in-depth study of its kind in Malaysia. This study contributed to knowledge about the perception of employers towards hiring ex-offenders and the support that should be provided. Academicians can further replicate or extend this study to have a wider understanding and knowledge. This research will be useful and serve as a benchmark for future researchers, employers and policymakers looking for qualitative information on this subject matter from academic, management and theoretical perspectives.

Limitations and recommendations for future research

This was a qualitative study that collected in-depth data-rich data from the participants. However, like any other qualitative study, there were some limitations associated with this study. The first limitation was the broad inclusion criteria where participants were employers and owners of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Malaysia. This provided a wider spectrum of data, but different industries may have different attitudes or perceptions. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies focus on specific industries and highlight the differences between industries. For instance, the perception of employers in the manufacturing sector may be different from the education sector. Secondly, this was a qualitative study, and like other qualitative studies, there is a limitation on the generalizability of the results. It is recommended that future studies use a sequential exploratory study to further confirm the results from this study's qualitative phase. Thirdly, in this study, data was collected from owners of SMEs only. The results are mainly based on the attitude and views of owners of SMEs. Data source triangulation is recommended for future studies where data is collected from multiple sources, such as employees of SMEs. This will provide a much more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena.

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