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Impediments to Women Accountants' Career Progression in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines women in the accounting profession, their perceptions of their own career barriers in their organization, and identifies possible reasons why they leave their organizations and ways to retain them. Seven measurable constructs were established: exclusionary environment; family responsibility; workplace benefit; job flexibility; corporate policies; job stress; and job demand. A multiple regression analysis is used to explain the effects of women accountant's perception of impediments on career progression. Except for elements of job stress, where they appear significant in isolation with career progression, most of the findings disclosed no correlations with career advancement of women accountant. Incidentally, marital status is significantly positively related to career progression. The reasons for leaving the organization indicated by the women accountants' are job demand, work-family policy, gender discrimination and etc. Work-family policies such as child care and flexi-time are the most consistent benefits quoted by respondents that will enhance retention of employees.

Keywords: *Female accountants, career, impeding barriers*

Introduction

Despite the dramatic increase in the number of female accounting graduates during the current decade, the number of women accountants continues to be very small and static. The number of women accountants entering the labour market and the number of them holding top position is not reflective. Referring

to a survey conducted by The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) 1991 as reported by Collins (1993), 59 percent of new graduates hired in 1990 by public accounting firms are female. Surprisingly, women have not been very successful in advancing in public accounting firms and few have made it to the partnership level. The Karpin Report 1995 found in Labourne (1996), has supported this, where the number of women in management continues to grow, but the number of women in executive management position has not risen commensurably. Thus, there is a need to study this issue so as to find out the reasons that impede the female accountants' in Malaysia from holding top executive posts. Furthermore, the findings will indicate whether the Malaysian female accountants' shared the same opinion with the reasons that hindered career progression with their counterpart from other countries. Besides, the findings will generalize the issue and be brought forward for further discussion.

Extensive literature on impediments to career progression with evidence from USA and Europe indicates that women face obstacles which are not faced by their male counterparts (Scheuermann et al., 1998). The available literature on the accountancy profession shows that this is no exception to the pattern reported in the general literature.

The AICPA Special Commission on the Upward Mobility of Women Special Committee (Scheuermann et al., 1998) found several issues that impede the promotion and retention of women in public accounting. The reasons are childcare and family responsibilities, awareness of success criteria, the perception problem, cultural and attitudes toward women, stress, dating and marriage, and involvement in professional associations. Stockard (1990) stated that the conflict of family life and an accounting career appears to be negatively impacting the retention of women in public accounting. She mentioned the key problems retaining women in the employment were overtime, job stress, flexitime opportunities, being more understanding when employees request time to handle family-related problems. On top of that Coughlan (2002) identified four other reasons that have led the female accountants to leave their profession. These are lack of flexibility, glass ceiling, not happy with working environment and feeling unchallenged in their jobs.

The Research Problem

This study will assist in providing possible answers to the following research questions:

- i. Do women accountant perceive that there are organizational barriers that impede their career advancement in their companies?
- ii. Do women accountant perceive that their organization have undertaken initiatives to remove career-impeding barriers that impede their success?

- iii. How do women accountant perceive their chances for success in career advancement in their organizations?

Hypothesis

- H1 : Components of exclusionary environment as perceived by women accountants are significantly related to career progression.
- H2 : The family commitment components as perceived by women accountants are significantly related to career progression.
- H3 : Elements of workplace benefits as perceived by women accountants are significantly related to career progression.
- H4 : The extent of job flexibility as perceived by women accountants is significantly related to career progression.
- H5 : The extent of corporate practices and policies as perceived by women accountants is significantly related to career progression.
- H6 : The extent of job stress as perceived by women accountants is significantly related to career progression.
- H7 : The extent of job demand as perceived by women accountants is significantly related to career progression.

Objective

The research objectives of this study are to model, define measure and validate a set of constructs that are relevant to career progression as manifest from the attitude and behaviour of women accountants and to empirically test for their relationships. Specific objectives then, are as follows:

1. To examine factors affecting career progression among women accountants in Malaysia.
2. To identify possible reasons perceived by women accountants for leaving the job.
3. To identify possible ways perceived by women accountant that will make them stay in an organization.

Methodology

This study is designed to collect quantitative data through a survey from the women accountants working in companies located in Klang Valley. Questionnaires were sent to 3,000 female chartered accountants who are registered member of Malaysian Institute of Accountants (MIA). To return the

completed questionnaires, a self-addressed stamped envelope is attached to each questionnaire.

In designing the questionnaire, preliminary discussions were held with several women accountants for the purpose of gaining insights into prevailing circumstances relating to obstacles in preventing them to move up the ladder at the same pace as their male counterparts. Some useful inputs were collected from these discussions with female chartered accountants and used in the adoption of some questions in the instrument.

The questionnaire is divided into three sections. Section A requests for information on the respondents' demographic background. Section B of the questionnaire consists of four questions comprising of 24 items to ascertain the respondent's perception of the factors that impede their career progression. Section C contains two open-ended questions associated with reasons for leaving and ways to retain women accountants in their organization.

To check for ambiguities in the questions and other anomalies that might affect data reliability, the questionnaire was sent personally to five female chartered accountants for pilot testing. On the basis of the comments, the questionnaire was modified slightly for the study.

Result

Profile of Respondents

Tables 1 to 6 portray the profile of respondents. A total of 396 usable responses were received, giving a response rate of 13.2%. In Table 1, fifty percent of the respondents were in the top management positions namely, as Finance Directors, Chief Financial Controller, Chief Financial Officer, Accountants and Auditors. Twenty percent of the respondents hold managerial posts such as Account Manager, Audit Manager and Finance Manager and 119 respondents (30%) are at junior level such as Assistant Manager and Account Officer.

Table 1: Present Designation

Designation	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Top management	197	50%
Middle management	80	20%
Junior level	119	30%

Table 2 showed the dispersion of the industries in which the respondents were employed.

Fifty percent of the respondents worked in trading and/or servicing companies, 65 (16%) of the respondents worked with companies manufacturing industrial products, and 58 (15%) were attached to finance companies.

Table 2: Types of Industry

Designation	Number of Respondents	Percentage %
Consumer products	4	1
Industrial products	65	16
Construction	16	4
Trading /services	198	50
Infrastructure	1	.3
Finance	58	15
Technology	28	7
Hotel	1	.3
Properties	20	5
Plantation	5	1

Respondents were asked how long they had been serving their current employer and Table 3 showed that out of 396 respondents, 321 (81%) of them had served their current employers for less than 5 years, a total of 71 (18%) of them have been in their current position between 5 to 9 years and about only 5 of them (1%) had been serving their current employer for 10 years and more.

Table 3: Number of Years in Current Position

Years	Number of Respondents	Percentage %
1	98	25
2	115	29
3	66	17
4	42	11
5	28	7
6	16	4
7	13	3
8	9	2
9	5	1
More than 10	5	1

The respondents were also asked to indicate the total number of years they had worked and the results is shown in Table 4. Sixty four (16%) of the respondents indicated that they had been working for 5 years and below, 188

(48%) respondents had been working between 6 to 10 years and about 144 (36%) had spent more than 10 years of their life earning a living.

Table 4: Total Number of Years Working

Years	Number of Respondents	Percentage %
Less than 5 years	64	16
6 to 10 years	188	48
11 to 15 years	80	20
16 to 20 years	44	11
Above 20 years	20	5

The respondents were also asked whether they had been changing jobs throughout their career, and as shown in Table 5, 354 (88%) of the respondents had changed jobs throughout their career and 42 (11%) of the respondents admitted that they have yet moved to another organization.

Table 5: Changing Jobs

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
YES	354	89
NO	42	11

As for the marital status, Table 6 indicated that 311 (78%) are married and 87 (22%) of the respondents are single.

Table 6: Marital Status

Marital Status	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Single	87	22
Married	311	78

Factor Loading for Independent Variables

Using Varimax rotational method, 24 items are factor analysed to identify if respondents perceived this notion in terms of more than one construct. The results shown in Table 7 revealed that items 1 to 4 with loading ranging from

.653 to .804 loads significantly on Factor 3. Items 1 to 4 are associated with benefits offered by the respondents' employers. Items 5 to 7 loaded significantly on Factor 4, related to job flexibilities, allowed the respondents to work from home and on-site day care centre. Factor 5 takes in items 9,10 and 11 with a loading ranging from .581 to .900. These items represent corporate practices in staff performance evaluation policies. Six items (14 to 17, 19 and 20) loaded onto Factor 1, which accounts for 28% of the variance explained the close association among the variables. Family issues such as the need to travel frequently and the possibility of relocation to another city are items of relevance to the label of "family responsibility" (Factor 2) and four items (21 to 24) loaded significantly on this factor. The two job stress items involved overtime pay and existence of policies for continual progression to partnership are relevant factors loaded significantly in Factor 6 with item-factor of .701 and .739 respectively. Heavy workload and the frequency of being assigned new tasks are relevant to the factor labelled "job demand" (Factor 7) and items 13 and 18 with item-factor loading of .814 and .570 respectively loaded onto this factor.

Table 8 also gives the results of Cronbach alpha reliability tests. It shows that Factor 6 and Factor 7 have poor internal reliabilities with alpha equals to .4087 and .5728 respectively. Despite these poor results, the 2-item measure of job stress and job demand is retained respectively in this study. Their poor reliabilities are to be noted as limitations and any interpretations of their relationships with other variables are to be treated with caution. The other five constructs are found to be reliable with Cronbach alpha ranging from .6914 to .8712. The 24 items loaded onto seven factors explaining 67.8% of the overall variance, with eigenvalues ranging from 1.257 to 3.655.

Tests for Confounding Effects of Demographics

Preliminary analysis is also undertaken to determine whether any demographic factors associated with the respondents or their companies have a confounding effect on the dependent variables and, therefore need to be controlled for in the testing of the hypotheses by regression analysis. The existence of significant relationships between the demographic variables and the dependent variables can be gauged from Pearson's correlation coefficients. Correlation coefficients give an indication of both the strength and the direction of the relationship between the variables. Demographic attributes of present designation, number of years in current position, total number of years working and marital status are included as dependent variables in the empirical schema and therefore, its effects on the independent variables will be made explicit in the regression analysis in the latter sections of this chapter.

Table 7: Factor Analysis for Independent Variables

Item	Description of items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7
		Exclusionary Environment	Family Commitment	Workplace Benefits	Flexibility Job	Corporate Policies	Job Stress	Job Demand
1	Medical benefits			.794				
2	Retirement benefits pension			.741				
3	Sick leave			.804				
4	Short term disability insurance			.653				
5	Ability to work from home				.752			
6	Housing assistance				.726			
7	On-site day care centre				.815			
8	Overtime Pay						.701	
9	Annual Performance appraisal					.581		
10	Salary adjustment tied to performance evaluation					.900		
11	Performance bonus policy					.798		
12	Policies on Continual progression to partnership						.739	
13	Workload too heavy							.814
14	Lack of appreciation from superiors	.766						
15	Work specification not clear	.726						
16	Lack of management support	.810						
17	Poor communication among colleagues	.684						
18	New tasks assigned							.570
19	Performance evaluation not transparent	.752						
20	Performance evaluation too rigid	.748						
21	Frequency of Travelling outstation		.757					
22	Lack of support from spouse and family		.809					
23	Balancing family Commitment with job demand		.717					
24	Possibility of relocation to another city		.732					

Table 8: Reliability Test using Cronbach Alpha

Item	Description of items	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6	Factor 7
		Exclusionary Environment	Family Commitment	Workplace Benefits	Flexibility Job	Corporate Policies	Job Stress	Job Demand
1	Eigenvalue	3.655	2.482	2.525	2.490	1.938	1.257	1.402
2	Percentage of variance explained	28.0	10.2	7.2	6.8	5.8	5.2	4.6
3	Cumulative percentage	28.0	38.2	45.4	52.2	58.0	63.2	67.8
4	Cronbach alpha	.8712	.7929	.8024	.7951	.6914	.4087	.5728

Table 9 presents the bi-variate correlations between the demographic variables (numbers 1 to 3) and the dependent variables (numbers 4 to 6). These relationships are highlighted inside the box in Table 9. The results indicate that there are no significant correlations between industry currently attached and any of the dependent variables. Therefore, this demographic variable is unlikely to have a confounding effect. However, marital status of the respondents is significantly positively correlated with each of the dependent variables of number of years in current position, total number of years working and the number of times changing jobs.

Therefore, marital status will need to be included in the subsequent regression analysis. Further, significant correlations between the demographic variable of present designation and dependent variable of total number of years working, suggest that subsequent comparative analysis between top, middle and junior level of management should yield some significant differences.

Table 9: Correlations Analysis between Demographic Variables

Item	Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Present designation	1.000					
2	Industry currently attached	-.060	1.000				
3	Marital status	-.087	.056	1.000			
4	No. of years in current position	.093	.003	.239**	1.000		
5	No. of years working	-.146**	.075	.306**	.182**	1.000	
6	No. of times you changed jobs	-.012	-.065	.216**	-.123	.138**	1.000

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2 tailed)

Results for All Independent Variables Regressed on Career Progression

Table 10 presents the results of the multiple regression analysis to explain or predict the relationship among the independent variables and the dependent variable (total number of years working and number of years in current position). The regression model has produced a fairly strong model fit with adjusted R² of .061. As can be seen in Table 10 the results of the regression analysis give non-significant between the six independent variables against dependent variable of career progression. The significant effect on career progression exists in terms of job stress which is significantly negatively related to career progression. Therefore, H6 is accepted and H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, and H7 are rejected.

Table 10: Regression Results for Independent Variable Against Dependent

	Variables	Std. Beta	T-Score	Sig T	VIF
Dependent Variable	Independent Variables				
	Exclusionary environment	.034	.396	.692	1.553
Career Progression	Family commitment	.060	.732	.465	1.444
	Workplace benefits	.097	1.140	.256	1.527
	Job flexibility	.074	.936	.351	1.337
	Corporate policies	-.095	-1.286	.200	1.164
	Job stress	-.294	-3.951	.000**	1.171
	Job demand	.044	.574	.567	1.236

Model Fit Adj R² = .061, F value = 2.853, Sig F = .007

* Significant at .05 level

** Significant at .01 level

The potentially confounding demographic variable of marital status and the number of times changing jobs are also included in the regression model. Table 11 presents the results of the regression analysis between marital status and number of times changing jobs as independent variables and career progression, as dependent variable. An examination of the results reveals that there is a significant model fit, with reasonable levels of adjusted R² of .132. The regression coefficient in Table 11 reveals significant positive relationship between marital status and career progression. They reinforce findings about the relationship between marital status and its effect on women’s career advancement as found in the literature on “glass ceiling”, an invisible barrier that keeps women from rising above a certain level in corporations.

Table 11: Regression Results for Independent Variable Against Dependent Variables

	Variables	Std. Beta	T-Score	Sig T
Dependent Variable	Independent Variables			
	Marital status	.377	7.856	.000**
Career Progression	Number of times changing jobs	-.060	-1.259	.209

Model Fit Adj R2 = .132, F value = 30.958, Sig F = .000

* Significant at .05 level

** Significant at .01 level

Reasons for Leaving and Ways to Retain Women Accountants

The female respondents indicated reasons why they left their firms and ways to retain the women accountants as shown in Table 12. The categories included unsuccessful transfers, management turnover within the firm, better offers, discontent with compensation and personal reasons. Respondents believed they were less accepted by partners than were their male counterparts and nearly half reported having fewer advancement opportunities. In addition, they indicated that the reason they left their employer was stress, better opportunity and no chance for advancement.

Comments indicated problems working with other staff members, delays in promotion of female employees by particular members of management, and too little or unequal pay. It appears that many of these problems are gender specific and are the cause of these women's stress. Many of the women commented that they were discriminated against or made to feel uncomfortable in their roles.

Women cited inflexibility in working hours and lack of access to child care. Many women accountants remain frustrated by what they see as patronizing and excluding behaviour by some of their male counterparts. They felt that the job is too demanding causing them to suffer from stress. They claimed that they were given no proper job specification which makes them less motivated. Travel and relocation are also often common elements of managerial jobs. Respondents perceived that refusing to travel or to work evenings or weekends is detrimental to their career.

Work-family policies such as child care and flexi-time are the most consistent benefits quoted by the respondents that will enhance retention of employees. These views were supported by various studies which cited positive impact of work-family initiatives on recruitment, productivity and employees attitudes [(Epstein (2002), Coughlan (2000), Hooks and Cheramy (1994), Doucet and Hooks (19990, D'Angelo (1994)].

Table 12: Reasons for Leaving and Ways to Retain Women Accountant

	Reasons for leaving	Ways to retain women accountant
1. Job Demand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too demanding; too heavy; work pressure • Long, inflexible working hours • Transfer; relocation; extensive travelling • No job specifications; no job satisfaction; not motivated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workload not too heavy • Flexible, shorter working hours; part time job • Transfer; relocation; outstation; travelling • Clear job specification; job satisfaction; job security; less stressful • Clear line of communication
2. Work-Family Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family commitment; lack of quality time spent with family; married • No personal life • Policies on leave; benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work from home • Child care centre • Work-family balance policy; family benefits
3. Gender Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfair treatment • Performance evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equal treatment • Fair performance evaluation
4. Role of Supervisors/ Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not happy with management, superiors, corporate politics; lack of management support; no appreciation from management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition, appreciation, understanding by superiors • Management support
5. Career Prospects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better job prospect, higher salary elsewhere, poor salary • No promotion; no career progression • No training provided 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salary increment; bonus; attractive remuneration package • Career prospect; opportunities for career advancement; partnership • Promotion; empowerment • Motivational factors; incentives; partnership • Training and development programme

6. Accommodating Workplace/Work Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Location of workplace and home• Facilities not conducive• Problem with subordinate	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conducive; workplace near to home; friendly staff;• Good corporate governance;• Professional management supporting colleagues
7. Women Commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Promote social interaction• Give them respect• Health reasons• Positive thinking; aggressive; committed; accept changes, challenges; show interest• Support from spouse and Family	

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings of this study are fairly consistent suggesting the importance of family related issues to women in accounting. Some suggestions were made to include offering flexible time and providing more child care benefits to the women in the accounting profession.

The survey confirmed a finding in previous surveys that travel is not generally perceived as a problem. Travel was not a significant factor, but job stress, overtime and the existence of a two-career household were seen as affecting either the marriage or marital status. The study revealed that some respondents perceived that having children had a negative effect on their employment opportunities. They were convinced that children impaired job flexibility and possibilities for promotion

It is apparent that there has been some progress regarding barriers related to glass ceiling. It appears that the women in this study do perceive several barriers to career advancement in their organizations.

Excessive overtime hours required during peak periods can be reduced by recruiting additional part-time or full-time staff. Techniques in reducing job stress include providing job stress awareness seminars, seminars on minimizing the effects of stress, and on-site exercise/ relaxation classes during the workday. Employers offering more flexi-time opportunities can reduce stress from a two-career household.

A feeling of discrimination against women with children can only lead to employee dissatisfaction and discontentment. Employers should give assurance that discrimination does not exist and remove the perception among female employees that children may be used as a criterion in considering promotions.

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