CULTURAL VALUES AND CAREER GOAL OF EMPLOYEES IN A MALAYSIAN INDUSTRIAL CORPORATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study on the influence of cultural values (self-direction, achievement, tradition, and benevolence) on career goal of employees in an oil and gas corporation in Malaysia. The study used the Social Cognitive Career Theory to support the theoretical framework of the investigation. Data gathered from 87 employees of an oil and gas corporation in the area of Kuala Lumpur were used in the analysis. The results show that the levels of the four cultural values experienced by the respondents are high while for the career goal is moderate. The regression results reveal that the predictor variables explain 28.0% of the variance in the career goal of the employees. Recommendation for human resource management and future research are discussed.

Keywords – *Cultural values, career goal, self-direction, achievement, tradition, benevolence*

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Research Context and Research Questions

Employees in many organizations face challenges in the workplace such as how to deal with an opportunity for them to develop their careers professionally. Career refers to a series of occupations, jobs, and positions engaged in or occupied throughout the lifetime of a person, involving the enhancement of the working experience, the role played and continuous learning over a period of time (Ismail and Ramly, 2011). Career goals are related to the formation of a career identity based on self-perceived talents, desires and values (Ismail and Lu, 2014). It is thus well possible that peoples' beliefs about career goals and career success reflect the social context in which they have developed as adults (Sturges, 1999). This study, responds to Twenge's (2010) call for more investigations on employees' differences and the influence on careers; one of which is how differences in cultural values affect career behavior such as career goal among them.

Cultural values act as one of the guiding principles of a person's life, which are organized into a complete system of priorities including career goals (Schwartz, 2012; Leung *et al.*, 2011). This study adopts cultural values at an individual level and we use the definition by Schwartz (2012, p.8) in which four out of 10 cultural value dimensions are used, namely self-direction, achievement, tradition, and benevolence (see Figure 1). Each represents four core dimensions of values, namely openness to change, self-enhancement, conservation, and self-transcendence, respectively. These cultural values are believed to satisfy biological needs, to achieve coordinated social interaction, and to meet the social demands for group survival including work and career.
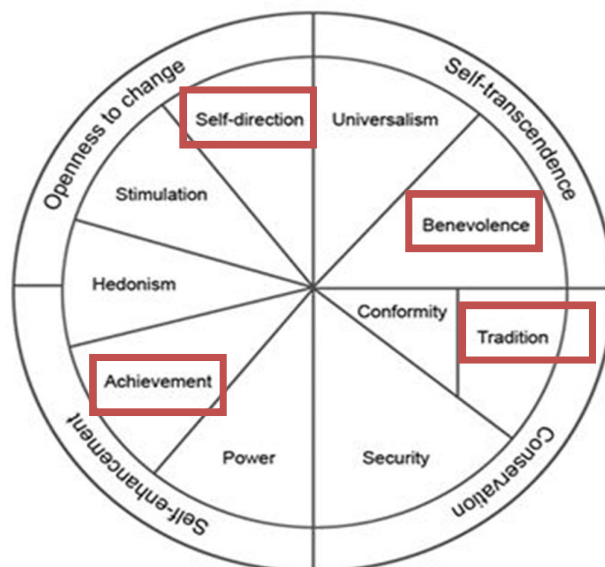
Figure 1: Theoretical model of Schwartz's (2012) core dimensions and specific cultural values used in the study.

This study did not consider Hofstede's (1980) conceptualization of cultural values because of many critics on it as it is being out-dated, over-researched and too condensed to capture culture issues (McSweeney, 2002; Shenkar, 2001; Smith *et al.*, 2002). Schwartz's (2012) conceptualization of cultural values was developed with systematic sampling, measurement and analysis techniques; and its normative data were collected in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Brett & Okumura, 1998, p. 500–501).

Although there are a number of studies on cultural values, little research has focused on their relationship with career goals. For instance, Tov and Diener's (2009) study identified the relationship between the quality of life (QOL) and Schwartz's cultural values. A Malaysian study among the R&D personnel on career aspiration was on the influence of personal and organizational factors as the predictors but did not consider cultural values as among the predicting variables ((Ismail and Ramly, 2011). In view of this, this study aims to fill this knowledge gap among the employees in an oil and gas company in Malaysia. This article addresses the following research questions: What are the levels of cultural values and career goal of the employees? What are the relationships between cultural values and career goal of the employees? Which cultural value predicts most career goal of the employees?

The findings of this study would contribute insights into HRD theory and practice in several ways: First, for the HRD theory, this study would contribute to the literature on cultural values and their influence on career goal in the context of employees in a specific industrial organization in Malaysia, a fast developing Asian country. It is noted that career development is one of the core dimensions of HRD in addition to organization development, and training and development (Swanson & Holton, 2001). Second, this study helps the organizations recruit potential employees whose values match the psychological environment existing in the company. HRD specialists should have the opportunity to capitalize on the assets of the employees, as employees' characteristics would have a significant impact on the performance of workforce (Society for Human Resource Management, 2010). Third, the study is also significant to help employers understand employees in terms of career goal and how it is influenced by the personal dimensions of cultural values.

The next section of this paper is organized as follows: a literature review on the conceptualization of career goal is discussed, followed by the relationship between cultural values and career goal. This is then continued with theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study and hypotheses. The next section describes the research procedures undertaken and the results of the study, after which a conclusion and recommendations are presented.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Career Goal Defined

Career goal can be defined as a primary end towards which an individual's effort is directed within a chosen profession (Colakoglu & Caligiuri, 2012, p. 264). Career goal reflects the strength of an individual's intention and desire to achieve and sustain in a particular profession. Rojewski (2005) expressed career aspiration as similar to career goal. He defined career aspiration as career-related goals or choices that provide an important motivational momentum for career-related behaviors and future educational and career success. This study focuses on four distinct career goals conceptualized by Mayrhofer *et al.*, (2005), which include company world, free-floating professionalism, self-employment, and chronic flexibility.

Company world is the traditional organizational career. This career goal relates to the notion that people strive for a position of job responsibility within one organization (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2005). Company world refers to the structure of jobs in an organization in which there are few points of entry including that at the bottom. Employees enjoy high job security and tend to stay with the organization for a long time. In return, the organization gains the loyalty of its staff (Hendry, 2000). The company world is characterized by the hierarchical job positions. The second career goal is free-floating professionalism, which refers to the field of professional specialists staying in their particular domain of expertise (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2005). It also refers to where people want to be under the contract of one or several organizations for special and challenging tasks. Individuals have a close relationship with one customer at a time but the relationship is of limited duration and customers are changing fast.

Contradicts to company world, self-employment career goal is the field of career in which individuals work outside organizations. This type of career goal is either self-employed professionals or entrepreneurs, who work in a rather limited field of expertise (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2005, p. 41). Individuals in this field usually have several or many customers at a time, although these customers do not change rapidly. The last career goal refers to the chronic flexibility which is characterized by frequent job changes, partly similar to free-floating professionalism. Individuals in this type of career goal aspire to take on a 'freelance' career with different projects for various clients and ever-changing work contents (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2005), not only a change from one organization to another, but also from one industry to another, or from being employed to self-employment, and so on. The four dimensions of career goal, however, are treated as a single dependent variable in this study.

### 2.2 Relationships between Cultural Values and Career Goal

Career goal is very important to all types of employees especially the younger and the middle career employees. Individuals' values influence their attitudes and behavior, become the bases of their self-evaluation and their evaluation of others, and consequently the values play a major role in the establishment of personal goals (Brown, 2002). Brown further reported that "work values have been identified as critical variables in the career development process" (p. 80). Work values are the underlying preferences and beliefs that should be satisfied in people's career choices (White, 2005) and hence, work values affect job behavior one of which is career goal.

Fatoki's (2014) study that investigated the personal values of university students in South Africa used the Schwartz Portrait Value Questionnaire. University students are the business leaders and entrepreneurs of tomorrow. The results indicated that achievement is the most significant value, followed by self-direction, benevolence, security and universalism. Inglehart (1997) demonstrated that older persons gave higher priority to materialist (emphasize economy and physical security) versus post-materialist (emphasize self-

expression and quality of life) values than younger people. He also added that the junior emplyees will give greater priority to hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, and universalism values, but less priority to security, tradition, and conformity values. Meanwhile, in early adulthood, their primary concern focuses on the world of work and family, thus the needs for achievement are great, both on the job and initiation of a family. Challenges faced by young adults encourage the pursuit of achievement and stimulation values. In the middle adulthood, employees invest in to establish family, work, and social relations, which the emphases are more on security, conformity, and tradition.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent *et al.*, 1994; 2000) as its underlying theoretical framework. The theory postulates that career development is influenced by objective factors such as the quality of educational and psychosocial experiences to which individuals have been exposed, the financial support available for pursuing particular training options, and their perceived environmental factors. As shown in Figure 2, this study derives cultural values as parts of constructs that consist of background contextual affordances (Box 1) of which these cultural values are dependent on person inputs (Box 2) such as age or generational cohort. The theory further describes that cultural values and person input will influence choice behavior (Box 3) and career goals (Box 4). The figure further indicates that social interest of an individual is likely to pursue a social-type career which then leads to any relevant actions such as respecting superiors in an organization and being creative. In addition, the perception of beneficial environmental factors (e.g., being highly aspiring and having self-direction) is predicted to help the process of translating one's interests into goal and later into actions.
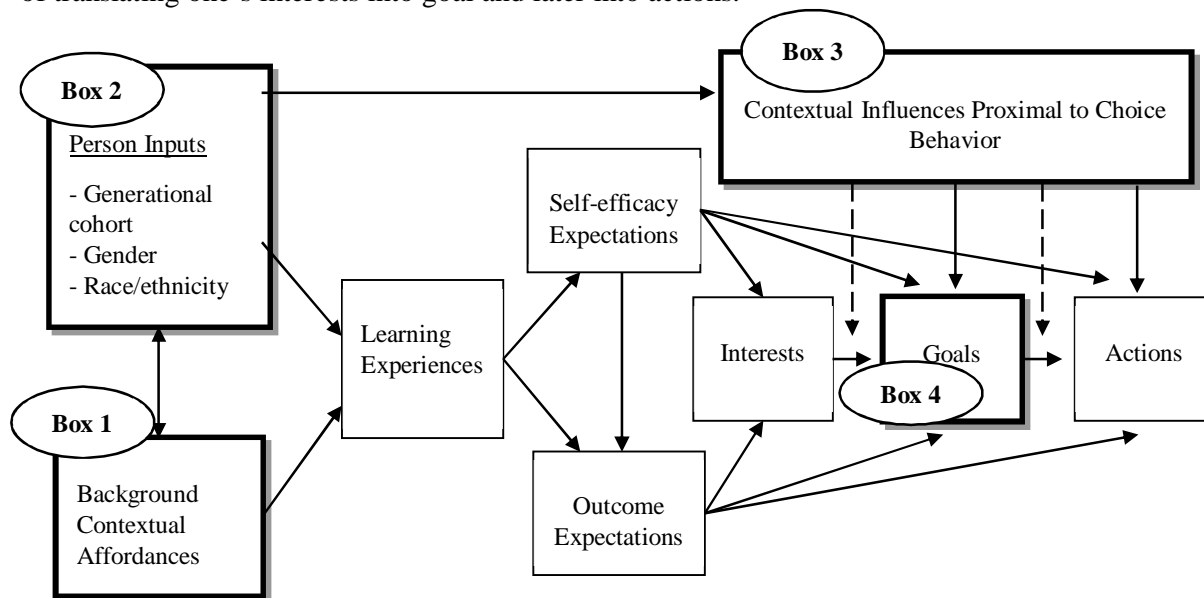
Figure 2: Model of social cognitive influences on career choice behavior.
Source: Adapted from Lent, Brown, & Hackett (1994, p. 93).

2.4 Research Framework and Hypotheses

A research framework (see Figure 3) has been developed to portray the variables used in this study. Self-direction, achievement, tradition, and benevolence are the independent variables, and career goal is the dependent variable. A study by Schneider and White (2005) stated that both men and women employees who perceived to have a high degree of self-direction at work would show higher levels of positive effect, engagement, and self-esteem, compared to those who reported on less self-direction. Wendy, Dee and Peter (2004) suggested that the stable personal inputs of optimism and self-esteem would predict career planning and career exploration through the variables of career expectations and career goals differently for young males and females. Findings by Da Silva Añaña and Meucci Nique (2010) showed that medical students who would be the potential employees in the medical sector highly value stability and self-direction (freedom) (p. 164). Based on this argument therefore we hypothesize:

H_1: Self-direction significantly influences career goal of the employees.

Individuals across individualistic culture are generally found to have a more achievement-oriented value when compared to others. For example, Americans rated achievement value the highest among three individualist countries: Australia, the United States, and Canada (Feather, 1998). Managers from the United States and Russia reported significantly higher value placed on self-enhancement than both Japanese and Chinese managers (collectivist culture). The need for achievement was positively related to political behavior and individuals high in political skill, further showing greater career growth (Liu *et al.,* (2010). Behaving in a high need for achievement may propel individuals to engage in political behaviors (Ferris *et al.*, 2007). There is a positive relationship between the value (achievement) and other personal and cultural indicators such as self-esteem (Feather, 1998). Kaygin and Gulluce (2013) further found that there was a significant relationship between individual values and career choice of university students in Turkey. The most important value is achievement, where the students, who would be employees after graduation take care of the values of acceptance by the social environment, protection of their self-esteem, and succeeding in action to contribute to the society. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is:

H_2: Achievement significantly influences career goal of the employees.

Respect for the traditions of the family or group is perhaps, instrumental in the decision-making process for some Native American Indians (Herring, 1996). In theological analysis of Schwartz and Huismans (1995), they argued that religion emphasizes feelings of awe, respect, and humility and opposes seeking for happiness through the pursuit of material good. Tradition was expected to be most strongly correlated with religiosity (Roccas, 2005). Moreover, extensive cross-cultural research on values indicates that religious groups do differ in their values and goals including that in jobs and careers (p. 753). Thus, it is hypothesized:

H_3: Tradition significantly influences career goal of the employees.

Benevolence was positively related to organizational and occupational commitments (Cohen, 2010, p. 1939). The benevolence orientation is expressed in ideals such as solidarity, cooperation, commitment, mutual trust, support and a sense of belonging that are believed to be present in the Arab nuclear and extended families and communities (Haj Yahia, 1997). Saroglou *et al*.'s (2004) study found that religiosity

was positively related to benevolence consequently to positive outcomes such as what to be achieved in careers. Johnson's (2014) research indicated employees had commented on the importance of working with good supervisors and that working with "like-minded people" in order to move towards achieving personal and career growth. This becomes one of the main reasons for them to remain in their organizations. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis is:

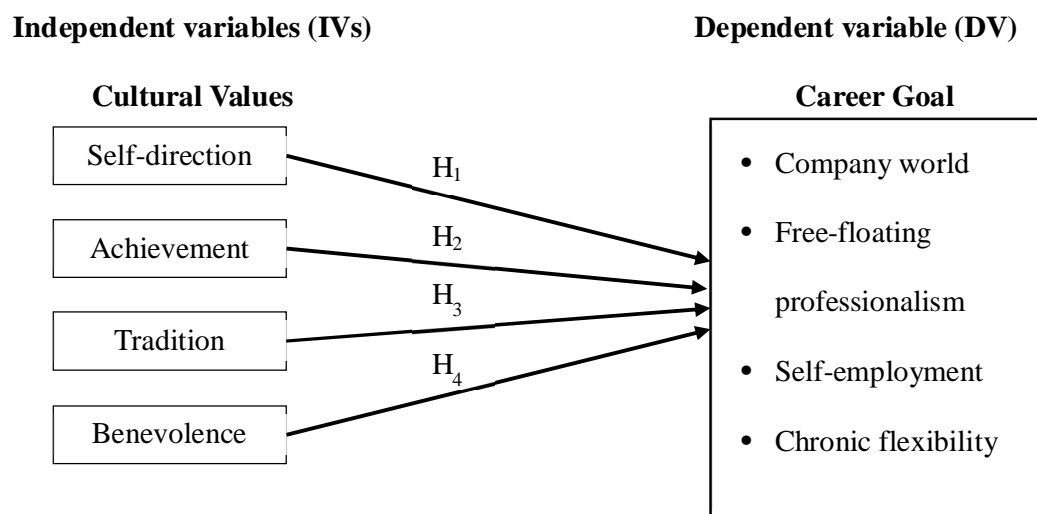H_4: Benevolence significantly influences career goal of the employees.

Figure 3: The hypothesized framework showing cultural values and career goal

3.0 Methods

3.1 Population and Sampling

The population of the study is a group of employees working in one of the subsidiaries of a large oil and gas Malaysian corporation located in the Klang Valley (that includes Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya, Shah Alam, and Petaling Jaya), a highly industrialized region in the country. The oil and gas corporation was chosen because it is one of the important industrial firms contributing to the petroleum industry and economy with a very dynamic workforce (INSTEP PETRONAS, 2015) in which the relevance of work culture to career goal would be obtained through this research. By doing so this study promises to offer new knowledge in the organizational and career development literature. To date, the corporation has trained almost 10,000 technical employees in the various facets of oil and gas industry in the country. A sample of 129 employees was chosen randomly from the corporation with the help of the manager of its human resource division. The sample size was determined using the G-power approach (Faul & Erdfelder, 1992). A total of 87 were returned and used for analysis, giving a response rate of 67.44%.

3.2 Instrument

The study instrument was a questionnaire containing items on cultural values and career goal, and demographic information. Questions on the cultural values consisting of items on self-direction, achievement, tradition and benevolence, were adapted from Schwartz's Value Survey (SVS) (Schwartz, 1994). Meanwhile questions on career goals were adapted from the Vienna Career Panel Project (ViCaPP) (Mayrhofer *et al.*, 2005). Example of an item to describe self-direction (of 6 items) is: "Freedom (freedom of action and thought is instrumental to achieve my career)". Achievement consists of 6 items. An example is "Ambitious (hard-working value leads to my career aspiration)". Tradition consists of 3 items. An example is "It is important for me to maintain traditional values or beliefs". Benevolence comprises of 9 items. An example is "A spiritual life (emphasis on spiritual not material matters in achieving my career)". Each item needed a response based on a measure from 5-point Likert scale, where "1=not important" and "5=very important" (Brown, 2010). Career goal was measured using a 5-Likert scale (1=very undesirable to 5=very desirable) (Vagias, 2006). An example is: "To embark on different projects for different clients simultaneously". The reliability of the instrument was acceptable, with Cronbach's alpha values for all sections ranging from 0.61 to 0.85 (pilot test) and from 0.73 to 0.92 (actual study).

3.3 Profile of the Respondents

The descriptions on the profiles of the respondents are divided into two sections. The first is their general demographic background, and the second is their professional background. The distribution of the respondents by age is as followed: the highest percentage of respondents aged from 20-25 (32.2%), followed by those from 26-30 (29.9%) and from 46 and 50 and above 51 (1.1%). The data also show that 51 respondents are female (58.6%), and 51.7% are married. Three-quarter of the respondents have a Bachelor qualification (77.0%), followed by Diploma (12.6%) and 4.6% have PMR (lower secondary school certificate) or SPM (Malaysian School Certificate) qualification. The respondents' monthly income has been organized into five categories: below Ringgit Malaysia (RM)2000 and RM2001-RM3000 made up 10.3%, respectively. Monthly income above RM5001 (51.7%) is from about half of the respondents. A total of 57.5% of the respondents work in human resource functions, while 20.7% in economics and engineering and technology/science related departments, and 11% in health, safety, and environment functions. In relation to job positions, 51.7% are at the head and senior manager level, 27.6% are assistant engineers, and the rest are the support staff.

4.0 Results

4.1 Level of Cultural Values and Career Goals

Levels of cultural values were derived based on the categorization of data into three, namely low, moderate, and high. Taken as a whole of the employees, the results showed high levels across the four cultural values. The top three of the four cultural factors were benevolence (M = 4.47, SD = 0.49), achievement (M = 4.34, SD = 0.45) and self-direction (M = 4.22, SD = 0.49) and as a whole the majority of them showed a high level of cultural values. The overall mean of career goal was at a moderate level (M = 3.39, SD = 0.26). Among the four career goals, free-floating professionalism and chronic flexibility showed a high level as perceived by the respondents.

4.2 Correlation between Cultural Values and Career Goal

Pearson product moment correlation analysis results (Table 1) show the highest value is achievement ($r =$ .42), followed by self-direction ($r = .40$), and tradition ($r = .33$), and all are significant at p = .001. The results of the multiple linear regression (MLR) analysis are shown in Table 2. Two predictor variables are found to be significant in explaining the career goals of the employees. They are tradition ($\beta = .35$, p = .001), and achievement ($\beta = .33$, p = .01). Self-direction and benevolence were excluded because they did not yield enough evidence to contribute to the variation in career goals.

Table 1: Correlation between cultural values and career goal (n=87)

	Mean	SD	Career Goal	Self-Direction	Achievement	Tradition	Benevolence
Career Goal	3.74	.49	-				
Self-Direction	4.22	.49	.40**	-			
Achievement	4.34	.45	.42**	.66**	-		
Tradition	3.98	.62	.33**	.16	.03	-	
Benevolence	4.47	.49	.13	.41**	.30**	.36**	-

   Notes: ** p < .01*

Table 2: Regression results of cultural values and career goal (n=87)

Predictor Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient			Co-linearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	B	t	Sig. (p)	Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	1.04	.55					
Self-Direction (X_1)	.20	.13	.21	1.61	.11	.51	1.95
Achievement(X_2)	.36	.14	.33	2.63	.01	.55	1.81
Tradition (X_3)	.28	.08	.35	3.57	.00	.85	1.17

Notes: ** *p* < .01; R = .56; R^2 = .31; Adj. R^2 = .28; F = 9.27; p = .0001

The adjusted $R^2 = .28$ implied that the two significant predictors of cultural values explained 28.0% of the variance in the career goal. This was quite a reasonable result with a model consisting of four predictors of 87 respondents.

5.0 Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

We conclude that all four dimensions of cultural values indicated were of high level with three dominant values of benevolence, achievement and self-direction. The overall mean career goal of the employees however was moderate. Further analysis shows that tradition makes the strongest contribution to career goals among them, followed by achievement. This implies that theoretically tradition and achievement are found to be relatively comprehensive to explain the career goal among the employees whom the majority (78%) is in the category of Generation Y employees (born between 1980 to 2000) as of 2015 they age is 35 years and below. Therefore, these variables of the cultural values are useful, after utilizing the SCCT, in relating to career behaviors within the specific context of a selected oil and gas corporation in Malaysia. Specifically, these employees value most traditional practices and culture (such as religion and family customs as well as organizational embedded cultures such as respecting keaders) and by doing so they will engage more in activities leading to achieving their career goals. Likewise value on achievement guides the employees in driving them what they want to expire in terms of career in short-term and long-term duration. Cultural value on achievement may prove to be helpful in giving motivation to employees in this specific industrial firm when it comes to making career decisions. Another conclusion is that these employees should be able to decide on their priority in the workplace based on tradition and achievement, so that assessments of fit can be done successfully. More importantly, these vital values are being placed high in deciding their future career goal.

Human resource managers in an organization are recommended to revisit the existing policy and try to improvise the policy which is consistent with the changing trends in work values and career goal of employees. Managers and other human resource practitioners such as trainers, project coordinators and human resource analysts must understand why cultural values (specifically tradition and achievement) of individuals are important in developing their career goal. Such an understanding would help managers to formulate interventions appropriate with career development program by incorporating the cultural values of tradition and achievement into human resource activities such as the induction training, on-the-job training, performance appraisal program, and training and development, knowledge sharing activities, celebration for achievements and awards, and quality maintenance initiatives. Some recommendations for future research are suggested based on the limitations of this study. Future studies are needed to delve into the influence of other eight variables of the Schwartz's (1994; 2012) cultural values. As this study used a limited number of respondents, future studies are recommended to use a larger sample size to improve its external validity by replicating it to other oil and gas subsidiaries located in other regions outside the Klang Valley or even abroad where the oil and gas subsidiaries are found. A larger sample size should be able to see differences in the influences of cultural values on career goal based on, for instance, two generation cohorts of Generation Y and their senior employees of Generation X as well as to treat the two generations as moderators. The influence of gender on cultural values and career goal of diverse employees promises another interesting area to explore as women take on career roles at different life-cycle stages, allowing them to integrate career and family demands. This comparative study between men and women may enrich knowledge on the influence of cultural values on career goal based on a gender perspective.

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