

## THE UNDERSTANDING OF LEAN PRACTICES AND WELL-BEING HARMONIZATION IN MALAYSIAN SMEs

Azyyati Anuar<sup>1</sup>

Daing Maruak Sadek<sup>2</sup>

Nurul Labanihuda Abdull Rahman<sup>3</sup>

Rusalbiah Che Mamat<sup>4</sup>

Nur Fakhzan Marwan<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Faculty of Business and Management/Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kedah, Malaysia  
(E-mail: azyyati@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>2</sup>Academy of Contemporary Islamic Studies/Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kedah, Malaysia  
(Email: daing729@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>3</sup>Faculty of Business and Management/Universiti Teknologi MARA, Perlis, Malaysia  
(E-mail: labanihuda@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>4</sup> Faculty of Business and Management/Universiti Teknologi MARA, Selangor, Malaysia  
(E-mail: rusal514@uitm.edu.my)

<sup>5</sup>Faculty of Business and Management/University Teknologi MARA, Pahang, Malaysia  
(E-mail: nurfakhzan@uitm.edu.my)

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**Abstract:** *Lean practices have played an essential role in combating the current and future challenges in the manufacturing and service sectors. Lean is very important in an organization because it wants to ensure organizational sustainability in the long term, especially among Small and Medium Enterprises (SME). Although the SMEs are currently important towards Malaysia's economy, there is a question of whether the SMEs are offering better well-being packages to their workforces to ensure harmonization in the organization. Therefore, this study will review and understand the lean practices and well-being harmonization for SMEs in Malaysia. The method is demonstrated by using multiple case studies that will focus on SMEs in Malaysia, specifically in the Northern Region. The expected findings are to provide an in-depth understanding of lean practices and well-being harmonization as a guideline for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), especially B40 households that owned a business. This aligns with the National Agenda in the Eleventh Malaysia Plan to produce a million small and medium enterprise entrepreneurs, including those from the B40 group, in the next five years. This study believes that the Malaysian SMEs will benefit from this new understanding in this thriving economy.*

**Keywords:** *Lean practices, well-being harmonization, and small and medium enterprises*

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## Introduction

In Malaysia, the structural change from agriculture-based economic to manufacturing economics has given birth to impressively high numbers of SMEs where up to 2019, it represents 98.5% of total business establishments. It also provides nearly 70% of total employment and contributes 38.3% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 17.3% of total exports, implying its importance as a key driver of economic growth (SME, n.d.). The government has undertaken numerous policy measures and initiatives relevant to the SME development, such as launching the National Entrepreneurship Policy 2030 (Entrepreneur Development Ministry, 2019) that embodies such directions towards building a comprehensive entrepreneurial environment. These long-term strategies include easing accessibility to financial supports, enhancing the efficiency of financial institutions, and cultivating beneficial financial innovations.

To fulfill these strategies, entrepreneurs in SMEs are working on adopting lean practices or tools or principles to improve their performance to compete with other various sectors (Adzrie, Chai, Elcy, Joselyn, Mohd-Lair & Madlan, 2019). However, lean practices are something that cannot be easily implemented. A study conducted by Eduardo and Arce (2017) few companies have failed to implement the system based on lean philosophy, and it has led to negative perceptions towards lean (Eduardo & Arce, 2017). Still, SMEs face substantial operational and financial challenges that threaten their survival and growth. Other few barriers faced by SMEs in executing the notion of lean such as lack of standardization, problems in relations between management and employees and deficiency of knowledge in regards to lean tools and techniques (Ulewicz & Kucęba, 2016).

Inside this viewpoint, it has motivated the researchers to investigate comprehensively the vital role of lean practices and employees' well-being in the Malaysian SMEs. A few years back, the idea of having employees well-being approach was practically inconceivable (Farrar, 2017). Most SMEs think they are too small to have well-being strategies. Recent research finds that a third the entrepreneurs of small business think that well-being benefits are just for larger firms, with 43% conceding they have never thought about contribution them (Crush, 2017). In the retail industry such as supermarket, home store and fashion shop, some issues have been shared that consist of long working hours, financial stress, and lack of knowledge, as well as working environment well-being concerns in retail (Carmichael, Fenton, Pinilla-roncancio, Sing & Sadhra, 2016). Similar findings by Sheikh Khairuddin, Saidun and Hashim (2019) revealed that the issues of the entrepreneurs' well-being in the perspective of pressure, motivation in the work place and performance in SMEs are unstoppable. The findings suggested several solutions to overcome issues on well-being among employees such as work relationship through training, job security plan by providing pension plan for employees, work-life balance by having flexible hour policy, effective communication plan to increase employee motivation in the workplace, high pay, and good benefit packages to cultivate employee performance in SMEs.

Beraldin, Danese and Romano (2019) claims that there are several areas in the lean context can stimulate their work engagement which are top management support, relevant training, suitable level of pay, less overload and exhaustion in the workplace. Lean practices would become a remedy to help SMEs accelerate operations, eradicate waste, speed innovation, continuously improve performance, and help employees' well-being (Post Lean Institute, n.d.). Although lean has been predominantly accepted among various industries by gaining from the Toyota development story, the accessible literature addresses a minimal degree of successful lean

practices (Chaple, Anup Prabhakarrao Narkhede, Akarte & Raut, 2018), particularly with well-being harmonization.

As lean practices require systematic and continual efforts, it is deemed crucial to have an in-depth understanding of lean practices and well-being harmonization, especially concerning the SMEs in Malaysia that prove to be culturally, religiously, and ethnically diverse. This is to guarantee that Malaysia's prosperity can be shared by all Malaysians, notwithstanding of culture, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. Furthermore, the New Economic Model has highlighted inclusivity that continuously been a significant standard in Malaysia's national socioeconomic development program, and a fundamental goal.

SMEs should understand the philosophy behind these lean practices to ensure a successful implementation for the lean concept. Because lean should emphasise value creation for end users rather than just reducing waste (Sahoo, 2021). To the best of our knowledge, limited research has been conducted to have an in-depth understanding of lean practices and well-being harmonization in Malaysian SMEs. Thus, this paper conceptualizes how lean practices can contribute to the well-being harmonization in Malaysian SMEs. The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. This study begins with reviewing the past literature on the lean implementation, specifically lean practices and well-being harmonization, followed by methodology, conclusion, and implication for this study.

## Literature Review

The study has conducted an extensive literature survey to identify the existing lean practises and well-being frameworks and came across only a few literature reviews on related issues of these variables. Previous literature reviews on lean practises and well-being are identified and listed in a following section.

### Lean Practices

Various lean practices, which include lean tools and techniques, are conveyed in the literature to represent lean. Based on the mostly cited definition of lean according to Shah and Ward (2007), lean manufacturing is a socio-technical system that has been integrated which core objective is to eradicate waste by simultaneously reducing or lessening supplier, consumer, and internal variability. The implementation of lean tools and techniques in SMEs provides many benefits to the company such as reducing cost and increasing profits (Zhou, 2016; Psomas, Antony & Bouranta, 2017). Lean practices that are commonly utilized by SMEs include the following:

#### 5S

5S is a Japanese workplace organization practices that are related to housekeeping activities to eliminate lean waste. 5S is consists of five Japanese words: Seiri, Seiton, Seisō, Seiketsu, and Shitsuke which has been translated into lean practices as "Sort", "Set In order", "Shine", "Standardize" and "Sustain" (Randhawa & Ahuja, 2017). The benefits obtained through 5S include keeping the workplace cleaner and well-organized thus increasing the efficiency of the working environment (Gupta & Jain, 2015). A study led by Ahmad, Ting, Nor, Wei, Hassan and Hamid (2017) had empirically examined the lean practices by comparing Japanese and Malaysia automotive service centers and the result has shown Japanese companies highly performed five lean practices that consist of Total Productive Maintenance (TPM), Kanban, JIT, VSM, and 5S compared to Malaysian companies.

### **Value Stream Mapping (VSM)**

Another lean practice that is crucial when SMEs implementing lean is VSM. It provides a wider picture of the material and information flow, beginning with raw material and ending with the customer. Incorporating VSM in a company enables a reduction in related lean wastage such as cycle time to reduce its production process and delivery time (Narke & Jayadeva, 2020).

### **Just-in-Time (JIT)**

JIT is an inventory management technique that exercises a pull production system to fulfill customer needs with an intention to produce at the right time with the right quantity to be delivered the right place (Rahman, Laosirihongthong & Sohal, 2010). This is necessary for a company to avoid unnecessary cost and to decrease waste by ensuring the customer to receive goods only as they are needed.

### **Total Productive Maintenance (TPM)**

Maintenance of equipment is deemed necessary in a lean environment. Machine breakdown is costly to a company as it will lead to downtime losses due to production line stoppage, poor product quality, higher work in progress (WIP), and employee morale (Hooi & Leong, 2017). Thus, involvement throughout the organization ranging from top management to all levels of employees is needed for effective maintenance. Besides, a company is said to achieve competitive advantage by having an excellent maintenance program.

Lean implementation is not only due to technical lean practices as discussed above. Lean originated from the Japanese manufacturing system, Toyota Production System (TPS), which also emphasized the human or people for successful implementation. Several studies found that soft lean practices do positively influence the SMEs' operational and business performance. This indicates the importance of a company to emphasize soft lean practices and hard lean practices (Bortolotti, Boscari, & Danese, 2015; Sahoo, 2019; Naveen, Sunil, Sanjay & Abid, 2013). Beraldin, et al. (2019) revealed that soft lean practices are positively related to employee well-being in companies that employ lean practices. Below are the soft lean practices that are practiced in lean companies.

### **Top management support and commitment**

Top management plays a critical role in lean implementation programs such as providing awareness to the employees on the new ways of doing things and having the right change mindset (McLean, Antony & Dahlgaard (2017). In addition, top management must emphasize quality as the main outcome of lean waste elimination (Bortolotti, 2015). Top management must strive towards quality improvement programs through various lean tools and techniques to achieve superior performance in the marketplace.

### **Employee involvement**

Employees must be involved in all stages of lean implementation. Resistance to change among the employees is a major reason a company fails to implement and sustain lean for a period of time (McLean, Antony & Dahlgaard, 2017). The success of SMEs is dependent on human capital to run its business; thus, employee involvement must be an integral part of lean. Employees are involved in lean through employee suggestion scheme and cross-functional work team (Marin-garcia, 2010).

### **Training and Development**

Training is essential to ensure a high level of awareness and exposure to lean tools and techniques among employees (Nordin et al., 2011). Adequate training enables the employee to perform at their best with knowledge on how to implement lean. Employee skills and competencies are developed when employees are involved and participate in lean implementation (Stewart, Danford, Richardson and Pulignano, 2010).

### **Communication**

Effective and clear communication throughout the organization during lean implementation enhances company productivity and employee commitment (Puvanasvaran, Megat, Hong & Razali, 2009). Indeed, communication and mutual trust among team members and management are also critical components (Fadnavis, Najarzadeh and Badurdeen, 2020). Employees must be clear of the lean implementation objectives and the outcome must be visible to all (Alia et al., 2014) because good communication within the company leads to higher performance.

Clearly, past studies have shown that several sectors implemented different lean practices. In view of that, the understanding of lean as a whole is vital to ensure the organization's managers identify the right tools or practices that can be adopted. However, inadequate studies have been found between lean practices and well-being harmonization. Therefore, it is crucial to comprehend how employee well-being can produce a consequence of the transition in the working environment caused by lean (Hasle, Bojesen, Jensen & Bramming (2012).

### **Well-being harmonization**

A study conducted by Di Fabio and Tsuda (2018) suggested that harmonization definition refers to the individuals, relationship between groups, organizations and society. Whereas, well-being in the workplace refers to the self-evident imperative for all individual. Incorporating virtuous well-being directly affects the well-being of the employees and organization (Jiménez-Parra, Alonso-Martínez & Godos-Díez (2018).

Health and well-being are interrelated and it is vital in the workplace not only for individuals but also to the enterprises and public enormously (Carmichael, et al., 2016). It is believed, most of the workers spent their time in the workplace, especially most adults (Carmichael, et al., 2016). Ethically, it is important to have a healthy and better working environment for business, with the intention to support business in terms of productivity and yet to reduce cost in regards to injuries and sickness (Hosie & Sevastos, 2015; Goetzel & Ozminkowski, 2006; Shain & Kramer, 2004). Likewise, there are more extensive expenses to individuals of unsavory well-being reflected in the significance given to well-being strategy. Moreover, the working environment has been perceived as a primary setting to actualize intercessions to diminish the medical care hazard related to latency and being overweight (World Health Organization, 2011).

A study conducted by Hideg and Ferris (2017) discussed whether intentional well-being can be implemented in the workplace. They found two issues arise which are issues that differentiate both business and wisdom traditions and what work and what do not. However, a study by Louchakova-Schwartz (2020) revealed that well-being can be achieved through intended modification in two areas of experience. First, the scope of intersubjectivity can be modified by the act of care. Second, an impassive combination that refers to changes of experience incorporates changing feelings from harmful to good.

The findings revealed three aspects in workplace relational courtesy which are relational decency at work (respect the community and able to express suggestions freely), relational culture at work (politeness, humanity, good manners) and relational readiness at work (understanding others feelings and emotions) (Di Fabio & Tsuda, 2018). Moreover, Di Fabio (2017), believed academic relational civility must be implemented since university students to promote relational skills and a culture of courtesy in society and at work. Consequently, it has been suggested two important elements which are the psychology of sustainability and sustainable development in developing well-being in organizations perspectives in all different levels such as worker, group, organization, and inter-organizational processes (Di Fabio, 2017).

Therefore, this study should be carried out to explore well-being harmonization among SMEs that can be achieved by practicing lean. It is hoped that the understanding of lean practices and well-being harmonization will ensure the SMEs who owned a business are capable to execute a business effectively and efficiently.

### **Lean Practices and Well-being Harmonization**

After a successful execution of lean by large enterprises, SMEs have currently started embracing lean practices to ameliorate the performance of social, environmental, financial and performance (Chaplin, Heap and O'Rourke, 2016). It is approximated that only 10 per cent of organizations have magnificently implemented lean practices (Bhasin & Burcher, 2006). Nonetheless, ineffectual management of lean implementation barriers (LIBs) might cause such negligible successful execution (Dora, Kumar, Goubergen, Molnar & Gellynck, 2013). Conferring to Jadhav, Mantha and Rane (2014), barriers disrupt the lean implementation and affect one another. They further revealed, most of the points of lean barriers that are equally cited in the literature are the dearth of resources to invest, the deficiency of participation from the top-level management and workers' behavior or endurance for successful implementation of the lean system. Sharma, Dixit and Qadri (2014) pointed out that inadequate thoughtful or unawareness of lean barriers is a main cause why lean implementation could not succeed.

In spite of all these barriers, lean will affect the well-being of an organization especially the employees. The effect of lean on employees' well-being has been broadly discussed in various fields and continuously being debated among scholars (Beraldin et al., 2013). Hasle et al. (2012) argued that there is no constant or distinctive causal relationship between lean, employee well-being and the working environment. A study conducted by Hasle et al. (2012) has shown a negative relationship between lean and working environment as well employees' well-being. Meanwhile, a study by Huo and Boxall (2017) revealed that the risks in job demands and utilization of resources by employees will affect the well-being of lean production. Anderson-Connolly, Grunberg, Greenberg and Moore (2002) investigated lean and manifested causes of intensifications in the workplace that are associated with poor health and stress. As one of the lean practices, Kaizen functioned as a tool to increase awareness and handle psychological issues, which results in improved mental health and job satisfaction (von Thiele Schwarz, Nielsen, Stenfors-Hayes & Hasson, 2017). In addition, having favourable job characteristics motivates employees to actively engage in their work, which leads to an increase in job satisfaction and, consequently, performance (Minh et al., 2019)

Bocquet, Dubouloz and Chakor (2019) directed a study of lean practices in French industrial firms and indicate that lean practices and health workers should be investigated by combining lean and human resource management practices that change the lean process the organization. In contrast, Füllemann, Fridrich, Jenny, Brauchli, Inauen, and Bauer (2016) used multilevel

analysis and demonstrated that leaner work processes were not associated with workshop quality but were related to improve well-being after six months. Interestingly, Beraldin et al. (2019) produced a result of soft lean practices (SLP) and Just-in-Time (JIT) in their study whereby SLP contributes to work engagement and less exhaustion. Contrariwise, JIT demonstrates exhaustion, less work engagement, and acts as an interference. Likewise, in a qualitative study, Longoni, Pagell, Johnston and Veltri (2013) discovered support for the vital role of lean in reducing harmful effects.

Consequently, past literature evidenced that the studies of lean practices and well-being remain inconsistent (Bouville & Alis, 2014; Erdil, Aktas & Arani, 2018) and are less explored qualitatively. Supported by Füllemann et al. (2016), the empirical evidence concerning the effects of lean on employees' well-being is inadequate and conflicting. Thus, to comprehend the impacts of lean practices and well-being, this paper will qualitatively investigate by understanding lean practices and well-being harmonization for SMEs in Malaysia.

### **Methodology**

This study will employ qualitative multiple-case studies. Case studies are commonly used in past research, especially in the lean context. However, multiple-case studies were found lacking in the research of lean implementation (Erdil, et al, 2018). The proof from multiple cases is frequently deliberated more convincing. The overall multiple-case study is then considered more forceful (Herriott & Firestone, 1983) compared to a single case.

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate in various areas of lean such as the barriers of lean (Jadhav et al., 2014; Abolhassani, Layfield & Gopalakrishnan, 2016) lean manufacturing practices (Nawanir, Lim, Lee, Moshood & Nur, 2020), lean production and well-being (Huo & Boxall, 2017) the implementation of lean (Ulewicz & Kucęba, 2016) and others. However, limited studies have been found between lean practices and well-being harmonization in SMEs in Malaysia. Thus, multiple case studies are required to produce a connection between lean practices and well-being harmonization in SMEs, which are challenging to discover in cross-sectional studies.

Multiple case studies in lean research were found dearth, specifically in the SMEs setting. As stated by Pearce et al. (2018), there is the necessity to enrich the understanding of the qualitative and human factors that influence the achievement of lean implementation. Moreover, a multiple-case study needs vast resources and time past the means of a single student or independent research investigator. Therefore, the decision to embark on a multiple-case study should not be taken casually (Yin, 2018).

Consequently, this study will focus on SMEs in Malaysia, especially in the Northern Region which comprises Perak, Pulau Pinang, Kedah, and Perlis. This region was picked as the study area since these states are under the Northern Corridor Economic Region especially in Penang. This offers an epitome case study of the role of an economic corridor in connecting the agricultural vicinity with the "modern" sector of the economy (Athukorala & Narayanan, 2017). Additionally, these states are predicted to turn into an economic region globally by 2025 for the publics to invest, live and carry up families in a safe, unpolluted, hygienic and sustainable environment (Sime Darby, 2007).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is foreseen that SMEs in various industries will consistently play a crucial role in the Malaysian economy. The new understanding of this research is hoped to bring new insight for SMEs to improve well-being harmonization by implementing lean practices. Thus, several implications can be drawn from this study in the context of society, economy, and national.

### Society

- Towards this end, the government is committed to ensuring equitable opportunities for all segments of society, in particular the B40 households.
- This new understanding will improve the income and wealth of B40 households.

### Economy

- SME Corp will organize the growth of SME companies.
- For instance, cooperation among agencies offering entrepreneurship support programs to micro-, small- and medium-scale entrepreneurs in urban and rural areas such as SME Corp, TEKUN Nasional, and AIM. Indeed it should reinforce by delivering cohesive support and reduce redundancy activities.

### National

- It will help these potential SMEs companies network with agencies that can help them expand their production, exports, and market with this new understanding.

In sum, it is expected future research will propose a new model of lean practices and well-being harmonization which it can be adopted or adapted for the whole Malaysian SMEs. According to the SME Annual Report (2018/2019), the government had recommended a fully scaled business model to be implemented in the SMEs. This model provides a combination of economic growth and empowerment with positive social impact, especially to B40 communities.

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