WAYS TO IMPROVE EMPLOYEE RELATIONS AT WORKPLACES

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Abstract: *Maintaining and fostering good relations between employers and employees can create a harmonious atmosphere. Harmony at the workplace not only helps safeguard the interests of employers and employees but also promotes progressive development of the country. To ensure the sustainability of harmonious industrial relations, efforts to strengthen these two parties need to be given attention. Neglect of this will invite detrimental disaster, not only to workers and employers, but also to the country. Hence, this writing will reveal some of the ways and strategies in managing employment relationships. By consolidating the harmonious relationship between workers and employers it can indirectly increase the productivity of the country.*

Keywords: *Industrial Relations, Harmonious, Employer Employees Relationship*

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Introduction

Human beings play a significant role in any organisation. Organisations can only operate effectively if human beings assist them daily. Human beings working in an organisation are called employees. According to Section 2 of the *Industrial Relations Act 1967*, an employee was defined as any person, including an apprentice, employed by an employer under a contract of employment to perform work for hire or reward, as well as the proposers of any proceedings concerning a trade dispute. However, in real life, employees are not working in a vacuum, and they need to communicate and collaborate with others in the organisation in order to complete their tasks. Therefore, there is a relationship between employees in the workplace. Yet, each employee comes from different background and culture, they need to collaborate with each other, and sometimes there will have some argument or conflict between the employees. Hence, this type of relationship is referred to as employee relations. The term "employee relations" is derived from the term "industrial relations" (Pahuja, Chowdary & Mittal, 2021).

Contrary to widespread belief, there is a slight distinction between these two terms. The term "industrial relations" refers to the relationship between an employer and his employees, mainly when the employees are members of a trade union (Aminuddin, 2020). According to Pahuja et al. (2021), industrial relations are the contract of workplace relationship between industrial employees and employers and bargaining between two parties regarding salary and other work conditions. Besides that, the definition of employee relations is the relationship between employees in order to increase their work productivity (Luengalongkot & Hongwiset,

2020). Pahuja et al. (2021) also pointed out that employee relation is defined as "a study of the relationship between employee and employer to solve issues and increase production by improving employee motivation and morale."

Simply put, employee relations refer to the organisation striving to establish and maintain positive relationships with its employees. At the same time, employee relations also address the ways to involve employees in the organisation's vision and goals in a variety of situations (Akanbiemu, 2021). The aim of organisations is to strengthen employee loyalty and actively participate in their work by fostering positive employee relations. For every organisation, employee relations not only emphasise the relationship between the team members but also the personal relationship (Akanbiemu, 2021). A positive personal relationship within the organisation might have an impact on work performance. For instance, employees who perform well at work will improve the value of the organisation. Therefore, the significance of individuals in connection with an organisation's values is also dependent on the organisation.

Literature Review

Based on researchers' point of view, researchers believe that every organisation had been faced various issues and challenges to manage or improve the value of the organisation, whether it is internal or external. In the organisation, there have many problems that should be solved by the organisation, especially employee relations. Employee relations are the main issues that obstruct an organisation to be improved. Due to that, the organisation can internally range to prevent the issues of employee relations. Besides that, Petrova et al. (2020) stated that internal issues, such as employee motivation and commitment in the workplace, are some of the most critical requirements in determining the value of the organisation. According to the previous study, Akanbiemu (2021) pointed out that employees are unmotivated to work in the organisation. This statement has shown employees have poor interpersonal relationships and lack regard for their roles in the organisation. Petrova et al. (2020) also mentioned the increase in employee turnover and the decrease in efficiency of the organisation were due to a lack of motivation and commitment to the goals of the organisation.

In addition, the organisation which wish they have a strong employee relation in the workplace, and the organisation must consider the employee's basic needs. Maslow (1943) has determined the five categories of basic needs for humans, namely Maslow's needs. It is also called the needs hierarchy theory, and it is based on a hierarchy from the most basic human needs to higher-order needs, as shown in Figure 1. When the organisation meets the basic needs of employees, employees will have good motivation in the workplace. This motivation has affected the confidence level of employees who are more active in their work and working with other team members. At the same time, this means that the employee's job satisfaction increases, so they will work effectively to increase the value of the organisation. Therefore, the organisation needs to maintain a positive employee relation and identify the needs of employees need to ensure that they have affiliation with each other in the organisation.

Figure 1: Maslow's basic need Source: Adapted from Maslow (1943)

However, most organisations face the same problems in the workplace. According to Verlinden (2021), employee relations is the most critical factor because it affects the overall organisational performance. One of the problems that the organisation faced was conflict management. Conflict management can be happened in everywhere, and it is unavoidable. It normally happens between the employees or between the employer and employees. In the organisation, some employees do not respect or show little not respect to their employer or leader. The employees do not pay attention to their employer or leader when they talk to them. Due to this, the conflict will have happened because each of the individuals has a different tolerance. If an employer is talking to his employees but the employee ignores him for a long time, his tolerance will be wiped out over time, and the conflict will occur at that time.

Wages issues also become a problem where there are poor employee relations in the organisation. Normally, this issue happens on pay up day. Employees tend to double-check their overtime and holiday pay when it is possible. When this issue happens, the human resource department does not prepare all kinds of questions to answer the employees well. However, they need to spend more time checking the timesheet or attendance record to view detailed information. Due to that, the relationship of the employees is poor in the organisation. Besides that, the employees do not or late to receive the wages on time will mess up employee relations. From time to time, employees can be understood by the organisation. However, if these issues frequently happen in the organisation, the employees will lose their trust.

Attendance of the employees is the most common issue for all of the organisation. Verlinden (2021) has pointed out that there are many excessive accidental absences among employees. Some of the employees come to work but come lately. They feel that they do not do wrong when they arrive later and even ask their colleagues to help them punch "clock in" for them. Other than that, the employees were always late for attending the meeting without any practical reasons. They made these mistakes many times, but the organisation did not take any action, so they felt that the employee would not punish them if they made similar mistakes again. When the attendance of the employees in the organisation is too bad, it will directly influence the productivity of the organisation.

In the organisation, there are various ways to improve employee relations. This is because there is different employees' different background in the organisation, and all of them have

different behaviour. In order to maintain the organisation work effectively, the organisation must manage the relationship of the employees well in the workplace to make sure that the performance of employees is excellent and helps to enhance the value of the organisation. Maheshwari, Samal and Bhamoriya (2020) explained that leadership support and long-term relationships play a critical role in building stronger relationships between employees. The research paper written by Maheshwari et al. (2020) has mentioned four dimensions for the role of employee relations, which are awareness, action, comprehensiveness, and excellence. Regardless of the organisation, employee relations play a significant role. This is related to the reasons that positive employee relations impact employee engagement, satisfaction, productivity, and other aspects of the workplace.

The Effective Ways to Improve Employee Relations at Work
Every organisation has its own ways to improve the relationship of the employees in the organisation, therefore there have various ways to improve employee relations. Thus, the department of human resources plays important role in the organisation. Human resources are the core of an organisation. This is because the role of human resources involves talent management, recruitment, and selection, learning and development, industrial relation, employee relation, and compensation and benefit (Salwa, A., personal communication, November 14, 2021). Human resource is also the middleman who helps maintain the relationship between employers and employees. Although human resources play various roles in the organisation, researchers only focused on the aspect of employee relations. Therefore, researchers will discuss the effective ways to improve employee relations at work in this study.

1) Effective Communication
It is often said that employee relations refer to how the human resources department communication with its employee. If there is effective interaction between the employer and employees, it will become a huge impact on the organisation's performance, enhancing its productivity. Normally, the department of human resources assists in handling employee relations by identifying and solving problems at work. Besides that, the human resource department should measure and increase the employee's morale, and the conflict in the organisation can also be reduced when the employee relations are positive. Based on Schroth (2019), communication skills involve the content and expression of social interaction. This involves the use of proper words and phrases, as well as the appropriate tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, and direct eye contact with the audience (Schroth, 2019).

Communication is very important in an organisation. Therefore, the organisation must improve the communication in the organisation. Communication is passing the information from one person to another person or one group to another group, and it starts with the same information from sender to receiver. The organisation should encourage the employees to have effective communication between team members. There were five steps for effective communication at the workplace suggested by Writer (2020), as shown in Figure 2. Riggio and Porter (2013) stated that miscommunication can lead to confusion and misunderstanding among the employees. Hence, the communication must be accurate and relevant. The semantic problem can lead to communication breakdown and affect the receiver to receive the information especially using jargon words to colleagues. It directly influences job outcomes such as job satisfaction. There was two-way communication in the organisation which means that employees should not keep silent when not agreeing with the proposal given by the colleagues with pointing out the opinion or ideas. Alternatively, employees can politely discuss

if they find unacceptable things with their top management. Therefore, employees can avoid this kind of conflict.
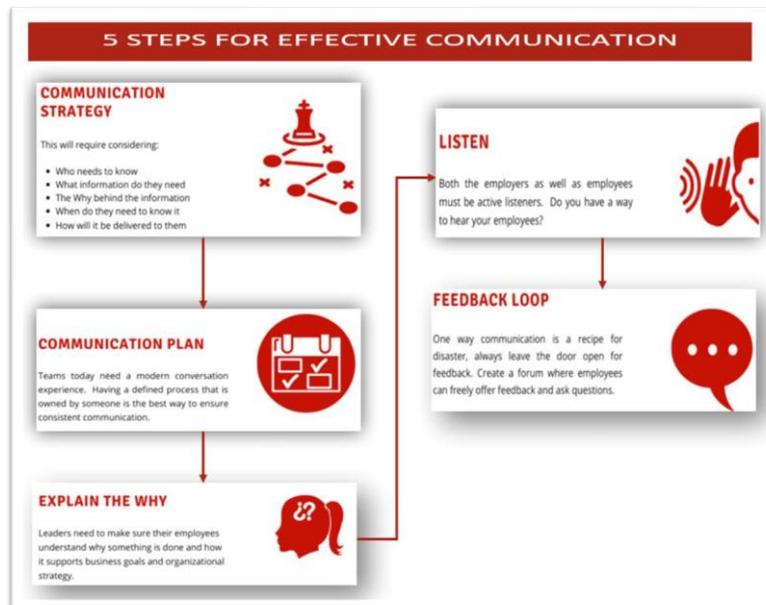

Figure 2: Five steps for effective communication

Source: Adapted from Writer (2020)

2) Create and Promote an Open Dialogue

Human resource department of the organisation should create and promote an open dialogue with the employees to improve employee relations at the workplace. It is important to ask employees about the way to improve the organisation, but it does not mean the human resources department talks to the employees frequently (Strikwerda, 2021). Establishing an open dialogue between employers and employees has provided valuable insights and made the team feel valued. This is because the employees are more likely to share their honest opinions. In an open dialogue, the focus is on finding a solution to an issue rather than arguing about it. Of course, a good manager is critical to the success of an organisation. Employees are more likely to build a positive workplace relationship with their top management if they perceive that they are open, honest, and trustworthy. Other than that, open dialogue helps to set up a clear goal and expectation for the employees. Based on Strikwerda (2021), communication became more challenging to the human resources department of the organisation during the pandemic session because almost millions of workers were working from home. Communication became harder because the human resource department cannot look forward to employees' attitudes behind the screen. The dissatisfaction and conflict of employees are the easiest to express and resolve through open communication. The employees require a means of expressing themselves openly without fear of reprisal from their colleagues or top management. They can provide feedback anonymously in the human resource management system. Feedback anonymously is ideal for organisations that use mixed labour. However, open dialogue is useless when there is no need for someone to monitor the forum and act on the issues.

3) Reward and Inspire

One of the ways to improve employee relations is to reward and inspire them. Organisations can adopt the theory of goal setting and reinforcement. Riggio and Porter (2013) stated that goal-setting theory is a theory that sets a challenging goal for the employees. To achieve the

goals, it needs commitment from the employees. Organisations should not simply pass down the goals to employees but consider working with employees to set them goals by encouraging them to set up a stretch goal. Even though the goal is difficult, but it is achievable. Employees will invest more when the performance management is in a two-way process. This is because the top management will seek feedback from employees throughout the process. For instance, Google allows their employees to set up a periodical goal, and the goal must be measurable. The ideas which came out from their employees had changed the face of Google to a better way. Organisations should have a deep understanding of what employees think. This is because they usually have insights or ideas that can significantly impact their efficiency or the organisation's success. Besides, reinforcement theory is apparent in the various plans used to reward the employee (Riggio & Porter, 2013). It is divided into two roles which are reward and punishment. The organisation can reward their employees for improving employee relations, such as incentives, bonuses, or awards for various achievements. However, the organisation must ensure that rewards are aligned with business values. If not, it will be self-defeating.

4) Motivation

According to Tewari and Kumar (2019), the effort made by managers to inspire, motivate, and influence employees to take action is known as motivation. When the employment relationship is good, the employee will be motivated to work. The simplest way is always to appreciate and say thank you to them. There have no employees who do not like to receive a nod ofappreciation from their top management when they do a good job in their career. The organisation will be in deep trouble when the management always keeps correcting and seeking the problem from the employees to improve employees' performance. Therefore, the relationship will worsen if the organisation continuously does it to their employees. Instead of using the word "but" to show thankfulness, the remedial way is to communicate genuine gratitude to the employees. If there is the word "but" in the middle, this appreciation is not good but is a disguised request that requires employees to improve their performance. Not only reward can improve employee relations, given a day off or saying thank you to the employees also will be appreciated by the employees. Employees are more willing to go the extra mile when they receive their manager saying, "thank you". This statement supports evidence from the survey by Powell (2021), as shown in Figure 2.2. Even though it was tangible and simple, it made employees feel appreciated by their top management. Tewari and Kumar (2019) also mentioned that a motivated employee would be coordinating and be monitoring to support the activities and goals of the organisation. When the employees have good relations with its top management, it can help them reduce the mistake in the organisations. As a result, the relationship between an employee and his or her colleagues may be affected by the motivation of the top management.

> Two in three (66%) of employees agreed that their managers could do more to praise and thank them in a timely, specific way, highlighting the importance of in-the-moment recognition.
>
> 75% of employees agreed that motivation and morale would improve at their company if managers simply said "thank you" more and noticed when people do good work.

Figure 3: The feedback from survey participants
Source: Adapted from Powell (2021)

5) Healthy Work-Life Balance

The organisation needs to consider the healthy work-life balance of employees as an effective way to improve employee relations at work. Work-life balance was defined as the state of balance in the relationship between non-work and work aspects of personal life such as work, home and other life roles (Kelliher, Richardson & Boiarintseva, 2019; Jaharuddin & Zainol, 2019). Personally speaking, having a healthy work-life balance in the organisation is crucial for the employees because it is beneficial to the relationship and health of employees. However, it can also improve their overall performance and productivity in the organisation. Normally, employers fail to concern that their employee has a personal life that they must prioritise. According to Muller (2021), the report from Grand Canyon University has stated that the family relationships have been recorded highest per cent in their employees' life has suffered the most due to poor work-life balance, as shown in Figure 3. When employers ignore the healthy work-life balance of employees, it may affect the organisation's employee relations. As far as is known, some causes affect work-life imbalances, such as increased job responsibilities, overtime work, family responsibilities and others. It has a bad effect on the organisation for employees who do not have a healthy work-life balance. In order to maintain a healthy work-life balance, the support of the human resources department to its employees' personal life through various programs, including flexible work schedules, children care services, emergency leave due to personal and family reasons (Kotera, Green & Sheffield, 2020).
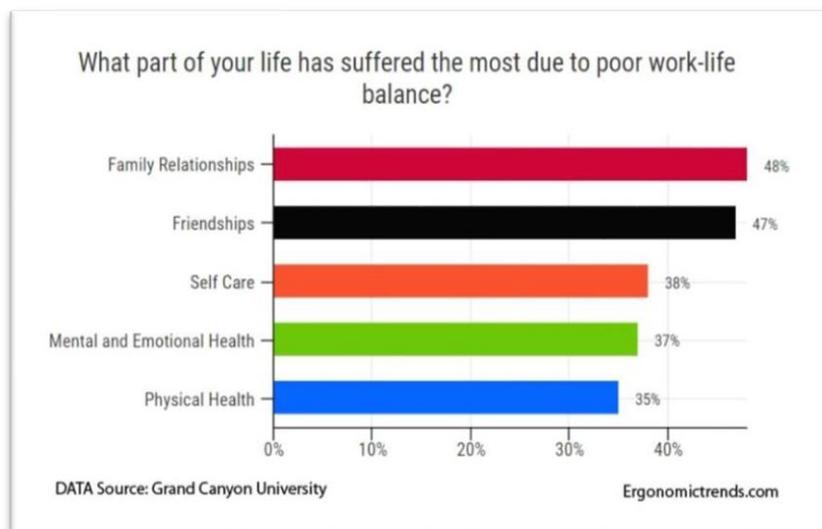

Figure 4: Statistics of the part of employees' life has suffered the most due to poor work-life balance

Source: Adapted from Muller (2021)

As an example, the Alliance Management team at Wivenhoe implemented work-life balance initiatives to increase the employees' loyalty and commitment. Therefore, Wivenhoe had moved their working days to five days a week. This means that employees change their overall view of the organisation and believe that they are valuable. The organisation will consider issues outside of their work rather than be concerned about their performance at work.In this situation, it improves employee relations, but employees have job satisfaction to work together and emerge their excellent performance at work.

6) Provide Career Development Opportunities

Provide opportunities for career development is also an effective way to improve employee relations at work. Before that, the human resource department ensures that employees are in the right job and right place at work. If employees are not engaged in a very suitable job, they will not feel enjoyable or successful at work. When employees have the right job and workplace, they will feel meaningful work and more confidence in achieving their goals. Therefore, the ability of the human resource department in the organisation is to take responsibility for providing and supporting career development programs for its employees. It means that the career development opportunities will build more motivated and well-equipped employees. Besides, it is beneficial for employees to understand the career path that will take them to their next promotion. Therefore, employees may establish specific goals and improve the skills required for their next promotion.

Besides that, employees who can learn and improve in their professions through career development programs are often happier and more productive in their job. Based on the survey conducted by Stevens (2019), most employees have chosen happiness over salary as crucial to them at the workplace, and the statistics are shown in Figure 5. At the same time, the human resource department also considers the abilities and talents that employees have but are not being used. Through these career development opportunities, the human resources department should work cooperatively with its employees to identify the ways in which they improve their existing various talents or skill and obtain new knowledge and skill. It helps the employees develop their new knowledge and skill and improves the value of the organisation. Kitana and Karam (2019) have stated that the career development program helps transform the collected information into a personal understanding of the occupation. For example, Nigerian bank has adopted career planning and career management to improve employee relations and it has shown positive results that it can affect the performance of the employees. Therefore, the employees need an understanding of the interactions with colleagues, mentors, and trainers. As a result, positive employee relations will be established.

Figure 5: Statistics about the most important to employee at workplace
Source: Adapted from Stevens (2019)

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, there is a positive relationship that employee relationships directly influence the job satisfaction and performance of the employees. The stronger the interpersonal relationships, the higher the level of performance of the employees. In this study, there are many ways to improve the relationship of the employees. The most effective way to improve employee relations is communication. In an organisation, there must have communication between each other. Therefore, they can achieve the same goal. However, if there is no communication in the organisation, the organisation will regress. There will always be a conflict between the team member or between employers and employees in the organisation. The work becomes easier

after the communication because employers can better know their employees' strengths and weaknesses. Employers can assign their employees' suitable jobs based on their skills and knowledge. Top management plays an important role to the employees, which are vital in spreading human values to maintain a good employee relation. The spirit of cooperation can be planted and maintained in an organisation through human resource professionals and skilled leaders. When the leaders always keep advocating and implementing this spirit in the entire organisation, then the entire organisation will gradually absorb the same spirit. Hence, it will become a mindset of the organisation.

Employees have the motivation to work when they feel they are satisfied with their job. Most of the employees have the motivation to work when their works have been appreciated by their top management. Besides that, the organisation gives its employees rewards or good benefits. Gainsharing will become a way for organisations to reward teams for outstanding performance. The employees will do their best to do all the work to get the rewards. Fortunately, this method has helped improve employee relations. The organisation will be led to growth by motivated workers. If an organisation has positive employee relations, the conflict will have fewer because the differences between the employer and employee have not widened any widespread gaps. While the employee relations had been improved, the culture of the workplace will become better, and people also wanted to job in the workplace which has a good culture. When there is a good relationship in the organisation, the employees will automatically abide by the organisation's norms and principles. Hence, the productivity of the organisation increases, and the employees will feel happy to work. At the same, they will be giving their best determination on their work.

The way that an organisation can take action to improve the communication in the organisation is that to have a team building such as organisation trip every year. This is because, through team building, employers and employees can get to know each other better. During the trip, the organiser of the trip can plan some games that can cultivate team spirit among the employer and employees. According to Fapohunda (2013), team building can improved employees performance. Employee relations can be improved when they play together in the games. Employers can have a deep talk with their employees about the future of the organisation. In this talk, they can have a deeper understanding of the organisation's background and what the organisation has experienced before they joined the organisation. For example, Apple has believed that communication is important to maintain good relationship between employees and employer. Apple organised a program to ensure their employee engagement and encourage all employees to keep in touch. Therefore, the employee relations will become better.

Besides that, the organisation can provide an anonymous box for the employees in the organisation. Thus, they can give their point of view anonymous. Every employee has different behaviour. Some of them are introverted, and some are outgoing. Due to this, introverted employees are shy to express and share their point of view with their employer. However, most of the time, they have a very good idea, and it helps to improve the productivity of the organisation. Hence, the department of human resources in the organisation can prepare an anonymous box for this kind of employee. When an employee's idea adopts by the organisation, they will feel valued, which indirectly improves employee relations (Ciraldo, 2021). Therefore, the performance of the employees will higher, and they will become more loyal.

Moreover, the organisation can provide a motivational programme to their employees. When the employees have the motivation to work and are satisfied with their work, the relations between employer and employee will directly increase. The organisation can raise the bonuses. This is because there is no better way to motivate the employees except for offering a bonus to the employees. The organisation also can promote their employees by giving them profit sharing. A profit-sharing plan is the most alternative way to motivate them. The way to improve the employees in the organisation is implementing a training programme for their employees. For instance, Google offer their employees free training because Google know the value of the employees and the employees will payoff to the organisation with their job satisfaction. Training programmes can improve the employees' working skills and improve employee relations in the organisation.

There have many ways to improve employee relations. One of example is preparing a leisure area for the employees in the organisation. Stigsdotter (2004) has pointed out that by having a leisure area can release employees' stress. It can enhance the work efficiency of the employees in the organisation. This is because employees work for long hours, and they will get bored after working for long hours. Therefore, this leisure space allows the employees to take a short rest in this area. There can be some food like biscuits in this leisure area and drink like coffee. Other than that, the organisation can prepare game areas such as snooker for the employees to relax. Take for an example, in United Kingdom, the organisation prepared a leisure area such as a cinema and bowling alleys for their employees to relax. Therefore, they can use this short break to interact together. It can directly enhance employee relations.

In an organisation, not only men work in it, but also many women work in organisation. Thus, the organisation can support the establishment of a nursing room and childcare centre for the women who work there. A mother who had gave birth a child and finished the maternity leave will experienced difficulties produce enough milk for her child (Kim, Shin & Donovan, 2019). The nursing room is prepared for the women who had already been a mother and she just given birth or still breastfeeding their child. An example from Nestle is one of the organizations supporting breastfeeding and preparing a nursing room for mothers. However, the childcare centre is prepared for the working mom. This is of great help to working mothers because they will not worry about their children not being taken care of by a nanny. They can just let their child study over there. Thus, they can pay more attention to their job. It helps the working mom enhance their work efficiency and productivity. As a result, the employee relations will be better when they feel their need are fulfilled.

Finally, the organisation can organise an annual dinner for their employees every year. The purpose of the annual dinner is to express gratitude to the personnel for their efforts on behalf of the organisation over the previous year. Therefore, the organisation can give awards to their employees at the annual dinner, such as the best employee, attendance award and best marketing award. Based on Kaiser (2018), the award ceremony in an organisation can be very effective in verifying the work performance of employees. However, these awards must be based on the key performance index (KPI) of the employees. Employees will feel that their efforts are seen by the employer. When they think they are valuable in the organisation, their job satisfaction will increase, and they will have more motivation to work. Hence, the organisation of these annual dinners will improve employee relations in the workplace.

Developing an effective employee relations plan will help an organisation improve its values. The problems stated above which are conflict, wages issues, and attendance issues can be avoided by the organisation. The solution is as follows:

i. Conflict management

In this problem, human resources play significant roles in the organisation. Human resources department need to identify the issue between the employees or between the employer and employees. The department of human resource must find out the main source of quarrel had been started. This is because the human resources department are acting as a bridge between the employer and employees. Therefore, when there is a conflict in the organisation, the human resource representative is the one who needs to find out the source of the problem and resolve the misunderstanding between the employer and employees. Besides that, employees and employers are encouraged to have open communication in the organisation (Todd, 2021). Through this method, gossip and misunderstanding will be reduced and it directly helps employees and employers trust each other. When trust is established between them, they will be willing to express the truest thoughts in their hearts and open their hearts to discuss their troubles with top management.

ii. Wages issues

Human resources also play an important role in this issue. Some of the employees faced trouble overcoming their expenses and applying for a salary advance.

However, they will complain and seek the payment during the pay up day and ague with human resources representative. Therefore, to avoid this kind of issue always happening in the organisation, the department of the human resource should have a contract or write it in black and white for the evidence. According to Jonatha (2021), when the employees argue incorrect payment of the salary, human resources can prove it to the employees. Another way to avoid this issue is self-service timekeeping. Self-service timekeeping is encouraged within the organisation by using a timekeeping system that tracks clock in and out times for employees. It helps employees to track and manage their schedule of work. Employees are encouraged to join a trade union to ensure that their rights are always protected by ensuring that the Employee Act 1955 is applied correctly.

iii. Attendance issues

According to Todd (2021), in a workplace, there occur problems where employees have their own "buddy punch" when they are late to work. An effective way to avoid it happening frequently in the organisation is to write some rules for all employees. The rules that had been set could affect certain aspects for the employees such as deduction of the salary when the employees come late. However, this method should be used carefully. At the same time, empathy must be maintained under special circumstances. Moreover, the organisation provides the punch card system to make sure that the production of the organisation operates smoothly and the work efficiency of the employees. Hence, the organisation can implement a face recognition system for the employees to clock in and out, a thumbprint system and closed-circuit television (CCTV) to avoid the employees having "buddy punch".

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