Managing rightsizing in higher education institution: A qualitative thematic investigation

Mohd Sufian Ruslan*[1], Ismi Arif Ismail** and Mohd Hafiz Hanafiah***
*University Transformation Division, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia**
*Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia***
*Faculty of Hotel and Tourism Management, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia***

Abstract: This study aims to explore the rightsizing practices of higher education institution administrators. This study utilised the qualitative research methodology within the constructivist paradigm to explore Malaysian higher education institution administrator's perceptions and experiences on rightsizing practice. Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with observations and document analysis were conducted. This study found four principal rightsizing objectives within the context of higher education institution administrators: i) changing policies; ii) organisation scanning; iii) human resource planning, and; iv) human resource optimisation. Managing shrinkage via rightsizing also includes recognising the rightsizing process, strategies, and barriers. It is essential to understand the implication of rightsizing exercise, especially in the public sector, to prevent organisations from making "wrong-sizing" decisions. Constant evaluation of the rightsizing efforts should also be done to ensure that the organisation operates in a lean and mean manner.

Keywords: *Rightsizing, higher education institution, qualitative, thematic analysis, Malaysia.*

Introduction

The rightsizing strategy or exercise has become a common strategy used by today's organisations (Batra, 2019; Kibble, 2019; Lhamo & Thinley, 2021; Marques et al., 2014). A sound and effective rightsizing strategy ensures that strategic decisions create long-term competitiveness for organisations (Ahmad et al., 2016). Since then, the rightsizing practices have been widely used in the private and public sectors worldwide (Appelbaum et al., 1999; Ashayeri et al., 2014; Batra, 2019; Datta et al., 2010) and a common strategy used by many organisations in Malaysia (Ho et al., 2013). However, both sectors' rightsizing strategies and approaches are quite different. In the private sector, other than the normal rightsizing strategies such as restructuring, job redesign, outsourcing, etc., the most common strategy used is through retrenchment (Gabriel et al., 2020; Kibble, 2019), either voluntarily (e.g. voluntary separation scheme) or involuntarily (e.g. termination contract of service). Rather than retrenching the employees, the public sector's rights can only be done through restructuring, delayering, employee multi-skilling, etc. (Md Saleh & Bakar, 2017). In terms of practice, there are no general guidelines or policies that administrators can refer to in implementing the rightsizing activities, thus making it hard to implement them within the public sector (Walaski, 2017).

Scholarly past research has shown that rightsizing strategies have become a popular and central management practice used by many firms, especially during economic downturns (Gabriel et al., 2020; Lhamo & Thinley, 2021; Marques et al., 2014). It also noted that the outcomes of the rightsizing activity might have mixed effects on the organisation's performance, both positive and negative (Bierbaum, 2020; Carriger, 2016; Khairi, 2020). Nevertheless, recent studies have shown that most rightsizing exercises conducted by firms have shown more negative effects than positive ones (Carriger, 2016, 2017; Datta et al., 2010; DeMeuse & Dai, 2013; Ho et al., 2013). All the firms involved in the studies were private sector firms that mainly adopt employee reduction through retrenchment strategy in their rightsizing activities. Although many studies have been done on rightsizing strategy, only a few studies (Ansari, 2016; Gabriel et al., 2020; Lhamo & Thinley, 2021) discuss rightsizing activities within the public sector outside the Malaysian context. On the other hand, Razali et al. (2014) emphasised a need to have more rightsizing studies within the local setting.

According to Lee (2004), various rightsizing strategies and implementation were taken by public sectors, such as organisational restructuring, business reengineering, retrenchments (involuntary and voluntary exercise), pay reduction, freeze on hiring, etc. Although there are many studies done on rightsizing strategy, only a few studies discuss rightsizing activities within the public sector, and it was done outside the Malaysian context (Ansari, 2016; Gabriel et al., 2020). Furthermore, administrators can refer to no general guidelines or policy to implementing the rightsizing activities, thus making it hard to implement them within the public sector (Md Saleh & Bakar, 2017).

Reports by The Star Online (2017) and Malaysiakini Portal (2017) stated that the number of public servants in 2017 increased to 1.6 million in Malaysia. An estimated total of MYR74 billion was paid for the public servant's emoluments and allowances in 2016, which cost the government 40% of its revenue (The Star Online, 2017). One of the components that made up the composition of the total public servant in Malaysia would be the employees in public higher education universities that comprises 20 public universities all over the country. Due to the ever-increasing high cost, many parties have called out for the government to rightsize the public sector before the situation gets out of hands (Malay Mail Online, 2016; Jaafar, 2017).

With the scarcity of rightsizing practices within the public sector Batra (2019), especially in Malaysia's higher education context (Lee, 2004; Ho et al., 2013), this issue is worth exploring to understand the rightsizing phenomena comprehensively. This study aims to understand and analyse the objectives, processes, strategies and barriers in executing rightsizing exercises. Specifically, this study targets to fulfil four specific objectives, which are to explore (i) the objectives of the rightsizing exercise; (ii) the processes involved in the rightsizing exercise; (iii) the strategies used in the rightsizing exercise and; (iv) the barriers in executing rightsizing exercise executed by the higher education institution.

This study may provide several significant insights from an organisational standpoint concerning the rightsizing strategies from the Human Resource Development (HRD) and Human Resource Management (HRM) aspects. The study findings will help them re-assess their concerns, experience, and method regarding the rightsizing activity and help them reflect and strategise their ways and actions through future rightsizing exercises. In addition, the result of the study will also benefit the organisation in the sense that they would have a better insight and understanding of what needs to be improved further during a rightsizing exercise. Besides, as the implementation of HRD and HRM practices in public universities is similar to other public sector organisations, the study findings will help public universities anticipate and prepare for future rightsizing exercise outcomes.

Literature Review

One of organisations' most common and popular strategies is the rightsizing strategy (Schenkel & Teigland, 2016). The rightsizing strategy has become a more prevalent method used by

organisations to increase organisational performance worldwide in the past two decades (Batra, 2019; DeMeuse & Dai, 2013; Kibble, 2019). Internal and external environmental changes have forced firms and organisations to respond to survive (Walaski, 2017). The term rightsizing is usually used interchangeably with many other terms such as downsizing, restructuring, retrenching, selective shrinking, reengineering, outplacing, streamlining, rebalancing, etc. (Ashayeri et al., 2014; Batra, 2019; Datta et al., 2010; Walaski, 2017).

Although, in general, practitioners are made to believe profoundly that rightsizing will improve the organisation's performance (Schenkel & Teigland, 2016), academic evidence indicates otherwise. There have been contradicting academic evidence that rightsizing can achieve its objectives (Batra, 2019; Bierbaum, 2020; Kibble, 2019). While some studies have found a positive effect from rightsizing (Gabriel et al., 2020; Khairi, 2020; Sobirin & Fathul, 2009), there were also studies showing a adverse effect on organisational performance (Carriger, 2016; Datta et al., 2010; Lhamo & Thinley, 2021) and the surviving employee of the rightsized firm (Ho et al., 2013; Marques et al., 2014; Razali et al., 2014). The surviving employee has been experiencing decreased motivation, low morale and loyalty to the organisation, and increased emotional stress levels such as anger, fear, distrust and guilt (Khairi, 2020). Therefore the rightsizing strategy must be implemented correctly to ensure success (Bhatra, 2019; Kibble, 2019).

One of the main reasons firms implement the rightsizing strategy is the economic downturns (Marques et al., 2014) that forces organisations to compete in the increasingly global marketplace. This is vital for an organisation to survive. Technological advancement also has prompted organisations to rightsize due to the redundancy created to the existing jobs (Carriger, 2016). Organisations need to respond and adapt to environmental changes (Pasmore & Woodman, 2017), so firms resort to rightsizing strategies to survive. Besides, internal and external environmental changes have forced firms and organisations to respond in order to survive (Schenkel & Teigland, 2016; Walaski, 2017).

The rightsizing strategy has become a more prevalent method used by organisations to increase organisational performance worldwide in the past two decades (DeMeuse & Dai, 2013; Kibble, 2019). There have been contradicting academic evidence regarding rightsizing effect (Schenkel & Teigland, 2016). While some studies have found a positive impact from rightsizing (Batra, 2019; Gabriel et al., 2020), there were also studies showing its negative impact on organisational performance (Carriger, 2016; Datta et al., 2010; Lhamo & Thinley, 2021) and towards employee perception (Ho et al., 2013; Marques et al., 2014; Razali et al., 2014).

Many researchers proposed that organisations use three common strategies in a rightsizing exercise (Batra, 2019; Bierbaum, 2020; Kibble, 2019). The first strategy is the workforce reduction strategy. It is used as a quick fix, top-down, and a short-term strategy to reduce staff members' numbers. The second strategy is the work redesign strategy. It is used to reduce the work rather than reducing the number of staff. The third strategy is a systemic strategy. It is used in changing the culture, attitude and values of the employees in the organisation. These three strategies might not necessarily be mutually exclusive; they can be done individually or jointly (Kibble, 2019). Although there is no specific guideline on how to execute the suggested strategies, adhering to these general approaches may help organisations have basic ideas of what is needed to complete rightsizing exercises at their organisations.

Organisations' implementation of the rightsizing process may sometimes be difficult and painful to handle if not done properly (Batra, 2019; Kibble, 2019). Therefore, organisations must find ways and means to achieve the objectives intended for the rightsizing exercise. Following that, this study will attempt to answer the following research questions: What were the objectives, processes, strategies, and barriers of the higher education institutions'?.

Method

Research Design and Sampling

The qualitative method was chosen because the researchers believe that one must study things in their natural setting to fully understand the issue and attempt to make sense of or regarding rightsizing. This qualitative inquiry adapts the phenomenological research approach (Creswell, 2013). The purposive sampling strategy used was based on the criterion sampling method. The top and middle management respondents, working with the Human Resource Management Department (HRMD). They were selected to gain in-depth insights and determine the extent of any changes in the rightsizing practices.

Informants

This study aims to explore the rightsizing exercise at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). It is the largest public university in Malaysia, offering more than 500 academic programmes with more than 100,000 students enrolled. To support the university's functions, 17,792 employees, both academic and non-academic, were employed within the university's system (Strategic Planning & Information, 2018).

After receiving approval and permission from the University's Registrar's office, the researchers contacted four prospective informants that fit the criteria to participate in this study. All four respondents interviewed in this study were officers that had worked or still working in the Human Resource Management Department (HRMD), the University Registrar's office. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents, the researcher has assigned aliases to the individuals as "Officer A", "Officer B", "Officer C" and "Officer D". Officer A is a graduate from a local university with a Bachelor's degree majoring in Human Resource Management (HRM). Officer A directly involved in human resource planning during the rightsizing exercise. Meanwhile, Officer B was the head of the Organisational Development Division in HRMD and is responsible for the university's rightsizing exercise. Officer C was the HRMD under the Registrar's office. Meanwhile, Officer D works as an auditor and provider of human resource data in the mapping process for the staff's redeployment under the HRMD.

Instruments

An interview protocol consisting of 14 primary questions was designed to guide the interview session from the beginning until the end. The instruments were adopted from previous literature. Standardised open-ended questions were used within a semi-structured interview that starts with specific questions followed by probing questions. It allows participants to contribute as much detailed information as they desire, and it also allows the researcher to ask probing questions as means of follow up. Probing questions were used to discover additional information following a primary or secondary question. The interview questions were also refined through pilot testing or pilot interview. The pilot interview helps ensure that the interview questions were capable of addressing every aspect of the study. Consent from the participants was obtained through their verbal approval to participate in this study. The purpose of this study was mentioned, the amount of time expected to complete the interview, and plans of using the results from the interview were clearly explained to the participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

An in-depth semi-structured interview was used in this study to obtain data from the selected informants. The interview method was used as a tool in this qualitative study (Mills & Birks, 2014). Interviews were scheduled over the phone with each respondent. Before the interview, the informants were briefed that their participation was voluntary and ensured that all information was provided was strictly confidential. Data gathered from the interviews was recorded using a digital voice recorder and were transcribed after the interviews. Theoretical saturation was used to ensure data collected from the sample were sufficient.

Data analysis and interpretation were made by forming the identified themes through interviews, document analysis and field notes. The recorded data were transcribed immediately

after the in-depth interviews were conducted. Next, the research data was analysed based on the general guidelines mentioned by Creswell (2013). These guidelines include (a) data organisation, (b) reading and memoing, (c) describing the data in codes and themes, (d) classifying the data into codes and themes, (e) interpreting the data, and (d) representing and visualising the data. Once all the data had been coded, it was arranged into several themes (broad unit of information) consisting of several codes combined to form a common idea. The last step was on representing the data through the textural description (what the respondents experienced the phenomenon) and structural description (how the experience happened).

To assure content validity, verification of informants and well-documented processes and documents were done, and inter-rater reliability tests were assessed and found acceptable. Evidence gathered from the interview were later compared with the evidence gathered from the document analysis to confirm the findings. This method is considered the triangulation strategy, where the researcher uses multiple and different sources to validate the evidence.

Findings

Objectives of rightsizing exercise

Examination of the data was conducted to determine the objectives of the rightsizing exercise for administrative staff in the university. The rightsizing objectives are considered as the theme for this research question. This research question revealed four main categories: changing policies, organisation scanning, human resource planning, and optimisation.

All the respondents have agreed that one of the main objectives for the University rightsizing exercise was induced by the policy changes that have affected the university's capability to function based on their changing policies. Officer A mentioned that:

> "...there were several constraints with regards to the recruitment aspects where the government has restrained and decreased the number of posts in the university..."

This refers to the reduced number of new posts approved for the university by the government and the circular issued by the government on freeze hiring for nonessential posts. Another example of policy change involving the University student's enrolment increment, as stated by Officer B:

> "...previously the target was 150,000 student's enrolments by 2020 but recently raised to 200,000 students, and of course it automatically raises the need for more lecturers and supports staffs..."

Notably, the policy changes can be considered an environmental change that organisations need to respond to and adapt (Pasmore & Woodman, 2017) to achieve their organisational goals. The next reasons why the university implemented the rightsizing exercise were to have an organisational scanning of its human resource capability. The scanning may involve organisations identifying the number of staff needed based on the nature of work within the organisation (Carriger, 2016). Officer B mentioned:

> "...for technical staff, we need to determine what kind of computer lab the technicians are accounted for. If it is a general computer lab, we can place one technician staff to cater for two computer labs. But if when it involves a high-end sophisticated computer lab, we need to have one technician to one high-end computer lab..."

Similarly, Bhatra (2019) claimed that organisation also needs to understand that the number of staff carrying the same job function but in a different department may differ due to its work volume. Officer D clearly states that:

> "...one of the job descriptions of a clerk under the academic affairs department is to take care of the student's files. For a clerk in a faculty at the main campus, the number of student's files that the clerk might be responsible for about 2,000 files. Comparing to his counterpart that works in a huge campus where the number of students may reach up to 10,000 students, it is impossible to allocate only one clerk to be responsible for the student's file..."

Through the organisation scanning done during the rightsizing exercise, the organisation can collect data and information with regards to its workforce that can be used in the decision-making process. The third objectives of rightsizing exercise are human resource planning. Through the earlier organisation scanning, staff will be equipped with valuable data and information regarding their workforce capacity if they practice human resource planning. They quickly identify any surplus or shortage of workforce within the organisations. Officer C said:

> "...faculties and departments were always complaining they are understaffed. As administrators, it is a part of our duty to identify the human resource needs are met. In order to do so, a rightsizing exercise is needed to identify whether the number of the University staffs is adequate, or in shortage or surplus."

One way to identify workforce surplus is when there is an overlapping task within the same department. It was explained by Officer A that mentioned:

> "...when we interviewed three clerks within the same administration office; we always found out there was an overlapping task done between them..."

Similarly, human resource planning is also considered a rightsizing plan that is important for organisations (Khairi, 2020) in optimising their effort in rightsizing the organisation. The fourth and final rightsizing exercise objective is human resource optimisation. Human resource optimisation objectives can be achieved once the organisation identifies whether its workforce has been fully optimised. This is mentioned in Officer B:

> "...example in preparing the employer's verification letter, previously it takes 2 or 3 days to prepare the letter. But today, the letter can be prepared automatically in just 5 minutes with the advancement of computer's software..."

Officer A also confirmed that one of the main objectives of the university's rightsizing was to optimise the use of human resources. Officer A was recorded saying this:

> "...the rightsizing exercise that we have implemented was targeted to optimise human resource usage because we have a huge number of workforce amounting up to 18,000 staffs..."

These findings indicate that the rightsizing efforts were not made solely as a quick fix to the university's changes. The systematic planning and data collection done during the rightsizing activities has further enhanced the organisation's ability to make more accurate decisions and plans regarding its human resource. The view of the workforce regarded as assets and not as a

cost to the organisation is demonstrated through the organisation efforts in optimising its human resources.

Processes involved in the rightsizing exercise

There were three main processes involved in the rightsizing exercise, and they were in a specific order starting from the pre-audit process, on-site audit process and post-audit process. The pre-Audit process is the process conducted by the HRMD before commencing the audit process. Officer B and Officer C claimed:

> "...departments will need to prepare their organisation charts, functional charts, staff's job description, the department's need, the number of students, and what kind of activities carried out by the department. Based on the information, we will compare the data received and decide on the action to be taken…"

> "...based on the data, we will look to the placement of staffs and compare with the overall numbers of posts available within the organisation…."

Next, the on-site audit process is considered the most crucial part of the rightsizing process. In this process, auditors amongst administrator officers in the university were appointed to conduct an on-site audit of departments, faculties, and campuses worldwide. Officer D said:

> "...once we have reviewed and compared the data submitted by the departments, we will then conduct an on-site audit to confirm and check the reviewed data submitted earlier..."

The auditors examine all the relevant data and conduct individual interviews with the staff during the audit process. As stipulated by Khairi (2020, this was done to better understand the staff's job description and nature of work that will lead to the determination of the workforce needed by the departments. This is supported by Officer B explanation below:

> "...other than checking the organisation and functional chart, we will also review the staff's existing job description and make adjustments to the job description if it was found not accurate…"

Once the on-site audit finished, the findings were presented and discussed with the department's management team. An overall report of the audit conclusions was compiled for the next process of the rightsizing exercise. The audit findings were consolidated by the Human Resource Management Department (HRMD) based on the on-site audit report. This is where the mapping process happens. Officer A reports:

> "...examples of dimensions that affect the complexity and workload of a certain job are specific criteria that the job is accountable for, such as the number of students, number of files ……. but the most important dimension is the KSA (knowledge, skills and ability) to perform the job…"

Once the mapping process was done and endorsed by the top management, the redeployment and reorganisation through the HRMD through the post-audit process. This is the final process in the rightsizing process. A mapping process considers all related dimensions criteria required for a specific post (job function). It determines the complexity and workload of a job. Officer A reports as follows:

"...examples of dimensions that affect to the complexity and the workload of a certain job are specific criteria that the job is accountable for such as number of students, number of files, land area size, building area per square feet, number of machines, laboratory size, numbers of cars and buses, etc. but the most important dimension is the KSA (knowledge, skills and ability) to perform the job..."

Once the mapping process is done and endorsed by the top management, the redeployment and reorganisation of staff will be carried out by the Human Resource Management Department (HRMD). An example of the staff's redeployment exercise conducted by HRMD as mentioned by Officer D below:

"...when we identify any workforce surplus in a certain department, we will redeploy them to other departments experiencing workforce shortage. "

It is important to note that although the rightsizing processes were only categorised into three simple parts, there were many stages and steps involved within the three processes before staff could be moved to another place. It is quite idealistic to be done but not impossible if everyone plays its part in the organisation's rightsized workforce.

Strategies used in the rightsizing exercise

This section presented the strategies used in the rightsizing exercise for administrative staff in the university. Two themes emerged: workforce reduction strategy and work redesign strategy. The workforce reduction strategy has been considered the firm's first choice in rightsizing their organisations. It offers a fast and quick fix in reducing the cost of human resources. There are many ways that firms can adopt in implementing this strategy, such as layoffs, retrenchment, outplacement, redeployment, freeze hiring and attrition (Cameron, 1994). Based on this study's inquiry, the university only adopts three workforce reduction strategies: internal redeployment, freeze hiring, and attrition methods. Officer B admits it by saying:

"...any retired staff, staffs that quit from their jobs and staffs who had finished their employment contracts with the University were not renewed and not replaced..."

This is regarded as the attrition method where no new staff replacement is given to replace the retired due to the freeze in hiring adopted by the management for nonessential posts. Although the term redeployment from the literature includes redeployment outside the organisation (Appelbaum et al., 1999), it is not the same as the university where the staff's mobility revolves within the university only. Redeployment is typically carried out when a surplus in the workforce is identified. Officer A mentioned:

"...once the audit process is completed, we will consolidate the data collected by mapping the posts with the workforce needs for the whole University system. The surplus workforce will then be redeployed to other places..."

The second strategy used by the university in rightsizing their organisation is the work redesign strategy. This strategy aims to reduce the work process instead of reducing workers' number (Cameron, 1994). Methods such as redesigning tasks, merging units and departments, phasing out layers, etc. A certain level of effort is needed to redesign the task to analyse the job description. This is what was done by the auditors during the rightsizing audit exercise. Officer C said:

> *"...based on the organisation and functional chart of the department, we will review the staff's current job description and analyse it to enhance it further. We can't afford to spare some staffs doing tasks manually that are repetitively and has no value-added elements..."*

Automation of jobs reduces the work and provides staff to concentrate on the more critical aspect of the job. This is further backed up by Officer A by providing another job automation example:

> *"...before this, the staff in the student's intake department was required to print out thousands of new student's offer letters and need to post it to the student's address. But with the advancement of the internet, now the students can print their offer letter. Therefore, the staffs employed to print and send the offer letters can be allocated to another kind of jobs..."*

The university's two rightsizing strategies have managed to help the organisation to rightsize their workforce better. Although not all the methods suggested can be used, such as layoffs, retrenchments, outplacement, etc. Due to the strict government policy on staff dismissal, the organisation still managed to apply redeployment, attrition and freeze hiring within the rightsizing strategy.

Barriers in executing the rightsizing exercise

Lastly, the data analysis revealed four main categories in determining the barriers in executing the rightsizing exercise for administrative staff in the university. Four themes emerged from the study. The barriers are lack of guidelines, economies of scale, inexperience auditors, and staff's knowledge gap. The findings were summarised as follows. One of the respondents' major issues was no specific lack of guidelines for implementing the rightsizing exercise. Officer C had been recorded for saying that:

> *"...there are few factors that we need to address and improve on the tools and method used, especially in terms of data reliability and human issues. Everyone will claim that they are understaffed because they would want to give up any number of staff. Therefore, the reliability of data may become questionable..."*

One of the tools used was the time-motion study form, where staff can fill in the form and calculate the number of hours they spent per day doing their work. There was some criticism on the usage of the tool. Officer C remarked:

> *"...there is no problem using the time-motion study form if we want to calculate the workload of the staffs if they have the same routine kind of job that they do every day, but for staffs which do not have the same routine job every day, it would be difficult for them to fill in the forms. They will be seen as underutilised because the form is designed to calculate the workload based on routine kind of work..."*

The second issue would be the economies of scale. Since the university has a sheer workforce size, it is a big challenge for HRMD to handle and plan an event as big as this, especially in preparing the numbers of auditors involved and the working days needed to complete the rightsizing exercise. Officer C shared:

> *"...we need time to execute the rightsizing programme. This is because the university has branch campuses all over Malaysia, and each campus has many*

different departments that need to be audited. With limited numbers of auditors, working days needed is a problem for auditors to audit every single department in the university thoroughly…"

It is worth noting that auditors have an essential role in determining the workforce of a certain department audited, whether in a surplus or a shortage of human resources. Therefore, there is a need for these auditors to be trained appropriately. This has raised some concerns on the auditor's competency because not all of the auditors appointed were familiar with auditing human resource needs. This was remarked by Officer A when she said:

"…to audit every department within the university and the time needed to complete the audit may sometimes be gruesome for the auditors. Even times, the auditors failed to examine and understand other people's workload that they are auditing. This is true, especially for newly appointed auditors and in-training auditors…"

The issue of inexperienced auditors was something that the university could not avoid because this was the first time a massive effort on rightsizing exercise was carried out in the university. Therefore, there was a need to appoint new auditors from other departments. The new auditors were paired and tagged with experienced auditors to train and expose them to audit experience. Almost all the respondents have reported that they were having some issues with the department being audited. Most of the reaction received was quite unwelcoming and negative. Officer B shared her experience on this matter:

"…there was one time that we did an audit in one department. The head of the department was very defensive and protective of his staff. He was very territorial in defending his staff. He argued a lot of things during the exit audit meeting when we presented our findings…"

The inability to understand the rightsizing exercise itself may be why most departments audited responded negatively to the audit teams. Officer C added her response to this matter:

"…most of the departments we audited believed that we wanted to take their people away."

All of the decisions were discussed openly with the head of departments, and no decision was made behind them. Justification and documentation were used as evidence in making any decision-making process. More importantly, each party involved must have an open-minded approach to addressing this issue.

The fourth issues are on staff's knowledge gap towards the rightsizing exercise in the university. The respondents agreed that most of the audit session staff were unprepared and sometimes gave inaccurate information. Quoted below are responses from Officer A and Officer B, respectively, with regards to the issue:

"…There were staffs that were underutilised, so what they did was they have hidden their real job scope and provided extra job scope that was really under other people's job scope…"

"…most of the staffs were not ready and were scared when we came to audit them. They were also worried if they were transferred to other places…"

Staff mobility was another significant barrier when the university carried out the rightsizing exercise. HRMD played a substantial role in facilitating the process to execute this step. Offers were made to all staff that wanted to volunteer themselves to transfer to the new campuses. HRMD also helped the staff find any matches available to have one to one transfer or even up to three or four-point of staff's transfer matching. The approach was to facilitate as much as possible to the affected staff. Officer C shared her thoughts on this matter:

> *"...when is dealing with human resources, you are dealing with people's life. There are a lot of factors that need to be considered. We need to understand that many things are at stake here, and we should give considerable time for the staff to understand that the decision to move them is for the benefit of the university..."*

It is not an easy task to manage people around. Nonetheless, it is normal for organisations to face some kind of barrier or resistance. Empathy should always be in the mind of people handling human resources (Batra, 2019). Nonetheless, there is no point in making decisions that might backfire on the organisation in the future. From the inquiry, the university has tried its best to reduce the barriers and resistance through lots of discussion and communications with the involved parties. This is to ensure that all the stakeholders are actively involved through effective communication channels in order to create a conducive environment for change to take place

Study Implication

Knowledge Implication

This study aimed to understand and explore the objectives, processes, strategies, and barriers in executing rightsizing exercises towards administrative staff at the university. The themes that emerged from the data explained this study's phenomenon, focusing on administrative staff's rightsizing exercise in the university. Figure 1 proposes the conceptual framework that describes the rightsizing practice executed for administrative staff in the university.
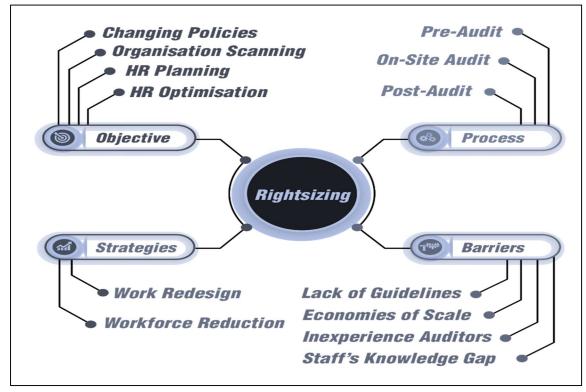

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Rightsizing Exercise

Rightsizing has been considered as one of the main strategies used by organisations all over the world. Although there was much-contradicting evidence on the execution of the rightsizing efforts, it would be a disadvantage for organisations to neglect its importance in managing human resource functions. Nowadays, human resources have no longer been considered a supporting function to the organisation's operations. It has become one of the strategic functions that must be aligned with other organisations' strategic objectives. The rightsizing strategies can be recognised as one of the Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) efforts in contributing to organisational effectiveness (Fottler, 2018) that can be achieved through HRD initiatives. Organisations may prepare themselves to rightsize their organisation by outlining several main processes and strategies in implementing the rightsizing efforts. Outlining here means that they have specific guidelines that can be followed or benchmarked in rightsizing their organisations. Most public sector organisations are executing rightsizing programmes without any general guidelines. Understanding rightsizing practices is essential because recognising the reasons, processes, strategies, and barriers of rightsizing will help organisations evaluate and make relevant efforts to rightsize their organisations properly (Batra, 2019; Kibble, 2019; Mahmood et al., 2017).

Several practical implications can be highlighted as a result of the findings. The three major stakeholders' perspectives can consider the repercussions of rightsizing practice. This is similar to Gabriel et al.'s (2020) and Walaski's (2017) propositions. First, having insight from the officers' perspective that has handled the rightsizing exercise may provide some pointers in handling potential rightsizing problems. Secondly, the organisation (the university) should reflect on the rightsizing efforts and initiatives that have been done earlier. With that, the organisation will have more insight and understanding of things to be improved in executing a rightsizing plan. This study also helps the organisation better prepare for anticipating future outcomes of a rightsizing exercise. Lastly, other public sector organisations might benchmark the university on the rightsizing practice of sharing knowledge between organisations. Hopefully, it will, in the end, create a certain kind of specific policy for the public sector in rightsizing their organisations.

Practical Implication

Administrators, especially those assigned with human resource management functions, will always face the demand or request from their respective departments to have inadequate staff. There will always be someone needing more staff. Hence, having insight from the officers' perspective that has handled the rightsizing exercise may provide some pointers to them in handling these kinds of problems. It would help them to strategise the rightsizing efforts within their department. On the other hand, the organisation should reflect on the earlier rightsizing efforts and initiatives. By doing so, the organisation will be able to have more insight and understanding on things to be improved further in executing a rightsizing plan.

By documenting the experience and opinions of the officers handling rightsizing, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding and shared responsibilities amongst the staff regarding the rightsizing activities. Organisations should not consider the rightsizing initiatives as a one-time event or being done when needs arise. Besides, more efforts must be made to implement training and development programmes for staff on rightsizing issues. Staff should be trained to assess their own department workforce to determine whether they have a surplus

or shortage of manpower. Having an internal self-independent or cross-department audit enables organisations to enhance their capability further to plan their human resources. On the contrary, periodically re-evaluation of the organisation's size is required to ensure that the organisation is performing optimally. This is important because change is happening so fast in the current globalisation era. Therefore, there is a need for organisations to constantly re-evaluation their workforce in accomplishing their organisational's goals.

Open and honest communications are considered essential elements needed in implementing an effective rightsizing programme. Therefore organisations must take this opportunity to have more engagement programmes with all the stakeholders involved. All information and decision made should be discussed and informed without hiding anything. Having true transparent communication among the stakeholders involved will eventually create mutual trust and respect between the management and employees, enabling the rightsizing exercise to achieve its objectives. Such strategic plans and roadmaps can be built upon to ensure the organisation's human resources are fully used and optimised. It will also help the organisation better prepare to anticipate future outcomes of a rightsizing exercise.

Organisations that understand and acknowledge their problems will be able to respond and act better in the future. Moreover, new strategies can be devised and implemented to increase the percentage of success. Constant evaluation of the rightsizing efforts would also ensure that the organisation operates lean and meanly. It is essential to highlight that such initiatives will only 'work' when all involved stakeholders share the same mission and vision to support each other's plans and initiatives to ensure the rightsizing objectives are generally well met. Perhaps, the increasing pressure has been coming from the government itself and the mass public to reduce the number of government servants.

Conclusion

The global economic, geopolitical landscape and internationalisation of higher education within the South East Asian region have transformed how higher education is managed. Higher education is facing challenges of reduced support from the government and a much more competitive market. Increasingly, the administrators are finding ways to reduce the institution's cost while keeping the market competition alive. Hence, it is essential to know the actual implication of the activities associated with the rightsizing exercise, especially in the public sector, that would help organisations make "wrong-sizing" decisions.

The findings from this study can explain the phenomenon of rightsizing exercise and its pertaining issues. It is important to know the actual implication of the activities associated with the rightsizing exercise, especially in the public sector, that would help organisations from making "wrong-sizing" decisions. Although the study is being done in a public higher education institution, the findings can also be applied to other public organisations. This is due to the similar governing context where many government agencies use the general orders and several other government regulations and manage their human resources. Other public sector organisations might be able to benchmark the rightsizing exercise as sharing knowledge concepts between organisations. Hopefully, it will, in the end, create a certain kind of policy for the public sector in rightsizing their organisation.

Based on the findings of this research, several future types of research can be suggested and recommended. Prospective studies can be pursued on more informants representing all the stakeholders involved in the rightsizing exercise. As this study only includes limited

interviewees, different informant selection criteria can be used to enrich the data and study. Moreover, quantitative research on the rightsizing exercise can be done using the current study instruments. The variables can later be researched to generalise their findings. It may also be used to investigate the rightsizing exercise in other organisations that generally use the same method. Lastly, future studies should embark on a comparative study of rightsizing exercise in other public sector organisations. Perhaps, different locations, nature of jobs and structure of organisations may influence the outcome of the rightsizing exercise.

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