

## Employee Silence as a Barrier to Career Development among Blue-Collar Workers

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between employee silence and career development among the employees of palm oil industry in Malaysia. Employee silence has a significant impact on the training access, superior support, career success and future employability which overall affects the attraction of new talents to palm oil sector. This conceptual paper explores how different type of employee silence plays an important aspect towards employee's career development in palm oil sector with job satisfaction as a mediating variable. It was found through literatures that reduced employee silence and supported by supervisory trust and psychological safety can significantly increase career development opportunities among employees and can attract more locals to join the industry with more clear career trajectories.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes to the existing literature by exploring the dynamics of employee silence and its implications for career development among blue-collar workers, principally within the under-researched Malaysian palm oil industry. Consequently, covering the more comprehensive understanding within culture and industry.

## 1. Introduction

The Malaysian Government has stressed and made efforts to increase local employees' employability, despite all the exertions the Palm Oil Industry seems to still be in the tough twine to attend to employee retention and youth attraction to this industry. Despite their difficult (Akhbari et al., 2020) work condition and working environment, there still may be multiple underlying reasons that are not rectified to increase the employability and attraction of the younger generation as well as to retain the existing employees such as interesting salary wages and allowance, health services, retirement scheme and many

more. Increased in these issues, has caused the industry to be in a very vulnerable position to maintain a healthy workforce.

In the vigorously growing economics, the excellence of human resources in a company plays a role in the organizational success which indirectly influences the employee's success (Naseem et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important for employees to be retained but with proper upskilling and reskilling to add more responsibilities which can empower their employees to thrive and stay competitive to achieve organizational goals (Na Ayudhya & Plangsorn, 2024). When a proper career trajectory and employee development are in place in the HRM policies, it will be easier to attract more competent employees.

Palm oil industry important industry in Malaysia that contributes to the country economy as this country is the second largest producers of palm oil in the world (Kushairi & Amiruddin, 2020), and it is a labour-intensive industry similar to manufacturing, construction, agriculture, transportation, food production, mining, and maintenance (Fordjour et al., 2025). Similarly, these industries face substantial challenges in retention of employees and attraction of new talents to maintain a stable workforce. Despite the robust growth and innovation of palm oil industry, the industry faces its own set of challenges not limited to deforestation, loss of biodiversity, human rights violation, climate change (Ahmad Mokhtar et al., 2002; E-Vahdati et al., 2023; Noor et al., 2022) and also shortage of workforce (Che Omar et al., 2023). Thus, the overlying of migrant workers (Shehu, 2024).

This shortage is most of the time due to the perception of 3D concept of dirty, difficult and dangerous and limited awareness among youth as well as their career opportunities remains limited in this sector (Ahmad Mokhtar et al., 2022). In order to maintain the quality of production and also to meet the sustainability requirements, Malaysia has introduced the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) and Malaysia Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) certification schemes that has to be fulfilled by all the suppliers, producers and distributors since 2019. These extraordinary expansions and requirements have hand in hand increase the labour demands in this industry. Although there are high stresses, this industry faces the highest labour shortage issues (Arifin et al., 2021).

Globally, employees tend to prioritize long term career sustainability and employability (Asuquo & Inaja, 2013). Industries that offer less continuous learning or development opportunities, becoming very competitive to attract new talents into the industry. At the same time, employee silence may also seem to be one of the intersecting factors and creates long term consequences for individual professional trajectory in this industry.

Currently, employee silence is a vast topic discussed in the academic world which is told to be a barrier to both organizational and individual growth (Yu et al., 2023). When an employee withholds the information, concerns or ideas is labelled as employee silence. Studies has showed that employee silence is multi-dimensional and there are four (4) types of silence which is acquiescent silence (silence due to resignation), quiescent silence (silence to avoid negative outcomes), prosocial silence (silence to benefit others or the organization), and opportunistic silence (silence for self-benefit) (Lerebulan & Amalia, 2023; Morrison, 2014; Van Dyne et al., 2003).

There are growing research that have related employee silence to negative outcomes such as low engagement, poor job performance, job insecurity, turnover intention (Jing et al.,

2024; Whiteside & Barclay, 2013; Yu et al., 2023), burnout (Knoll et al., 2019; Lainidi et al., 2025; Sherf et al., n.d.) and job satisfaction (Wang & Hsieh, 2014). Yet, few studies have explicitly demonstrated how employee silence obstructs career progression among employees and by what mechanisms.

In the context of organizational culture, previously mentioned industries operates on organizational hierarchical and high-power distance (Alas et al., 2009) with centralized decision making and limited upward communication. Within such environments, it may cause the employees to remain silent and suppress their concerns and development needs. Over time, employee silent may cause underlying issues related to job satisfaction and visibility to the superiors in order to have accessibility to trainings or career progression that may cause the weakening employee engagement and long-term retention. The persistence of these challenges reflects deeper structural and procedural shortcomings within the HRM practices and understanding these relationships will help organizations in the industry create supportive environments that encourage employee voice, enhance job satisfaction and improve career development opportunities especially in Malaysia.

In current era, employees tend to find job opportunities that promises better career trajectory that comes with better wages scheme (Adams-Prassl et al., 2023). When we refer to the palm oil industry the labour-intensive industry, most of the employees fall under the skilled and unskilled employees (TPOLS, 2022) who are over relied for operation, efficiency, safety and product quality. These are the employees who might not look at career development like the white-collar employees who prefers professional and managerial roles (Özcan et al., 2023). For this category of employees, the career development may refer to apparent opportunities for skill development, training access, advancement, and internal employability rather than hierarchical promotion alone. According to Barber (2020) typically it is assumed in careers that upward mobility is the goal.

Relatively, employees who withhold their work related concerns and ideas may reduce the employees visibility, reduce the superior trust (Morrison, 2014) and indirectly limits the access to developmental opportunities due to lacking of upward communication (Detert & Edmondson, 2011) that causes the blue collar employees to be on career stagnation or plateau (Jing et al., 2024) especially in hierarchical and high power distance work environments such as palm oil industry (Castellanos-Navarrete et al., 2019).

Basically, employers who identify and reduce employee silence and actively supports and promotes skill development, training access and supervisory involvement may enhance perceptions of career viability, making the palm oil industry more appealing to both existing employees and newcomers looking for long-term career growth and sustainable employment rather than just temporary job security. Despite multiple scholars studied career development and employee silence as separate construct, limited conceptual work has been examined how employee silence indirectly constrains career development through job satisfaction among blue-collar employees. Addressing this gap, the current paper proposes the cause effect framework that explains the relationship.

## 2. Research Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual review methodology to analyze existing literature and empirical studies regarding employee silence and career development. Applicable

scholarly sources were examined to identify trends, theoretical perceptives and key constructs that add insights on employee silence as the barrier to career development among blue-collar workers.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1. Employee Silence

Employee silence can be defined as consciously withholding ideas, opinions and concerns related to work which includes behavioural, cognitive and affective evaluation to organizational issues (Knoll & van Dick, 2013; Timperley et al., 2025; Wilkinson et al., 2020). For many years, the definition of employee silence and its causes remained constant where it highlighted as a collective situation where employees do not speak up about errors, unfair treatments and behaviours as they fear negative consequences, feelings of futility, or organizational cultures discouraging open communication (Morrison, 2025). According to Nitafan (2020) silence can yield both positive and negative outcomes although most research highlights its adverse effects on organizational and individual levels.

Researchers claim that silence and voice are distinct constructs and not always the opposites (Morrison et al., 2014). The multidimensional nature of silence was first introduced by Van Dyne et al. (2003) that includes acquiescent silence: silence due to resignation, defensive (quiescent) silence: silence to avoid negative consequences and prosocial silence: silence to benefit others or the organization. This was later further explored and the fourth dimension was evolved called the opportunistic silence (Knoll & van Dick, 2013) where employees withhold information to gain self-advantage such as self-protection or dysfunctional political behaviours (Guo et al., 2019).

A considerable amount of literature has been published on employee silence and its consequences. Along with that, there is also increasing concern on how employee silence significantly affects individual level rather than organizational especially when it comes to career development (Li et al., 2024; Morrison, 2023). Previous scholars done studies on multiple industries such as healthcare, education, banking, IT, and hospitality (Yasin & Jesevičiūtė-Ufartienė, 2023). However, there is limited research to understand the various perceptions of employee silence in the palm oil industry, particularly in Malaysia.

##### 3.1.1. Acquiescent Silence

Acquiescent silence in any organizations is characterized as a form of employee silence that is driven by a state of resignation and low self-efficacy with the belief that speaking up is futile or ineffective (Li et al., 2024; Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Riantoputra et al., 2016; Van Dyne et al., 2003). This type of silence often linked to perceptions of powerlessness, emotional withdrawal or lack of competence within the organization (Li et al., 2024). This is a passive type of silence where the employees have perceptions that they cannot make any difference by voicing out and just accept the situation as it is (Riantoputra et al., 2016).

Pinder and Harlos (2001) has mentioned that acquiescent silence involves withholding ideas based on resignation, suggesting a passive disengaged connection with the employer and overall organizational participations. Studies have shown that acquiescent silence may bring negative implications to the organizational level which includes low motivation, job satisfaction, and well-being, as well as higher turnover and reduced

organizational resilience. Undervalued or un-welcoming organizational environments may foster this type of passive silence. Technological overload, poor communication, and leadership styles also contribute to feelings of helplessness and resignation (Jungst & Verbeek, 2025).

There are several studies that highlights the different consequences of employee silence but there are limited to specific type of silence. Especially how acquiescent silence limits organizational learning, problem-solving, and innovation due to suppressed feedback and ideas. It correlates with adverse employee outcomes such as decreased motivation, increased stress, and withdrawal behaviours. Recognizing this form of silence is important because it signifies not just a lack of communication but a strategic choice rooted in organizational dissatisfaction and perceived futility.

### 3.1.2. Quiescent Silence

Opposite of acquiescent silence is quiescence silence also known as defensive silence (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Riantoputra et al., 2016; Van Dyne et al., 2003) which labelled as silence that is caused by employees to deliberately withhold ideas, information or opinions as form of self-protection. Unlike acquiescent silence, quiescence silence is driven actively and feedback to avoid perceived workplace threats (Morrison, 2023).

Where there is power imbalance and workplace hierarchy between supervisor subordinate relationship that impacts the follower's reaction (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) where the employee chooses to deliberately stay silent instead of responding to any concerns (Xu et al., 2015) as a way of self-protection. Where there is unsupportive or threatening scenario in an organizational climate, the employees may silence themselves even on a critical issue as well as individual visibility, recognition, and the sharing of developmental feedback, which are critical components in career advancement (Afshan et al., 2022).

### 3.1.3. Prosocial Silence

Another dimension of employee silence is the pro-social silence which is similar to the first two (2) silences but it is when employees choosing to withhold work-related information with the intention of benefiting colleagues or the organization as a whole (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Motivated by humanity and cooperation, this silence can happen to protect sensitive information, maintain social harmony, or prevent harm to others. Some research suggest that prosocial silence is largely positively determined and may help build trust and a supportive work environment but unintentional consequences like unreported errors at work, stress, burnout and reduced performance (Knoll et al., 2019).

Knoll et al. (2025) mentioned that silence can be distinguished by cooperation intension but it's not always a positive outcome. It may affect relationships and trust between peers and create impacts on performance as well on long run (Morrison, 2023). On the other hand, Wilkinson et al. (2020) mentioned that leadership styles and work environment are also important as employees may avoid direct communication to prevent group harmony.

### 3.1.4. Opportunistic Silence

Opportunistic silence is defined as strategically withholding work-related information to gain personal advantage but often at the expense of colleagues or the organization itself

(Knoll & van Dick, 2013). This type of silence categorized as self-serving and on the long run may cause loss of respect and credibility (Randeve et al., 2025). Besides this, a key element of organizations performance is the employee's expertise. When employee refuses to knowledge share or knowledge concealing it may become business to be more competitive in the industry (Wen & Ma, 2021) externally but internally may affect the succession planning and career development of employees.

Additionally, this multi dimension employee silence is corelated to job satisfaction (Alarabiat & Eyupoglu, 2022; Zahra Malik et al., 2020) as it fosters the feelings of tension, burnout, and emotional exhaustion created from the unfavourable consequences (Morrison, 2023). Employees who feel distanced from the organization may feel demotivated, reduced psychological safety or even high turnover rates that can hinder the career satisfaction or organizational commitments (Hao et al., 2022; Su Yee et al., 2018).

Employee silence is concept as a good intention and as a strategic self- protection especially in the hierarchical work setting. By hiding or keeping important information to oneself may prevent the individual from participating and eliminating potential advantages for self-development, career enhancement and increase job satisfaction. This might cause a significant effect. As the root cause of the employee silence is address with proper open communication and empowerment of employees can reduce the employees multi dimension or multi factors of employee silence and this could directly benefit the individual as well as the organization as a whole. Especially among the blue-collar employees whose work roles are often characterized by limited autonomy, close supervision, and power disparity (Fordjour et al., 2025).

In these contexts, silence becomes a rational response to perceived risks associated with challenging authority or established work practices. However, while strategically protecting the voice in short term, continuous silence can reduce opportunities for learning, weaken upward communication, and fade growth-related signs such as initiative, competence, and developmental readiness, thereby will cause the employees low longer-term career prospects (Morrison, 2023).

### 3.2. Career Development

Career development refers to the continuous process where employees advance in their careers in the workplace (Arthur et al., 2005; Chioma Joy, 2025; Super, 1980). This can be acquired by continually learning new skills, new opportunities, higher job responsibility as well as advancing in career (Touni, 2023). This can be guided with organizational initiatives to have internal training, external trainings, mentorship programs to assist the employees to expand their knowledge and prepare themselves for higher positions by upskilling (Adnyani & Dewi, 2019; Andrew, 2002).

For blue-collar workers it could be typically defined by alleged chances for progress both within and outside of their current employment rather than by formal hierarchical promotion like white collar employees (Fordjour et al., 2025). Career development in labour-intensive businesses usually takes the form of increasing task diversity, access to training and certification, skill upgrading (Lu et al., 2019), and the capacity to move across roles or work units, all of which improve internal employability rather than just upward mobility. Job trajectory for blue-collar workers occasionally involves lateral movement or advancement from unskilled to semi-skilled or skilled positions (Koekemoer et al., 2019), indicating developmental performance.

Contrarily, an organization may have high turnovers if the career development management is not in place (Ryan & Alper, 2021). However, the access to the opportunities depends on the communication between the employees and the employer. When an employee actively expresses the interest to invest the time for upskilling and the available trainings the employer might consider the interest for upskilling and career progression that will benefit the organization in building motivated workforce, increased job performance as well as fostering greater innovation.

### 3.3. Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a wide topic since 1969 by Locke, and it is known to be the emotional and critical reaction that workers have to their work, influenced by perceived success, fairness, recognition, equity, and organizational policies. This is clearly elaborated with Herzberg's paradigm, which includes hygiene elements such as insufficient support or unattractive conditions or even organizational policies could be associated to unhappiness. In disparity of the low job satisfaction, which may lead to disengagement, absenteeism, and impeded career growth, high job satisfaction boosts employee engagement and loyalty, which improves performance and enhances the possibility of career progression (Montuori et al., 2022).

When employees engage in silence, particularly in contexts where voice is discouraged they may feel unheard, undervalued, and powerless which reduces their sense of psychological fulfilment at work (Alarabiat & Eyupoglu, 2022). These experiences are particularly significant for blue-collar workers, whose job satisfaction is more closely linked to unbiased treatment by supervisors, considerate interpersonal interactions, and access to opportunities for training and skill development than it is to formal promotions (Heimerl et al., 2020). The factors affecting employee satisfaction that are related to working conditions and the nature of work are important to be identified. The factors may include low job autonomy, job security, low wages and low expectations of promotion (Boon Hwei & Anuar, 2024).

As job satisfaction declines, employees may become less motivated to invest effort in learning, skill upgrading, or long-term career planning, viewing such investments as unlikely to yield meaningful returns. Consequently, reduced job satisfaction functions as a critical psychological mechanism through which employee silence can indirectly constrain career development among blue-collar workers.

Empirical studies highlights that leadership styles is one of the factors to job satisfaction (Mwesigwa et al., 2020; Specchia et al., 2021), significantly correlate with job satisfaction across various sectors. Supportive leadership which supports open communication inspires and empowers employees, driving morale and job performance (Mwesigwa et al., 2020; Specchia et al., 2021). The palm oil industry studies in Malaysia suggest that job satisfaction drivers such as work-life balance, leadership quality, compensation, training, and organizational culture differ across employee levels but consistently impact satisfaction and performance.

### 3.4. Employee Silence linked with Job Satisfaction and Career Development

Employee silence is likely to have a direct and negative effect on job satisfaction (Alarabiat & Eyupoglu, 2022), particularly in work environments where hierarchical authority and limited upward communication prevail. When employees intentionally withhold work-

related concerns or ideas, they experience reduced psychological safety and diminished perceptions of being valued by the organization. Over time, this lack of voice can foster feelings of frustration, powerlessness, and emotional withdrawal, which undermine employees' positive evaluations of their work conditions. For blue-collar employees, whose daily work experiences are closely shaped by supervisory treatment and interpersonal respect, the inability to express concerns or suggestions may be especially detrimental to job satisfaction, as silence signals limited recognition and responsiveness from those in authority.

However, employee silence has a drawback that leads to reduced job satisfaction. Where job satisfaction plays a critical role in shaping employees' inspiration to engage in career-related behaviours (Rijal et al., 2024) that may include the intensions of reskilling and upskilling, training participation, and long-term career planning. When employees perceive their work environment and lack of communication upwards and downwards, they are less likely to express their intension towards career progression or taking the opportunity for skill upgrading as they believe it might not be acknowledged. Among blue-collar workers, job satisfaction is strongly tied to access to learning opportunities, fair treatment, and supervisor support rather than formal promotion not same with white collar employees who solely depends on promotions and pay raise (Özcan et al., 2023). Consequently, low levels of job satisfaction may reduce employees' willingness to pursue skill upgrading or internal mobility, thereby constraining perceived career development and reinforcing feelings of career stagnation.

Taken together, job satisfaction serves as a key psychological mechanism through which employee silence indirectly influences career development. While silence may initially function as a self-protective strategy, its prolonged representation can erode satisfaction by weakening employees' sense of belonging and organizational support (Hennequin, 2007). This destruction, in turn diminishes motivation to engage in developmental activities that sustain employability and career growth. Accordingly, this conceptual framework proposes that employee silence constrains career development primarily through its negative effect on job satisfaction, highlighting the importance of addressing silence not only as a communication issue but also as a barrier to sustainable career development among blue-collar employees in labour-intensive industries.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the issues with career development among the blue-collar employees are becoming more a topic of attention to be reviewed in this era towards sustainability especially in the palm oil industry. To address this, policy makers, managers, superiors and organizational leaders need to first understand the underlying issues and intentions of the employee. This study will help organizations especially with the blue-collar employees in the labour-intensive industries to increase the job satisfaction not only to retain the employees but also to attract employees especially the youths with a properly managed career trajectory. Consequently, addressing employee silence will improve the organizational behaviour, job satisfactions (Rijal et al., 2024) and encourage employees to be more verbal which will allow them to be more visible towards training access, superior support and career success. The finding of this study could contribute to the existing literature as well as suggest several courses of action for the manager, policy makers, superior and organization leaders improve practices such as encouraging upward communication (John, 2019), training accessibility and mentorship programs

(Rijal et al., 2024) to reduce employee silence of blue-collar employees thus increasing career developments of the palm oil industry.

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