

FOREIGN WORKERS REDUCTION IN MALAYSIAN CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Foreign or migrant workers are the indispensable workforces that has become part of the lives and economy in Malaysia. However, the presence of rising number of illegal foreign workers and much higher percentage of unskilled foreign workers than that of skilled and semi skilled have undeniable induced negative impact on political, economic and social aspect. The objectives of this research is to identify the factors for reduction of foreign workers and to propose strategies for reduction of foreign workers in Malaysian construction industry. Data were collected through explanatory sequential mixed method. The questionnaires were sent to the construction professional that have direct contacts with foreign workers and are working in G7 construction firm. The three principal factors for reduction of foreign workers to the Malaysian construction industry are "Imposing of new policies", "Foreign workers' main objective is only to earn income" and "Reduced quality of work (Bad workmanship)". This research proposes that "Enhance safety practice and procedure", "Working condition improved machinery for machine operator" and "Industrialized Building Systems" as the strategies for reduction of foreign workers.

Keywords: foreign workers, unskilled, reduction, Malaysian construction industry

INTRODUCTION

Foreign or migrant workers are the indispensable workforces that has become part of the lives and economy in Malaysia. These workers are non-Malaysian citizen that are employed on a temporary basis to fulfil the gap in labour employment. Most of these foreign workers are

coming from neighbouring countries like Nepal, Indonesia, Vietnam and Bangladesh. In fact, Malaysia is deemed to be the largest net labour importer in Asia and this shows that our industries are highly depend on them.

The employment of foreign workers are crucial for 3D (dirty, dangerous and difficult) sectors that are shunned by Malaysian workers. Construction sector is the synonym for the word "foreign workers" (Abdul Hamid et al, 2012). Ministry of Home Affairs recorded that construction industry employs about 450,364 number of foreign workers in 2015 making this industry to employ the third highest number of foreign workers (21.1%), below manufacturing (34.9%) and agriculture (23.3%) in Malaysia.

The employment of foreign workers as a construction workers is now considered to be a trend and this is mainly due to labour shortage, they are eligible to work and the available of cheap foreign labour from neighbouring countries. According to Ministry of Homes Affairs (2015), there are total of 2.13 million of foreign workers in Malaysia and this number have exceeded the 2.06 million Indian ethnicities. On top of that, 93 percent of construction workers are foreign workers (Arunandy, 2016). Hence, it is clear that Malaysia is now swamped with foreign workers.

In fact, controlled employment of foreign workers sustain Malaysia's economy growth as this is what we see in South Korea, Singapore, Brunei, United States, the Gulf countries and some West European countries (Rueben, 2016). However, the presence of rising number of illegal foreign workers and much higher percentage of unskilled foreign workers than that of skilled and semi skilled have undeniable induced negative impact on political, economic and social aspect (Abdul Hamid et al, 2012; Ismail and Yuliyusman, 2014; Ajis et al, 2010).

Study showed that skilled and semi skilled foreign workers are significant and have positive impact on the output growth in both short and long run. On the contrary, the employment of unskilled foreign workers negatively affects output growth in both short and long run (Ismail and Yuliyusman, 2014). Although foreign workers is one of the imperative solution to labour shortage issue, they are also one of the biggest barrier for both the Malaysia and local companies to improve competitiveness (Bhaskaran, 2016).

This research objective is identifying the factors for reduction of foreign workers and then propose the strategies in reduction foreign workers in Malaysian construction industry. Questionnaires and interviews will be carried out to investigate on the reduction of foreign workers in Malaysian Construction Industry. Reduction of foreign workers in Malaysia is necessary before total number of foreign workers outnumber local population like Dubai (Hamid, 2016).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research explanatory sequential mixed method is used as the data for quantitative approached will be collected first then followed by qualitative approach producing a more comprehensive analysis on the outcomes, explaining on the unclear, unexpected and extreme cases. Qualitative approach is particularly useful to determine the reasons behind the selected answers for that particular respondent. This approach is more subjective and unbiased which would helps yielding valuable and more complete data that can be used to support the result obtained through quantitative approach. In this approach, statements in terms of texts or words.

Questionnaires and structured interview were carried out concentrating to the professional that have direct contacts with foreign workers in Malaysia working in building construction companies with G7 registration under Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB). Only respondent from Wilayah Persekutuan and Selangor were chosen for this survey as comparing with the other states in Malaysia these states has strong direct links to the foreign workers (Rahman, et al, 2012). According to CIDB (2017), Wilayah Persekutuan (1,603) and Selangor (1,538) both have the highest number of contractors with G7 registration as compared to the other states. Wilayah Persekutuan are not only the largest city, the rapid development in this state has led to increasing influx of unskilled foreign workers from Indonesia, India and Nepal constituting for about 9% of total population 1.76 million (World Population Review, 2017).

90 questionnaires were distributed to the target respondents. Due to time limitation only 18 questionnaires were received and this is equivalent to 20% of response rate. All the questionnaires answered are valid and were used for data analysis. Among these 18 respondents, 3 face-to-face structured interviews also know as researcher-administered survey or

standardized interview were voluntarily carried out in beginning of year 2017. Each interviewees takes about 75 minutes to answer the exactly same questions with the same order. The questionnaire is divided into 3 main parts: A, B and C. Part A is about background of respondent, Part B is about the factors for reduction of foreign workers in Malaysian Construction Industry and Part C is regarding the strategies for reduction of foreign workers in Malaysian Construction Industry.

The data collected will be analyzed using Microsoft Office Excel. For quantitative method, multiple choice questions will be analysed based on percentage of answer selected whereas the formula for average Index method as shown at the following was used to analyse ranking questions where the data was collected by using Likert scale method. Other than that, frequency analysis was use to analyse questions that allow more than one selection. The responses from qualitative method will be used to further explain the results for quantitative method.

$$\text{Average Index (A.I.)} = \Sigma (aX)$$

Where, a = Value weight set for variable (1 for strongly disagree and 5 for strongly agree)

$$X = \text{Respondent frequency} / \text{Total respondents}$$

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Background of Respondent

There are 17% of Project Manager, 5% of site supervisor, 11% of Engineer, 11% of Contractor. Most of the respondents fall at "other" categories and they are the Quantity Surveyor, Contract Manager and Assistant Human Resources Officer. Most of the respondents (33%) have more than 20 years of working experience and this would help offsetting the insufficiency of low response rate. 44% and 28% of the respondents working at company who has 3 to 10 years and more than 20 years of experience respectively.

3.2 Overview of foreign worker in the Malaysian construction industry

Most of the companies (5 or 28%) employ 50% to 70% and more than 90% of foreign workers for a project. According to Arunandy (2016), 93 percent of construction workers are foreign workers. The construction company who employ less than 90% of foreign worker are because some or most of the foreign workers are from their sub contractors. Most of the respondents think that their employment of foreign workers will depend on the ability of the foreign site workers as most of the negative impacts are caused by the unskilled foreign workers not the skilled one. Most of the respondents prefer to continue recruiting the same group of foreign site workers. This is because resources and time are require to spend in training these new foreign workers that have no prior construction experience, low productivity and bad workmanship.

3.3 Factors for the employment of foreign site workers

Table 1: Factors for the Employment of Foreign Site Workers according to the respondents.

No	Factors for the Employment of Foreign Site Workers	Scale					Average Index	Rank	Comment
		1	2	3	4	5			
1	Easier to employ them	0	2	3	8	5	3.89	3	Neutral
2	Shortage of construction workers	0	1	1	8	8	4.28	1	Strongly Agree
3	More economical (Cheap)	0	0	3	7	8	4.28	1	Strongly Agree
4	They are not choosy	0	0	3	10	5	4.11	2	Agree
5	High rate of new development	0	1	7	8	2	3.61	4	Strongly Disagree

Table 2: Scale Index for Factors for the Employment of Foreign Site Workers.

Scale	Level of Agreement	Index
1	Strongly Disagree	$3.61 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 3.74$
2	Disagree	$3.74 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 3.88$
3	Neutral	$3.88 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 4.01$
4	Agree	$4.01 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 4.15$
5	Strongly Agree	$4.15 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 4.28$

Two of the factors for the employment of foreign site workers are rated as strongly agree with the same mean score of 4.28. Both of these factors are shortage of construction workers and more economical. Most of the Malaysian are now too choosy in job selection and they will no

longer willing to work in construction sector that require high physical strength or working at site which involve rough work as they will rather working in a air conditioned office. This situation not only increase the dependency of Malaysia on foreign workers, it also hinder the efforts in attracting local workers to join construction industry. Some employers choose to fill the gap by the employment of cheap foreign workers which help to offset the increasing construction costs. (Narayanan and Lai, 2005 as cited by Rahman et al, 2012).

They are not choosy are rated as agree with the mean score of 4.11. The remaining two factors are easier to employ them rated as neutral with mean score of 3.89 and high rate of new development rated as strongly disagree with mean score of 3.61. Although foreign workers are easier to employ as compared to local construction workers, the legal employment of foreign workers required the contractors to pay high cost, provide welfare for foreign workers and are time consuming due to the long processing time needed for the authorities to approve the foreign work permit.

3.4 Factors for reduction of foreign workers in Malaysian construction industry

Table 3: Factors for Reduction of Foreign Workers in Malaysian Construction Industry.

No	Factors for Reduction of Foreign Site Workers		Scale					Average Index	Rank	Comment
			1	2	3	4	5			
1	Workers	Hygiene	0	7	6	5	0	2.89	18	Strongly Disagree
2	affairs	Communication barriers	0	4	8	6	0	3.11	13	Strongly Disagree
3		Negative behaviours: Stealing or fighting	0	3	7	8	0	3.28	9	Disagree
4		Discourage the involvement of local construction site workers	2	4	5	5	2	3.06	14	Strongly Disagree
5		Bad attitudes: Absent for work, running away	1	4	5	7	1	3.17	11	Disagree
6		Contagious diseases	1	3	9	5		3.00	17	Strongly Disagree
7		Foreign workers' main objective is only to earn income	0	1	4	9	4	3.89	2	Strongly Agree
8	Technical	Reduced productivity	0	5	7	6	0	3.06	14	Strongly Disagree
9		Reduced quality of work (Bad workmanship)	0	1	8	4	5	3.72	3	Agree
10		Low initiative in utilizing modern construction method	1	3	7	6	1	3.17	11	Disagree
11		Low level of work done due to communication barriers	0	5	4	9	0	3.22	10	Disagree
12		Foreign workers are unable to cope in large scale project	0	7	4	6	1	3.06	14	Strongly Disagree
13		Increased accident rate	0	5	4	6	3	3.39	8	Neutral
14	Finance	Decline of Ringgit due to remittances	1	0	5	11	1	3.61	5	Agree
15		Affected the wage structure of local construction market	1	0	4	12	1	3.67	4	Agree
16		Continuous training with low return	1	1	5	11	0	3.44	7	Neutral
17	Issues	Imposing of new policies	0	0	3	11	4	4.06	1	Strongly Agree
18		Foreign workers leaving Malaysia	1	1	5	9	2	3.56	6	Neutral

Table 4: Scale Index for Factors for Reduction of Foreign Workers in Malaysian Construction Industry.

Scale	Level of Agreement	Index
1	Strongly Disagree	$2.89 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 3.12$
2	Disagree	$3.12 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 3.36$
3	Neutral	$3.36 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 3.59$
4	Agree	$3.59 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 3.83$
5	Strongly Agree	$3.83 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 4.06$

Two of the factors for reduction of foreign workers are rated as strongly agree. One of these factors are imposing of new policies ranked number 1 with mean score of 4.06. The employer suffered loss due to the frequent changes in the foreign workers' policy (Guang Ming Daily, 2016). In fact, longer transition period is required for these labour intensive industries. Imposing of these policies will only cause moving out of their businesses elsewhere or closures of the local companies (The Edge Markets, 2017). This can be supported by interviewee number 2 where he mentioned elimination of illegal migration would cause employers to fight for limited legal foreign site workers with higher pay. This could cause many of the construction companies to close down. The foreign workers employed in these companies will be unemployed and some of them will decide to leave Malaysia.

Another of the factor rated as strongly agree is foreign workers' main objective is only to earn income ranked number 2 with mean score of 3.89. According to the research from Mustapa (2014), the analysis of the household disposable income for foreign construction site workers proved that their expenditure in Malaysia are minimal. More than 50% of the salaries earned by the foreign workers are posted back to their family at their home countries (Marhani, 2012).

Contagious diseases is ranked number 17 with mean score of 3.00 (Strongly disagree). According to interviewee number 1, there are some contagious diseases among the foreign workers but since all the foreign workers that they employ have all passed medical check up, there are nothing serious. Hygiene is ranked as 18 with lowest mean score of 2.89 (Strongly disagree). According to interviewee number 3, foreign and local site workers are both dirty but this will not be the reason of reducing foreign construction site workers in Malaysian construction industry.

3.4 Strategies for reduction of foreign workers in Malaysian construction industry

Table 5: Strategies for Reduction of Foreign Workers in Malaysian Construction Industry.

No	Strategies for Reduction of Foreign Site Workers		Scale					Average Index	Rank	Comment
			1	2	3	4	5			
1	Technology	IBS	0	0	5	9	4	3.94	3	Agree
2		Mechanization	0	0	5	10	3	3.89	4	Agree
3		Encourage invention on local construction machinery	0	0	6	11	1	3.72	11	Neutral
4		High tax reduction and incentive	0	3	4	8	3	3.61	15	Neutral
5		Rebate for contractor who send local for training	0	2	4	10	2	3.67	13	Neutral
6	Employer's actions	Increase salary and benefits for the trained local construction site workers	0	1	3	13	1	3.78	9	Agree
7		Enhance safety practice and procedure	0	0	1	11	6	4.28	1	Strongly Agree
8		Enhance site accommodations and services	0	2	3	10	3	3.78	9	Agree
9		Filter, only employ those that are competent	0	2	3	11	2	3.72	11	Neutral
10	Encouragement for the local	Skill testing and certification	1	0	1	15	1	3.83	8	Agree
11		Regular job training and job promotion	1	0	0	16	1	3.89	4	Agree
12		Attract young generation with technology	0	0	4	12	2	3.89	4	Agree
13		machinery for the machine operator	0	0	1	16	1	4.00	2	Agree
14		Skilled training education (Polytechnic)	0	1	2	13	2	3.89	4	Agree
15	Government's	Impose high levy	1	5	5	7	0	3.00	17	Strongly Disagree
16	actions	Eliminate illegal migration	2	0	5	6	5	3.67	13	Neutral
17		Set dependency ceiling	2	3	7	4	2	3.06	16	Strongly Disagree

Table 6: Scale Index for strategies for Reduction of Foreign Workers in Malaysian Construction Industry.

Scale	Level of Agreement	Index
1	Strongly Disagree	$3.00 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 3.26$
2	Disagree	$3.26 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 3.51$
3	Neutral	$3.51 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 3.77$
4	Agree	$3.77 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 4.02$
5	Strongly Agree	$4.02 \leq \text{Mean Index} < 4.28$

Enhance safety practice and procedure is the only factors which is rated as strongly agree with mean score of 4.28. According to the research carried out by Aman (2008), unsafe and unhealthy working conditions is the second highest critical factor that contribute to low participation of local workers in Malaysian construction industry. The declination of the involvement is due to the poor safety record. Improved safety practice and procedure not only reduces the risk for inexperienced workers but strong history of safety also help making the companies to be in a better position in attracting more qualified applicants (Dueitt, 2016).

There are nine strategies for reduction of foreign workers rated as agree and most of it are to encourage the involvement of the local but not government's actions. Working condition improved machinery for machine operator has the highest ranking among these nine strategies with mean score of 4.00. The study from Aman (2008) has shown that the uncomfortable working environment such as dusty, dirty and hot is the highest critical factor that contribute to low participation of local workers in Malaysian construction industry. It is definitely more attractive to operate a machine that is quiet, clean and comfortable (CAT, 2014).

Eliminate illegal migration and rebate for contractor who send local for training both rated as neutral with mean score of 3.67. According to interviewee 1, government can impose high levy, eliminate illegal migration and set dependency ceiling for the foreign workers but without the available of local site workers and technologies like IBS and machinery to replace the foreign workers, it will just increase the burden of the construction sector. Interviewee number 2 do not agree "rebate for contractor who send local for training" as the strategy for reduction of foreign workers. This is because local site workers will become even more arrogant and will then request for even higher salary and benefits. High tax reduction and incentive is also rated

as neutral with mean score of 3.61. Due to time limitation the low ranking of this strategy for reduction of foreign workers were not able to explain by using qualitative results.

There are two strategies for reduction of foreign workers rated as strongly disagree. One of these strategies is set dependency ceiling ranked number 16 with mean score of 3.06 and impose high levy ranked number 17 with mean score of 3.00. The firm that exceeded the dependency ceiling will need to pay for a higher levy. Same as levy it is used to control or minimize the number of foreign workers especially unskilled one in a country. Before the imposing of new policies such as increase in minimum wages and levy, the main priority is to increase the productivity of the workers (Foo, 2016). In fact, longer transition period is required for these labour intensive industries. Imposing of these policies will only cause moving out of their businesses elsewhere or closures of the local companies (The Edge Markets, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Employment of foreign workers especially the unskilled one should not be the long term approach in overcoming labour shortage in all the labour intensive industry in Malaysia as it would erode the identity of Malaysia and cause social unrest. The employment of foreign workers reflected the low quality of works in construction industry as most of them are unskilled, without basic education or the first timer as a construction workers. However, reduced quality of works or bad workmanship is not the main factors for reduction of foreign workers as some of the employers choose to accept their workmanship or to slightly improve their workmanship with the use of apparatuses or equipments such as corner bead.

Other than reduced quality of work, the main factors for reduction is the impose of new government policies as it has the biggest impact on the employers. The employer suffered loss due to the frequent changes in the foreign workers' policy. In fact, longer transition period is required for these labour intensive industries. Imposing of these policies will only cause moving out of their businesses elsewhere or closures of the local companies.

Mechanization or IBS is one of the solution, however it is not the perfect solution. This is because technology are not only expensive to invest, it is only able to reduce the number of foreign workers require at construction site but it do not help increasing the involvement of

locals. It is the involvement of local construction site workers which helps overcoming labour shortage and reducing the negative impacts induced by foreign workers in long term.

In order to increase the involvement of local workers in the Malaysian construction industry there is the need to enhance safety practice and procedure, improve condition of construction machineries for machine operator, carry out regular job training and job promotion, attract young generation with technology and enhance skilled training education. The key in attracting the involvement of local construction workers is to make them feel safe, respected and appreciated.

Both government and employers part a huge part in the reduction of foreign workers in Malaysia. Cost reduction should not be the ultimate aim of all parties as being able to give back to the society should be what matter the most. According to Marhani (2012) one of the key in solving this problems is to carry out larger and more open policy dialogue that involve government, local contractors, non-government organizations, independent policy analysts and workers. It is recommended to further study on the strategies in attracting the involvement of local construction workers into Malaysian construction industry with local workforce as the target respondents for the study.

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