

THE EMERGENCE OF ISLAMIC BANKING IN MALAYSIA: THE DEVELOPMENT, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES AMONG EMPLOYEES

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Accepted date: 2 December 2017

Published date: 11 April 2018

To cite this document:

Abdullah, A., Mohd Salleh, M. Z., & Muhammad, M. Z. (2018). The Emergence of Islamic Banking in Malaysia: The Development, Challenges and Opportunities Among Employees. *International Journal of Accounting, Finance and Business (IJAFB)*, 3(7), 39 - 47.

Abstract: *The understanding among Islamic banking staff towards the implementation of tasks has been given less attention. Studies about the understanding of Islamic banking were more focusing on the aspect of customers' understanding and satisfaction over choosing factor and the usage of offered Islamic banking products. In fact, the previous studies were found to have adapted quantitative approach in studies related to understanding. Thus, this study aims to explore the phenomenon of understanding issues among staff of Islamic banking in reality and provide the solutions. On top of that, this study is using the qualitative approach in order to capture the problem understanding of the staff in detailed based on the real perspectives that they have been going throughout their working experience. In making this a reality, phenomenology research methods are appropriate. Meanwhile, face-to-face interview techniques and observation are applied in achieving the goals and the objectives of this study. The data will be analysed stage by stage with the presence of detailed filtering technique according to theme and sub-theme respectively. Triangulation technique is also used to strengthen the accuracy of the findings. In the data collection process, 32 respondents consisting of staff working at 32 different Islamic banking branches in Malaysia were chosen. Besides, there were 13 experts who are academicians, industrial experts, organisation advisors, sharia advisors and consumerism activists involved to ensure the data validity. The findings have succeeded in achieving the study objectives. This study also suggests that an ecosystem of Islamic banking staff understanding should be built and implemented systematically. Indeed, staff who understands each and every job scope will be able to locate*

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the organisation to the prestigious position as well as to flourish the harmonisation and achieve the solutions of the Islamic based financial system.

Keywords: *understanding, staff, Islamic banking, ecosystem*

Introduction

Islamic banking in Malaysia officially started with the establishment of Bank Islam Malaysia Berhad on the 1st of March 1983. Meanwhile, on the 1st October 1999 the government has initiated the second establishment of Islamic bank which is Bank Muallamat Malaysia Berhad (BMMB). The establishment of BMMB is based on the merging between two banks, namely Bank of Commerce (M) Berhad and Bank Bumiputera Malaysia Berhad (Nor Mohamed, 1996; Ab. Mumin, 1999; Sudin, 2008). Based on the latest statistics issued by Bank Negara Malaysia, there are now several numbers of Islamic banks that operate and offer the service of Islamic banking Shariah-compliant banking system. All the activities and operations of Islamic banking are regulated by the Financial Services Act (IFSA2013) of 2013 which came into force on 30th June 2013 to replace the Islamic Banking Act 1983 (ABI1983).

According to Zeti Aziz (2009), Malaysia's Islamic banking system continues to be driven by offering a variety of services as well as Shariah compliant banking products. However, the issue of staff's understanding in the Islamic banking sector needs to be looked into and highlighted. In addition, staff's understanding can increase the potential as well as widest global growth prospects of the Islamic financial industry. It can also strengthen the resilience and stability of the Islamic financial industry. In fact, this aspect of staff's understanding of the Islamic banking was also emphasized by the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak when he was delivering the opening keynote address at the "Islamic Management System Transformation Carnival in Malaysia" in 2011. According to the Prime Minister, staff's understanding is essential because Malaysia is a national reference in terms of development of knowledge, implementation of Islamic banking and finance in the region. He also stated that, skilled workforces in great numbers are important to strengthen the production of first class human capital (Berita Harian, 2011).

Literature Review

The development of Islamic banking sector in Malaysia is going through many challenges, in terms of products services offered, and implementation. According to Zaharuddin (2011), misunderstanding of the staffs regarding to the concept and implementation of Islamic banking is one of the real obstacles that can prevent the progress of Islamic banking industry from flourishing. According to Hamzah, Ishak, & Nor (2015), weaknesses do exist in Islamic banking operations, including staff's understanding in handling customer service. This weakness may be due to the lack of knowledge among staffs pertaining to its implementation (Harun, Rashid, & Hamed, 2015; Harun, 2014). This situation also revealed by Fayaz Ahmad Lone & Uwais Ur Rehman (2017) that highlighted in their study where the Islamic banks are very weak in assessing the customers' specific needs, which makes them unable to train their employees and tailor the products in parallel with these customers' needs. Muhammad Shahabudin (2011) also mentioned, the stating phrase "customer is always right" is not relevant any more. The author argues, based on the services provided by the employees of Islamic banking at present, the phrase should be changed to "Bank is always right". In his

opinion, this matter arises because current Islamic banking highlights more images and services that is nearly similar to services offered by conventional banking. Even the method of communication and service given by the staffs of Islamic banking to clients who deal with these banks portrays the lack of Islamic values. According to him, as a bank that carries the name of "Islam" (as a brand), customers expect the service to be more “Islamic” compared to other conventional banks.

On the other hand Adnan Alias (2012) mentioned that such situation occurs in local Islamic banking operations due to the institution itself which is not putting the need to meet with the goals of Sharia as the main focus of the business. On the other hand, they are perceiving profit as something that should be prevailed. It is also in line with the view of Jamelah Jamaluddin (2010) which states that, Islamic banking in Malaysia still seems to be biased in terms of its implementation. This is true especially among Islamic banks under the conventional banking subsidiary. Here are the excerpts of the interview:

“..... Banking groups in Malaysia have two forms of banking, conventional and Islamic. When compared to both these two are far too different from each other. Conventional banks are larger and old in nature. So in a situation like that, you can think of who controlled whom? Of course conventional banks control the Islamic banks. So, most of what I do in Islamic banking got resistance from parties who are in conventional banks. That's not just my problem only actually. This is experienced by all CEOS who are in Islamic banks, which became a subsidiary of conventional banks

Source: Utusan Malaysia (dated 12 April 2010)

Based on the problems presented above, it clearly reflects that the obstacles faced by the Islamic banking staffs in managing, implementation of products, services and customers are very challenging. Precise understanding should be instilled in each employee so that the products and services offered the bank will make the clients satisfied. Moreover, the statistics of product subscription and personal loan financing issued by Bank Negara Malaysia for a period of five years (2013-2017) seems to be aligned with these problems stated earlier. Based on Table 1 below, it is proven that the amount of personal loans issued by conventional banking is much more convincing in numbers compared to the amount of personal financing subscribed by customers of the Islamic banking provider.

Table 1: Total Amount of Personal Financing and Personal Loans Issued by Islamic and Conventional Banking for the year 2013 - 2017

Banking Institutions	Year 2013 (RM mil)	Year 2014 (RM mil)	Year 2015 (RM mil)	Year 2016 (RM mil)	Year 2017 (RM mil)
Conventional	23,557.60	22,279.60	19,818.00	17,495.70	18,848.30
Islamic	8,450.30	8,391.90	9,964.20	9,944.00	10,869.90

Source: BNM extract report (1.10 Banking System: Loan applied by purposed)

The statistics in table 1 above also provide an answer to the problems discussed the dominance of unsatisfactory staff understanding of the products and services offered by the Islamic bank also resulted in a lack of response by customers for the product and services. Random survey found that the issue of employees’ misunderstanding in the implementation of Islamic banking comes in many versions. It is also asserted by the *Persatuan Pengguna*

Islam Malaysia (PPIM) on 17 February 2012 through its website page (<http://www.muslimconsumer.org.my>), expressing their discontent with the implementation of the method carried out by the Islamic banking institutions. This is mainly related to promotional activities, product marketing and the debts handled by staffs serving in Islamic banking.

According to PPIM again, Islamic banking is only using the name of "Islam" to highlight the products that are promoted to customers. In addition, it claimed that persecution has occurred at the same time when the method used has the potentials of being contrary to Islamic laws. According to PPIM, if the Islamic banking authorities do not follow fully Shariah requirements in banking, it could give a negative image of Islam itself. As such, it has a bad impact on customer loyalty and trust towards the Islamic banking institutions.

Therefore, Mohamad Akram & Nusaibah (2010) have suggested the importance of mastery related aspects of Sharia among staff serving in Islamic banking institutions in order to put the integrity on the Islamic banking institution level. The control of unsatisfactory understanding seems to be misrepresented to customers whereby most of the products and services offered by Islamic banking products are perceived as equivalent to products and services of conventional banking (Qian & Velayutham, 2017). Yusof (2011) stated, Islamic banking is just an "imitation" of conventional banking. According to Muhamad et al.(2013), the result of the implication of misunderstanding which have arisen have led Islamic banking products to be labelled as the Islamization of the conventional banking products.

Based on the problems presented above, the question of understanding of Islamic banking staff in handling the entrusted operation is something that should be noted. The study of Liang, Wen, Ping, Ling, & Kuen (2013) also urged that the Islamic banking operators to increase efficiency in its management to make perception, having more confidence and enhance the image of Islamic banking itself. This is also in line with the views put forward by Zaharuddin (2011), David Vicary (2003), Muhammad Shahabudin (2011), Adnan Alias (2012), Jamelah Jamaluddin (2010) as well as Mohamad Akram & Nusaibah (2010).

Analysis

Based on the problems presented, a study was carried out in order to get the true understanding of the problems occurred among staffs serving in Islamic banking. Therefore, a total of 32 respondents were interviewed. They are employees who serve in Islamic banking institutions selected from all over Malaysia including Sabah, Sarawak and the Federal territory of Labuan. The study has also confirmed its findings through expert triangulation technique. The expert of triangulation involved a total of 14 individuals who specialize in the field of Islamic banking, including those involved in industry, academics, consulting organizations and activist consumerism.

The results of this study were analysed in theme with the objective to explore the understanding of staff that perform the operations of personal financing in Islamic banking. As a result, nine sub themes were analysed. The findings showed that all nine themes reviewed have resulted in findings of unsatisfactory understanding. Table 2 below is a summary of the results of the findings that have been obtained.

Table 2: Summary of Findings

Theme: Review the understanding of Islamic banking staff in implementing the operation of personal financing	
Sub-theme	Results
1) Understanding of the concept of <i>Tawarruq</i> in personal financing	Less Satisfactory
2) Understanding of the concept of personal financing by other banks	Less Satisfactory
3) Understanding of the advantages of personal financing products offered	Less Satisfactory
4) Understanding of differences in the concept of “financing” and concept of “loan”	Less Satisfactory
5) Understanding in differences of the concept ”profit rate” with “interest rate”	Less Satisfactory
6) Understanding of the contents of the contract of personal financing	Less Satisfactory
7) Understanding of the term “valid” in personal financing contract	Less Satisfactory
8) Understanding of the concept of “ <i>riba</i> ”	Less Satisfactory
9) Understanding of the concept of debt in Islam	Less Satisfactory

Once analyzed, the result of the understanding of Islamic banking staffs in managing the operations of personal financing has been found to be less satisfactory. These findings present a significant of the problems raised by the scholars in the past. Justification of unsatisfactory understanding was obtained after a process of review of triangulation by selected experts.

Based on the findings, the first sub-theme showed the majority of respondents are only capable of giving sheer-declare of the definition of *tawarruq* without being able to provide appropriate details about the application of *tawarruq* in the context of personal financing. While in the second theme, the study showed the majority of respondents who do not have the sensitivity of personal financing products are also being offered by other banking institutions. As presented in the third sub-theme, studies showed that the respondents are only able to explain the advantages of financing products offered based on the context of the material alone without being able to give the benefits overly of the product from a wider angle. The same outcome was also found in the fourth study of the sub-theme. Most of the respondents were unable to explain the differences in the concept of loans and financing concepts in a more practical way in terms of resources and its usability. Moreover, there are also some respondents who described both concepts to be the same, and they claim the difference is just the term only.

Therefore, based on the findings of each of the nine sub-themes presented, it has clearly shows a significant answer to the problems raised by the scholars at the start of this

discussion. However the study was also verified by a group of experts through triangulation techniques used. In general, the findings of this study indirectly give a clear justification for a lack of customer demand for financing products as compared to personal loans (Table 1) due to the lack of understanding of employees in mastering the skills associated with it.

Recommendations

In order to overcome this problem, the study proposed that a comprehensive mechanism should be established. The mechanism of such an ecosystem operates to strengthen the understanding of Islamic banking staff in the implementation of the tasks carried out. Hence, the study suggested that a sound ecosystem needs to be developed in the institution of contemporary Muslim such as Islamic banking. The need for the existence of this ecosystem is based on the results of the findings and details of sub themes which shows the pattern of association between all the factors stated. Therefore, the study suggests unsatisfactory staff understanding in all the nine sub themes that have been analysed. To overcome this, the following approaches should be taken into consideration and appropriate attention should be given by the management of the Islamic banking institution involved. The factors that have been identified and should be improved are listed in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Things that need to be improved

Factor	Factors that need to be improved
1	Creation of innovation and training delivery system.
2	Establishment of ethics code and practice of muslim's staff.
3	Improvement of remuneration system, benefits and performance appraisals work.
4	Application of Islamic values among the staff and the organization.
5	Strengthening the information management network system and organization.
6	Compliance practice for risk mitigation.
7	Embrace the practice of compliance and holistic social responsibility.

Based on table 3 above, there are seven factors that have been identified and are expected to boost the understanding of staff towards the implementation of the tasks carried out. These factors are interconnected with each other and are able to form a strong chain in an organisation orientation as set out in Figure 1 below.

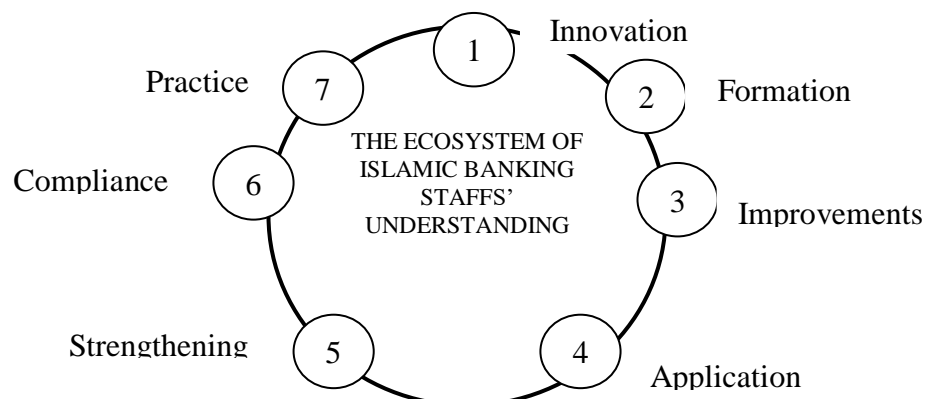


Figure 1: The Ecosystem of Islamic Banking Staff's Understanding

Based on the findings that have been obtained, the study found that the understanding of staffs should be strengthened through the creation of innovation in training and delivery system. Training methods that are more focused, interactive and friendly information should be developed so that the delivery system within the organization can be adjusted, updated and easy to understand. The study also found, that the understanding of the Islamic banking staff need to be supported with clearer working guidelines. These guidelines can help Muslim staffs to easily follow the codes of ethics of the Islamic banking. It should be given appropriate attention because studies have shown that employees who serve in the Islamic banking institution are paying less attention to the application of code organized by Islamic teaching in their daily work, whether in terms of appearance and personality. It is important to be developed so that the existence of the Islamic banking institution is in line with personality, freedom and human capital development.

In addition, the study also found that staffs' understanding could be strengthened with the improvement of the system of remuneration, benefits and performance evaluation. This is because, the study has found that most of the staff has put in an integral factor to marginalize other factors such as health and religious affairs. This is true due to the orientation of the banking institution itself, which is more likely to put the goal of profit as the main objective without giving attention to the ability of the staff in interpreting the predetermined goal. Improvements in this regard should be done in order to create a win-win situation in the granting of compensation, benefits and performance evaluation to its employees. In addition, the study also found the need for Islamic banking institutions to implement Islamic values to its employees and to take steps to change the appearance of the organization in an environment that is more contemporary in nature. In this way the study believes understanding of employees who serve in the Islamic banking should be strengthened and this will lead to appreciation of Islam in their daily work orientation. However, such things are important to Islamic organizations, in highlighting the image of Islam in line with the brand, products and services available. Improvements in this regard do not only contribute to the understanding of staff, but indirectly increase customer confidence and boost the organization's image.

In addition, this aspect of understanding also managed to strengthen the organization with the enhancement in management information systems and organizations. This is because studies have shown that the majority of the affected employees work were directed through their own initiatives to achieve the objectives that have been set. The staffs were found to deal with the problem of limited reference source in addition to the weaknesses in the management of time. This may happen due to the factor of information distributed to employees, which did not reach the desired meaning. As such all information received by the employees was seen to be not uniform, a bit behind and elusive. If these could be improved, they could contribute to a better understanding of the staff in the implementation of the tasks carried out.

The study also found that the understanding among staffs can be strengthened with the existence of compliance system that practices for risk mitigation. In this case the staffs should be given clear direction in performing their tasks. This is because studies have shown that most of the employees concerned were carrying out their duties by exposing themselves to the risk factor. The risk factor mentioned here is a lack of sensitivity to the intended method of affairs management between customers and staffs. The staffs are seen likely to take risks

with an appointment outside the banking premises and also passed the official workday. This is true due to the target setting work by corporations which are quite tight. Therefore, the need to create a system that is more systematic should be included in compliance with the assignment entrusted. This is to be in line with the risk factors faced by employees in carrying out their daily tasks.

Finally, studies have shown that staffs' understanding could have been strengthened with the practice in the organization itself. Measures mentioned earlier could be undertaken as to nourish the nature of conformity and holistic social responsibility among staffs at the banking institutions involved. This is because all plans and objectives set by the organization must be more practical rather than simply putting achievement factor as a priority. Furthermore appreciating the values of adherence to the creator as an encouragement should not be left in contributing to the understanding of staffs that is more universal and effective.

Conclusion

Based on the studies that have been conducted, problems and understanding of the reality faced by employees who serve in the Islamic banking institution must be given particular attention. A sound understanding of the ecosystem should be developed and implemented as a whole to strengthen understanding, preserve its continuity and propel the organization to a class of its own in the global banking arena. A good understanding staff can create harmonization in practice, strengthen the integrity and the main instil more responsibility in a trust in order to acquire the blessing from Allah SWT.

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