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Qualitative Investigation of Employee Efficacy on Sustainable Work Performance in Oil Palm Plantation

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian oil palm industry, a key driver of the nation's economy, faces persistent challenges such as labor shortages and declining productivity. This qualitative study examines the factors influencing employee efficacy in small and medium-sized oil palm plantations by exploring the interplay between employee personality traits, leadership styles, and environmental work conditions. Using a purposeful sampling strategy, five plantation managers from various states in Malaysia were selected as respondents. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed using thematic analysis, which identified nine key themes: (1) Employee Personality, (2) HR Practices, (3) Leadership and Management Challenges, (4) Performance Evaluation, (5) Conflict Resolution, (6) Employee Development and Training, (7) Safety and Compliance Management, (8) Workplace Environment, and (9) Environmental Work Factors. The findings highlight that positive personality traits such as diligence, discipline, collaboration) enhance productivity, while negative traits like stubbornness, absenteeism, and laziness hinder efficiency. Leadership and HR practices play a critical role in motivating employees through training, performance incentives, and structured feedback mechanisms. Additionally, a safe and conducive work environment, compliance with occupational safety standards, and access to modern equipment significantly improve work performance. The study provides actionable recommendations for plantation managers to enhance managerial strategies, improve workforce engagement, and create a sustainable work environment to drive productivity and industry growth.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

The oil palm sector has been pivotal to Malaysia's socio-economic growth, contributing significantly to GDP (Musa et al., 2021). Oil palm plantations, as a major employer, face challenges such as labor shortage, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and negative perceptions of plantation work (Marcus et al., 2021). Employee effectiveness is key to better plantation performance since productivity depends on traits like diligence and discipline, which impact job satisfaction and performance. Leadership plays a key role in enhancing productivity by empowering employees and fostering teamwork (Hindarwati et al., 2022). A supportive and comfortable work environment boosts worker well-being, leading to higher productivity (Saad et al., 2023). However, poor conditions and leadership shortcomings hinder performance necessitating studies on the impact of employee personality and leadership in the oil palm sector. The study aims to explore these relationships by focusing on environmental factors like health, safety, and technology to improve employee efficacy and industrial sustainability in SMEs (Saad et al., 2023). Specifically, this investigation is conducted to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate the relationship between employee personality and work performance in SME oil palm plantations.
2. To examine management leadership and comprehend its impact on organizational productivity in Malaysian SME oil palm plantations.
3. To investigate the environmental factors and employee efficacy in Malaysian SME oil palm plantations.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Oil palm plantations are vital to Malaysia's economy and global palm oil supply, with employee efficacy being crucial to operational success and competitiveness. This study explores the unique challenges and factors affecting employee effectiveness in Malaysian SMEs within the oil palm sector, using the Resource-Based View (RBV) model (Figure 1). The RBV framework clarifies the relationship between employee performance and various operational factors providing valuable insights into enhancing efficiency and sustainability in the industry.

2.1 Model of Resource-Based View (RBV) and VRIO

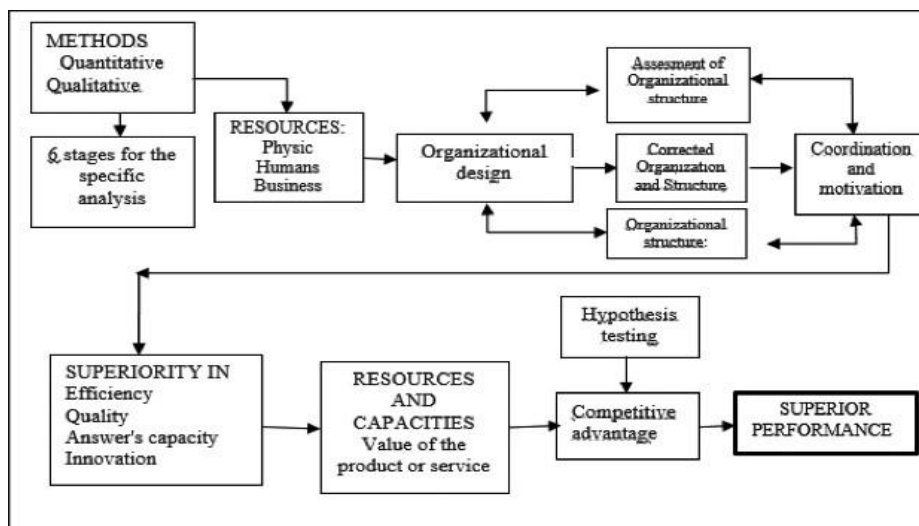


Fig. 1. The Resource-Based View (RBV) Theory

The RBV Theory emphasises that superior organizational performance stems from the strategic utilization of a firm's unique resources and capabilities. Introduced by Barney (1995), RBV focuses on resource heterogeneity (value and rarity) and immobility (inimitability) as drivers of competitive advantage. It highlights those internal capabilities, both tangible (financial, physical) and intangible (human resources, technology), can create long-term, hard-to-replicate advantages (e.g., Johnson et al., 2014).

The RBV suggests that internal resources like human capital are critical for gaining a competitive advantage. In this study, employee efficacy is considered a strategic internal resource. Employee efficacy is a human capital resource whereas when employees are efficient, skilled, and confident, they contribute to higher sustainable performance in oil palm plantations, especially important in labor-intensive and environmentally sensitive industries. Malaysian oil palm plantations found that workers' efficacy positively impacts plantation performance (Rahim et al., 2023). The research highlighted that behavioral factors such as workers' initiative, motivation, dependability, and cooperativeness also play vital roles in influencing performance outcomes (Rahim et al., 2023).

In the context of Malaysia's oil palm plantations, RBV (Figure 2) is applied through the leveraging of unique resources to maintain a competitive edge in the global market (Ahmad et al., 2020; Workman, 2023). This includes adapting strategies to ensure resource efficiency and sustainability in an increasingly competitive industry (Islami et al., 2020).

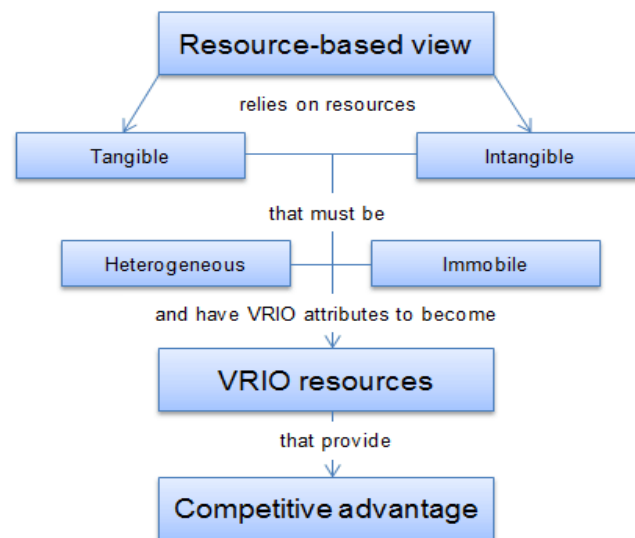


Fig. 2. The Resource Based View

Sources: Strategic human resource management in Chinese companies operating in Bangladesh: Issues and challenges. International Journal of Economics, Commerce and Management (Adapted from Foysal, & Zhen, 2019).

The VRIO framework (Figure 3), an extension of the RBV, assesses resources based on four criteria which are Value, Rarity, Imitability, and Organization (Barney, 1995). A resource provides a competitive advantage if it is valuable, rare, hard to imitate, and effectively organized. The framework helps assess whether resources such as human capital, technology, and infrastructure are strategically managed to maintain a sustainable advantage (Ariyani et al., 2018; Rothaermel, 2013). However, the VRIO framework faces challenges in the subjective interpretation of resource value across different contexts (Kristensen et al., 2017).

The VRIO tool helps evaluate whether a resource employee efficacy provides sustained competitive advantage. If employee efficacy meets all VRIO criteria, then it can be positioned as a sustained competitive advantage for oil palm plantations.

Table 1. VRIO Criteria

VRIO Criteria	Application to Employee Efficacy
Valuable	Yes. High efficacy improves productivity, reduces errors, and increases sustainability in operations.
Rare	Possibly. Not all plantations have well-trained, motivated, and empowered employees.
Inimitable	Yes. Difficult to replicate due to culture, training, and internal processes.
Organized	Can be, if the organization supports efficacy through systems, leadership, and incentives.

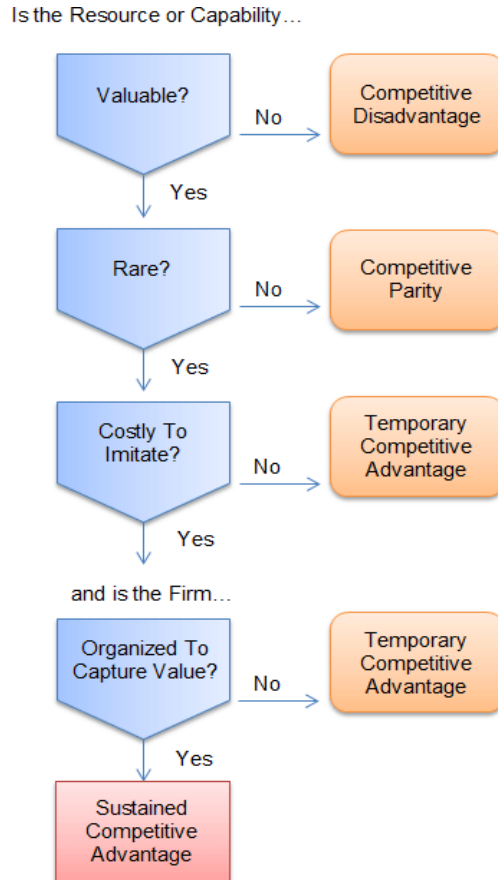


Fig. 3. VRIO framework adapted from the 'Strategic Management' of Rothaermel (2015), p. 911

Together, the RBV and VRIO frameworks provide a comprehensive approach to understanding how firms can leverage unique and valuable resources to drive long-term success and maintain competitiveness in industries such as oil palm plantations.

2.2 Oil Palm Plantation Operation Factor in Employee Personality

Employee personality significantly influences organisational goals and performance. Contented and motivated employees tend to be more productive, with positive work ethics driving success (Alamsyah et al., 2019). In Malaysian SME oil palm plantations, managing worker behavior is critical for superior performance, as employees are key assets (Mohamed Rahim et al., 2023). Motivation, shaped by incentives like pay and overtime, plays a vital role in enhancing performance, independent of other factors (Sowunmi,

2022). Personality traits, particularly those outlined in Big Five model (OCEAN: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism), influence job satisfaction, engagement, and performance (Zulkarnain et al., 2023). Openness is the strongest predictor of work engagement, as employees with this trait exhibit critical thinking and innovation. Organisations should prioritise recruitment and training programs to nurture these traits and maximize employee potential (Zulkarnain et al., 2023).

2.3 Oil Palm Plantation Operation Factor in Management Leadership

Leadership significantly influences organisational success by inspiring and guiding employees to achieve goals. Effective leaders play a critical role in leveraging resources, fostering a strong organizational culture, and ensuring alignment with the company's vision and mission (Tenggai et al., 2023; Rabun, 2023). Occupational Safety and Health (OHS) regulations are essential for improving employee well-being and performance, particularly in the palm oil plantation sector. Management should prioritize OHS training for workers and managers to enhance safety and establish high-performance standards (Abidin, 2023).

Organisational culture, encompassing shared values, beliefs, and practices, is a strategic tool for driving employee performance and competitiveness. Although exceptions exist, studies show that a positive culture significantly impacts performance. (Damai et al., 2023). To enhance motivation and job satisfaction, managers must ensure equitable treatment, foster competency development, and communicate expectations effectively. Leadership acts as the driving force for organizational progress and employee engagement (Alamsyah et al., 2019).

2.4 Oil Palm Plantation Operation Factor in Environmental Work Factor

A conducive workplace significantly influences employee productivity and satisfaction. Since labor productivity provides a dynamic measure of economic development, competitiveness, and living standards within an economy, it is also a telling indication of various other economic variables (Ahmad et al., 2017). The palm oil business has emerged as a significant contributor to the agricultural commodities sector. Ahmad et al. (2020) highlight the nation's income has been significantly influenced by the agriculture industry. As the second-largest contributor to the global palm oil industry after Indonesia, Malaysia's palm oil serves as evidence of this (Ahmad et al., 2020).

The work environment comprises social and physical aspects, categorized into three dimensions: organizational, technical, and human. Organizational philosophies, tools, equipment, and employee interactions must collectively foster collaboration and high performance (Raziq & Maula-Bakhsh, 2015; Suifan, 2019). A healthy work environment which is defined by favorable physical and psychological conditions enhances job satisfaction, motivation, and performance. Factors like wages, working hours, autonomy, hierarchy, communication, and safety climate play critical roles in shaping satisfaction and well-being (Wen Lim et al., 2018; Spector, 1997).

In Malaysia, the Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO) Standards mandate proper safety measures, such as providing PPE, ensuring chemical safety compliance, and developing Standard Operating Procedures to promote ethical and sustainable palm oil production. The government supports these efforts through financial aid for MSPO certifications, encouraging better working conditions and performance (Marcus et al., 2021; Kolandai & Lim, 2019).

2.5 Research Gap

Research on employee personality in Malaysia's plantation sector is limited, despite its potential to improve productivity through tailored training, task distribution, and engagement strategies. This study addresses the gap by exploring the relationship between personality and work performance in oil palm plantations, aiming to optimize operations and enhance industry outcomes. Suifan (2019) emphasises the need to investigate work environment factors that foster confidence and loyalty to improve output quality.

Effective leadership is crucial for addressing organisational challenges and improving job performance. Studies like Saad et al. (2023) and Tewari et al. (2024) highlight the link between leadership productivity and employee performance, suggesting further exploration of leadership styles and interventions that boost productivity. Limited research has examined the connection between psychological factors in the work environment and job satisfaction. This study will analyze variables like occupational health, workplace safety, and the use of appropriate tools, which are strongly correlated with productivity in the oil palm industry (Saad et al., 2023). Insights from this research can guide efforts to enhance performance and satisfaction in the sector.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach following the stated theoretical framework. The study focuses on employees who particularly worked at oil palm plantations. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the analytical scales, identical test questions were administered.

3.1 Selection Criteria

This study utilises purposeful sampling, which is a method of sampling in which the researcher purposefully selects participants for the study based on their willingness to supply the necessary data. Supervisor intervention was incorporated to monitor worker behaviour through a behavioral survey (Michon et al., 2004; Johari & Jha, 2020). Executive staff of Malaysian oil palm plantations (table 2), regarded as experts in assessing worker behaviour, were approached to examine workers behavior on plantation performance. This study analyses the impact of employee personality, management leadership, and environmental work conditions on employee efficacy, which in turn affects their overall work performance in oil palm plantations. The feedback and extensive records of employee performance collected provide valuable insights into understanding how these factors collectively influence work performance dynamics in small and medium-sized oil palm plantations.

Table 2. Selection criteria of the respondents

Respondents	Age	Years of experience in SME oil palm plantation	Position/rank
Respondent 1	60	17	Manager
Respondent 2	59	14	Manager
Respondent 3	58	12	Manager
Respondent 4	55	10	Manager
Respondent 5	59	16	Manager

3.2 Research Design

A virtual interview was conducted with five managers in oil palm enterprises across different states in Malaysia. The interview was recorded using both video and audio to ensure accuracy. During the interview, attention was given to nonverbal signals such as body language and verbal responses, and the manner in which questions were answered. This research employs a qualitative methodology, where was collected and analysed through interviews. Information was gathered from both interviews and the sources given by plantation management.

A semi-structured interview was employed to allow for greater flexibility, ensuring that key themes were addressed and enabling respondents to provide detailed explanation on specific areas of interest. A report was derived from recorded interviews, focusing on the impact of employee efficacy on Malaysia's oil palm plantations. The data collection process was structured based on the selected themes and thematic analysis used to gain deeper insights into participants' beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, perceptions, and values.

3.3 The Procedure

The data analysis was conducted using information obtained from the interviews. During the first interview session, employees were asked about their background, experience, work competency, and work efficiency specifically within the context of oil palm plantations. Then, all the relevant study questions related to the influence of staff efficacy in oil palm plantations were addressed. Finally, the researcher examined the primary factors that influenced employee efficacy.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Employee efficacy in Malaysia's oil palm plantations is influenced by nine key factors. Interviews were conducted to analyze these themes and provide actionable insights for improving performance in small and medium-sized oil palm plantations.

Employee personality plays a significant role, with traits like diligence, collaboration, and discipline positively impacting performance, while laziness, absenteeism, and stubbornness hinder it. Human resource practices, such as training, skill development, performance recognition, and fostering a supportive environment, are essential for enhancing productivity. Leadership and management challenges, including communication barriers and safety concerns, directly affect employee efficacy. Regular performance evaluation helps maintain and improve work standards. Conflict resolution strategies, such as open communication, mediation, and individual discussions, effectively address workplace disputes. Employee development and training focus on regular technical and safety training, skill-building, and supporting new workers. Safety and compliance management emphasizes the mandatory use of PPE, routine safety training, and adherence to safety regulations to ensure a secure environment. Lastly, the workplace environment, with comfortable facilities, modern equipment, and effective communication, contributes to employee well-being and efficiency.

4.1 Demographics of the Interviewees

Table 3 presents statistics on the gender and age of interviewed informants. The information indicates that all five respondents are male, aged over 50 years. They have more than ten years of experience in the oil palm plantation sector and are still actively employed in their respective organisations. Identifying female respondents proved challenging, as the workforce in oil palm plantations is mostly dominated by male.

Table 3. Category of Informants based on age and gender group

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	5	100
Female	0	0
<i>Age</i>		
40-50	0	0
50-60	5	100

After interviewing five respondents, the investigators found that the data had reached saturation, as similar patterns emerged in the responses. According to Fusch et al. (2018), saturation is the point at which the researcher determines that all relevant information has been gathered and no new insights can be obtained from the additional participants. Saturation typically indicates that additional data collection becomes unnecessary. Data saturation is a commonly employed technique in social science research and is a crucial component of the qualitative approach, which was originally introduced in Glaser and Strauss' grounded theory in 1967.

Table 4. Category of Informants based on total years of experience

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<i>Experience (Years)</i>		
0-10	0	0
10-20	5	100

Table 4 presents data on the categories of informants interviewed based on their years of work experiences in the SME oil palm plantation. The data shows that all participants have more than 10 years of experience in the SME oil palm plantation. The researcher specifically selected participants with over 10 years of work experience to gain a deeper understanding of the impacts of employee efficacy in SME oil palm plantation.

Table 5. Category of Informants based on position/ level

Respondents	Position	Organization/ Company	Location
Respondent 1	Manager	Yuwang Palm Oil Mill	Lahad Datu, Sabah, Malaysia
Respondent 2	Manager	Alto Sdn.Bhd.	Miri, Sarawak, Malaysia
Respondent 3	Manager	Central Palm Oil Mill Sdn Bhd	Perak Malaysia
Respondent 4	Manager	Solid Orient Palm Oil Mill	Kedah, Malaysia
Respondent 5	Manager	Kahang Palm Oil Mill	Kahang, Johor, Malaysia

Table 5 shows that all respondents interviewed were managers from various oil palm mills across Malaysia, selected for their leadership roles and diverse organizational affiliations. The respondents represent a wide geographic distribution, including Sabah, Sarawak, Perak, Kedah, and Johor, showcasing the study's focus on regional diversity within the oil palm industry. The uniformity in their managerial experiences and insights contributed to data saturation, as consistent themes emerged throughout the interviews, suggesting that further interviews would likely produce redundant findings.

4.2 Research Findings

The answers of the respondents to the thematic research analysis are summarised in Table 6 as to the impact of employee efficacy at SME oil palm plantation in Malaysia.

Table 6. Summarization of the Transcript Interview

Impact of employee efficiency at SME oil palm plantation	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3	Respondent 4	Respondent 5
Employee Personality	√	√	√	√	√
HR Practices	√	√	√	√	√
Leadership & Management Challenges	√	√	√	√	√
Performance Evaluation					
Conflict Resolution	√	√	√	√	√
Employee Development & Training	√	√	√	√	√
Safety & Compliance Management	√	√	√	√	√
Workplace Environment	√	√	√	√	√

4.3 Relationship between Employee Personality and Work Performance in SME Oil Palm Plantations

Employee Personality (Positive)

In SME oil palm plantations, employee personality traits significantly influence work performance and productivity. Figure 4 represents three sub-themes identified under employee positive personality and attitudes that greatly impact efficiency and productivity at SME oil palm plantations, as highlighted by most

of the respondents. Positive traits like diligence, discipline, and collaboration improve efficiency, adherence to SOPs, and teamwork, while negative traits such as laziness and absenteeism harm morale and increase costs. The Big Five Personality Traits framework provides insights into how conscientious employees are reliable, agreeable workers foster teamwork, and those high in openness excel in innovation (Rahim et al., 2023). Understanding these traits enables management to develop targeted strategies to enhance positive traits and address negative ones, improving overall plantation performance and sustainability.

Employee efficacy is crucial for organizational success, as it directly impacts productivity. In oil palm plantations, understanding worker behavior is essential, with diligence highlighted by the interview respondents as the key trait for productivity. Diligent workers are responsible, focused on quality, and help minimize mistakes and delays, which is vital in labor-intensive environments. Tenggai et al. (2023) describe conscientious individuals as reliable, goal-oriented, and hardworking, making them valuable assets. Cultivating diligence and responsibility enhances operations and boosts productivity (Rahim et al., 2023).

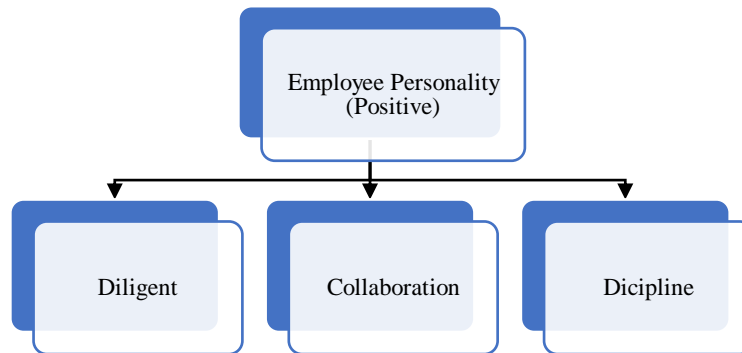


Fig. 4. Theme and Sub-Theme 1 Identified

Respondent 2 emphasises that a collaborative attitude promotes teamwork and mutual support, leading to faster task completion and improved efficiency. Effective collaboration allows employees to share knowledge, helping less experienced workers and boosting overall productivity. As Rahim et al. (2023) noted, strong teamwork directly impacts organizational performance. In Malaysian oil palm plantations, where workers are from diverse backgrounds, cooperation among workers enhances team dynamics and contributes to the plantations' success.

Discipline is key to maintaining productivity in oil palm plantations, as Respondent 5 commented. Adhering to standard operating procedures (SOPs) ensures tasks are performed consistently, reducing errors and inefficiencies. Disciplined employees are punctual, organised, and focused, minimising downtime and disruptions. Johari and Jha (2020) emphasise that responsible and dependable workers contribute to high-quality production, ultimately improving overall performance. This highlights the importance of cultivating a culture of responsibility within the workforce.

On the other hand, Figure 5 represents three sub-themes identified under employees' negative attitude that have a significant impact on the efficiency and productivity at SME oil palm plantation which were the most highlighted by the respondents. Stubbornness is a negative attitude that significantly impacts productivity in SME oil palm plantations, as noted by Respondents 1 and 5. Employees with this attitude resist following instructions and SOPs, disrupting workflow, increasing errors, and lowering work quality. This behavior leads to delays and inefficiencies, affecting the entire team. Rahim et al. (2023) highlight that stubbornness creates obstacles to productivity, making it difficult for the team to stay on track and perform at their best.

Employee Personality (Negative)

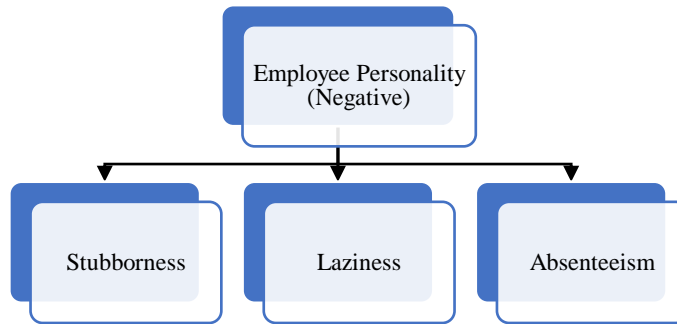


Fig. 5. Theme and sub-theme 2

Respondent 2 identified laziness and lack of responsibility as major productivity barriers. These traits lead to incomplete tasks, disrupt workflows, and create stress for other team members, causing frustration, errors, and lowered morale. Azman et al. (2022) and Rahim et al. (2023) emphasise that lack of effort and procrastination disrupt performance and hinder productivity. Experienced respondents highlighted how such behaviors undermine efficiency.

Respondent 3 emphasised absenteeism as a major productivity issue. Frequent absences disrupt workflows, leave tasks incomplete, and increase the workload on other employees, leading to burnout and lowered morale. This inconsistency makes it harder for management to meet targets and maintain operations. Addressing absenteeism and promoting responsibility could improve team cohesion and productivity. Syahlan et al. (2020) highlight that absenteeism increases operational costs and reduces overall productivity in oil palm plantations.

4.4 Human Resource (HR) Practices

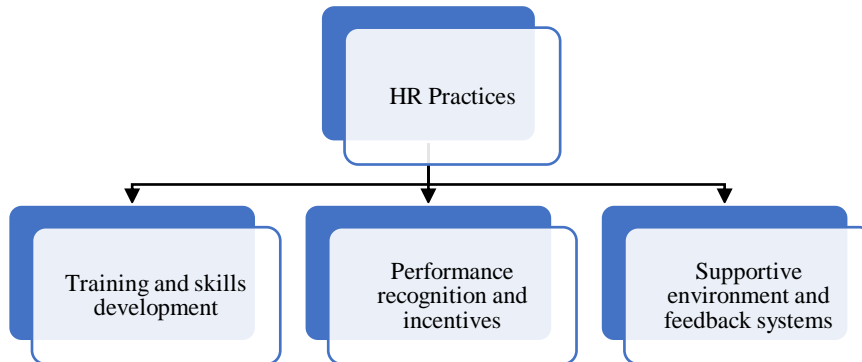


Fig. 6. Theme and Sub-theme 3

Figure 6 represents three sub-themes identified based on the interview of each respondent at oil palm plantation. All three sub-themes were closely related to human resource on oil palm plantation which was the most highlighted by the respondents.

Training and Skill Development

Training and skill development were highlighted by Respondents 1, 3, and 4 as key to enhancing productivity. Respondent 3 emphasised regular training on technical skills and safety protocols, which builds employee confidence and effectiveness. Respondent 1 also stressed the importance of skill enhancement and safety in high-risk environments. Investing in training ensures employees are

well-prepared, supporting greater productivity. Effective leadership plays a crucial role in monitoring, guiding, and motivating workers to apply their skills with confidence (Saad et al., 2023).

Performance Recognition and Incentives

Motivating employees through recognition and incentives, such as comfortable housing, performance bonuses, career growth, and extra leave, enhances productivity in oil palm plantations. Respondents 1, 2, and 4 highlighted that these benefits make employees feel valued, boosting job satisfaction and engagement. According to Damai et al. (2023) and Saad et al. (2023), such practices create a positive work environment, leading to improved performance and organizational success.

Supportive Environment and Feedback Systems

A supportive work environment and effective feedback systems were identified as key to boosting productivity. Respondents highlighted the importance of structured feedback channels, like complaint and suggestion forms, to address concerns and show employees their opinions are valued. Praise and leadership support, as emphasised by Respondents 1 and 3, also motivate employees by building trust and job security. Damai et al. (2023) and Saad et al. (2023) agree that when employees feel heard and supported, they are more engaged, leading to improved performance. This shows the significance of fostering a positive work culture where employees are respected and aligned with organisational goals.

4.5 Management Leadership on Productivity in Malaysian SME Oil Palm Plantations

Management leadership behavior significantly impacts employee efficacy and plantation performance in SME oil palm plantations. Effective leadership motivates employees, sets clear goals, and creates a supportive environment by resolving conflicts, providing training, and enhancing skills, engagement, and productivity. Strong leadership promotes adherence to SOPs, teamwork, and communication, particularly in diverse teams. In contrast, poor leadership leads to low morale, inefficiency, and reduced performance. Ultimately, leadership behaviors are crucial to both individual and overall plantation success (Saad et al., 2023). Figure 7 represents two sub-themes identified under the challenges faced by management in overseeing employees on the plantation. Both two sub-themes are closely related to maintaining effective communication, motivation, and safety which were key areas of focus highlighted by the respondents.

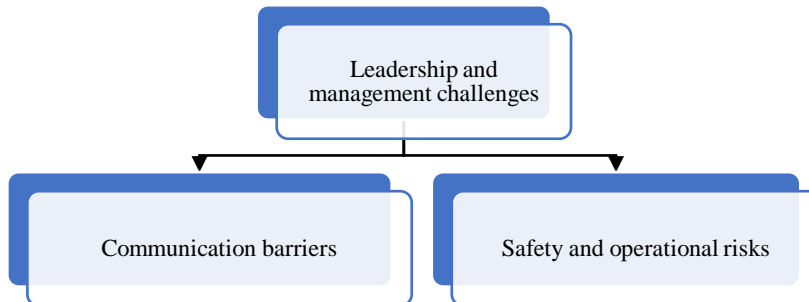


Fig. 7. Theme and Sub-theme 4

Communication Barriers

Communication barriers, particularly language and cultural differences, were identified by Respondents 1, 2, 4 and 5 as significant challenges in managing foreign and local workers. Language issues disrupt teamwork, while coordination difficulties arise, especially among Indonesian workers. Companies address these challenges by providing communication training and fostering better relationships. Respondent 4 emphasised the importance of improving communication to enhance productivity, reduce errors, and create a supportive workplace. Effective communication and recognition from management are

crucial for motivation (Damai et al., 2023). Breaking down communication barriers helps build a cohesive, supportive environment, enhancing teamwork and employee confidence.

Safety and Operational Risks

Respondent 3 emphasised safety and procedural adherence as key challenges in plantations, where sharp tools and heavy machinery pose risks. Failure to follow safety protocols can lead to accidents. To address this, the company conducts regular safety training and briefings, reinforcing the importance of compliance with safety standards. This focus on safety ensures employees work in a controlled environment, reducing incidents. Proper handling of equipment minimises the risk of injuries or damage (Rahim et al., 2023).

4.6 Performance Evaluation of Employee Productivity

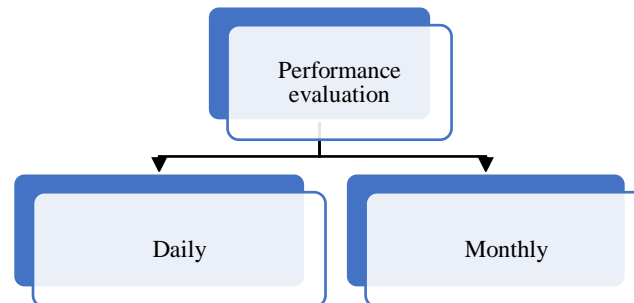


Fig. 8. Theme and Sub-theme 5

Figure 8 represents the frequency of employee productivity reviews conducted in the plantation, specifically daily and monthly assessments. The responses from the respondents provide insights into measurable aspects of employee productivity that are regularly evaluated.

Daily Assessments

Daily productivity reviews are crucial in the plantation sector, as highlighted by Respondents 1, 2, 3, and 5. These reviews allow management to monitor operations, provide immediate feedback, and resolve challenges, ensuring smooth workflow and minimizing disruptions in tasks like harvesting and maintenance. This oversight fosters accountability and prevents minor issues from escalating, sustaining productivity. Monitoring labour productivity is essential for maintaining the oil palm industry's global competitiveness and its contribution to GNI (Zulkefli et al., 2020).

Monthly Assessments

Respondents 2 and 4 highlighted that monthly productivity reviews help evaluate employee performance, identify strengths, address challenges, and plan for necessary training or improvements. These reviews also recognize top performers and support strategic adjustments to meet productivity goals. Effective leadership ensures workers are supported and equipped for long-term success, with monthly reviews helping to pinpoint areas for training or process improvements (Saad et al., 2023).

4.7 Conflict Resolution

Figure 9 represents three sub-themes identified under methods for handling conflicts among plantation workers. All three sub-themes are closely related to fostering a positive work environment which was a primary focus highlighted by the respondents.

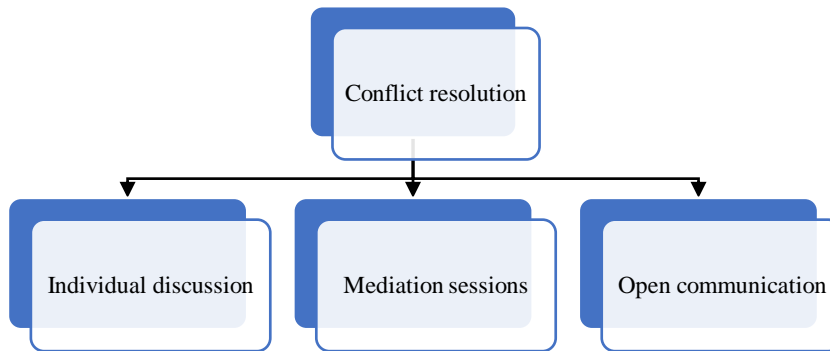


Fig. 9. Theme and Sub-theme 6

Individual Discussion

Respondents 1, 2, and 4 emphasised the importance of individual discussions in resolving conflicts, allowing management to understand different perspectives and address issues fairly. This approach builds trust, clarifies misunderstandings, and ensures employees feel respected. Effective communication and recognition from management are crucial for motivating employees (Damai et al., 2023). Listening to individual viewpoints helps set the stage for a productive group discussion and enables a fair assessment of the situation (Saad et al., 2023).

Mediation Sessions

Respondents 1, 2, and 4 highlighted the effectiveness of mediation sessions in resolving workplace conflicts. These sessions bring all parties together, with management facilitating the discussion to reach a mutually agreeable solution. This approach not only resolves immediate issues but also promotes open communication and teamwork, essential for a harmonious and productive work environment. Job satisfaction gained through such efforts can enhance organisational performance and productivity (Ishak et al., 2016).

Open Communication

Fostering open communication was identified as an effective conflict resolution strategy by Respondents 3, 4 and 5. Encouraging employees to discuss conflicts professionally and transparently helps prevent misunderstandings, builds respect, and fosters trust. Respondent 4 emphasised the importance of professionalism in these discussions, noting that respectful conflict resolution encourages employees to share concerns without fear of repercussions. This approach creates a supportive environment, enhancing team cohesion and productivity. The integration of freedom and autonomy in the workplace significantly influences task organisation and job satisfaction (Ishak et al., 2016).

4.8 Employee Development and Training

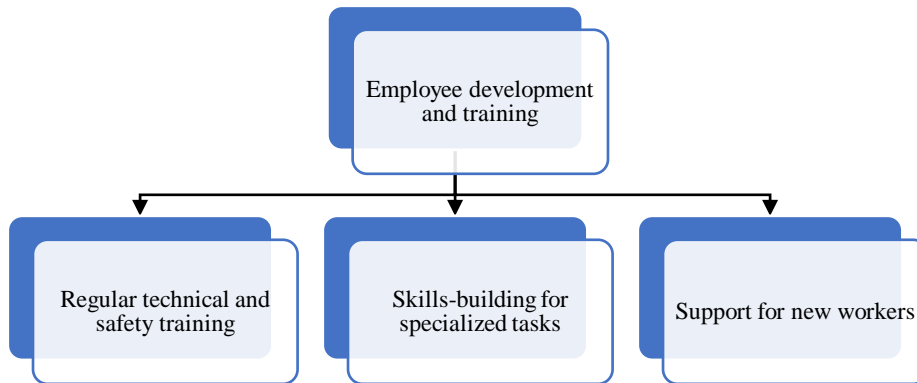


Fig. 10. Theme and Sub-theme 7

Figure 10 represents three sub-themes that were identified under methods for enhancing employee skills through training and development programs. All three sub-themes are closely related to improving productivity and safety on the plantation which was a primary focus highlighted by the respondents.

Regular Technical and Safety Training

Respondents 1, 2, and 4 emphasised the importance of regular training programs to improve both technical skills and safety practices. Respondent 1 highlighted that these sessions build technical expertise and reinforce safety protocols, ensuring a safe and effective work environment. In labor-intensive settings like plantations, where safety and skill accuracy are vital, such training enhances productivity and employee well-being. Laborers tend to be more productive in a comfortable work environment, closely linked to the level of support and comfort provided (Saad et al., 2023).

Skill-Building for Specialized Tasks

Respondent 3 highlighted bi-monthly briefings focused on skill-building, particularly in handling sharp tools during harvesting. These sessions reinforce technical skills and safety awareness, ensuring employees are confident and proficient in their tasks, reducing accidents, and boosting productivity. Proper training in tool usage minimizes safety risks and enhances employee confidence, leading to fewer mistakes and a safer work environment (Rahim et al., 2023).

Support for New Workers

Respondent 5 emphasised the company's focus on onboarding new employees through specialised training programs. These sessions equip new hires with the skills and knowledge needed to adapt to plantation tasks, ensuring they perform confidently and effectively. This approach promotes consistent productivity and reduces disruptions from inexperience. Strong leadership and a positive work environment play a key role in shaping labor productivity, as confident and capable leaders foster trust, teamwork, and motivation (Saad et al., 2023).

4.9 Safety and Compliance Management

In SME oil palm plantations, worker productivity is significantly influenced by both physical conditions (housing, safety, tools) and psychological factors (workplace stress, management support, communication). Poor working conditions, such as unsafe environments or inadequate facilities, reduce morale and efficiency, while a supportive work environment that prioritises safety and teamwork boosts job satisfaction and productivity. Improving these conditions can help address productivity challenges, making employees feel valued and motivated to perform effectively.

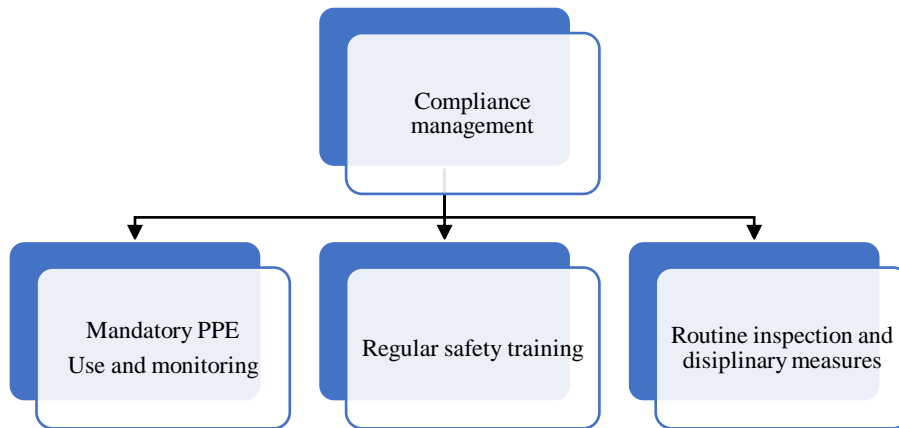


Fig. 11. Theme and Sub-themes 8

Figure 11 illustrates three sub-themes identified under the challenges faced by management in enforcing safety standards on the plantation. These sub-themes are closely related to ensuring the proper use of personal protective equipment (PPE), conducting regular safety training, and maintaining ongoing compliance were the focus areas emphasised by the respondents.

Mandatory PPE Use and Monitoring

All five respondents emphasised the importance of PPE (gloves, helmets, goggles) to minimise injury risks in oil palm plantations. Respondent 4 stressed a zero-tolerance policy for safety, requiring full PPE before work begins, with regular supervisor checks to ensure compliance. This approach fosters a safety-conscious culture and builds trust by prioritising workers' well-being. Zulkefli et al. (2020) highlight the role of proper PPE and tools in creating a safe environment that boosts morale.

Regular Safety Training

Regular safety training is essential for fostering a strong safety culture. Respondent 3 emphasised weekly safety briefings led by the Workplace Safety and Health Committee, where workers receive hands-on training on PPE use and potential risks. These briefings reflect the company's commitment to employee safety, reinforcing that safety is a shared responsibility. By integrating training into the routine, employees are more aware of hazards and better prepared to manage risks. Wen Lim et al. (2018) highlighted that a positive safety climate boosts motivation and enhances safety performance.

Routine Inspections and Disciplinary Measures

Respondent 5 stressed the importance of preventive measures through strict adherence to SOPs, regular monitoring, and updates on safety protocols. This proactive approach minimises risks, fosters discipline, and ensures workers stay informed about safety changes. Consistent compliance reduces accidents and reinforces a safe working environment. Rahim et al. (2023) highlighted that understanding and managing worker behavior, such as following safety rules and collaborating effectively, is key to maintaining safety and efficiency.

4.10 Workplace Environmental Factors and Employee Efficacy in Malaysian SME Oil Palm Plantations

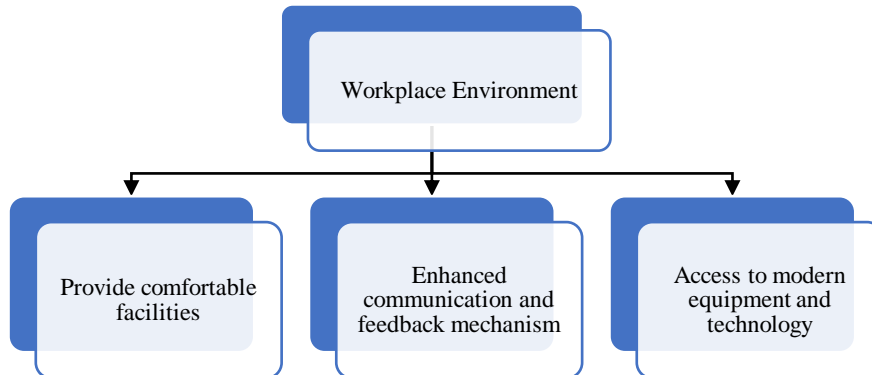


Fig. 12. Theme and Sub-Theme 9

Figure 12 illustrates three sub-themes identified under the improvements suggested by respondents to boost employee productivity on the plantation. These sub-themes are closely related to enhancing workplace comfort through improved facilities, fostering effective communication and feedback mechanisms and introducing modern equipment or technological support, which are essential focus areas emphasized by the respondents.

Provide Comfortable Facilities

Interview data highlighted the importance of a supportive work environment for boosting plantation productivity. Respondent 1 emphasized shaded areas and rest facilities for worker recovery, while Respondent 4 stressed a clean, hazard-free workspace for safety and morale. Respondent 5 focused on positive communication and strong relationships. Saad et al. (2023) found that laborers are more productive in a conducive environment, where comfortable facilities help workers recharge, improving focus and efficiency.

Enhanced Communication and Feedback Mechanisms

Respondents 1 and 2 emphasized the importance of open communication and structured feedback systems, such as suggestion forms, to address workplace challenges. Respondent 1 noted that feedback encourages employee ownership and motivation, while Respondent 2 suggested using forms to identify deficiencies and equipment needs. Saad et al. (2023) found that creating a positive work environment boosts productivity. Effective communication and feedback mechanisms strengthen employee engagement and satisfaction, driving higher productivity.

Access to Modern Equipment and Technology

Access to modern equipment and technology is vital for boosting productivity in oil palm plantations. Respondents 1 and 3 highlighted that upgraded machinery reduces physical strain, streamlines labor-intensive tasks, and saves time, improving efficiency and worker satisfaction. Modern technology simplifies tasks, creating a positive work environment that enhances overall productivity (Saad et al., 2023).

5.0 DISCUSSION AND INTERPRETATION OF FINDINGS

This study highlights the crucial impact of employee personality, leadership, and work environment on productivity in SME oil palm plantations. Figure 13 provides the overview of the nine themes of this study. Traits like diligence, discipline, and collaboration enhance efficiency, while stubbornness, absenteeism,

and irresponsibility reduce performance, requiring targeted interventions such as structured training and performance incentives. Strong leadership boosts motivation, goal clarity, and teamwork, whereas weak leadership causes communication gaps, low morale, and safety compliance issues, especially among foreign workers.

Improving communication strategies, feedback systems, and compliance monitoring can enhance leadership effectiveness. A safe and conducive work environment that ensures adequate housing, PPE enforcement, safety training, and modern technology significantly boosts worker well-being and productivity. Continuous skills development and structured feedback systems sustain workforce engagement. Ultimately, optimising employee management, leadership, and workplace conditions is key to improving productivity and ensuring long-term sustainability in the oil palm plantation sector.

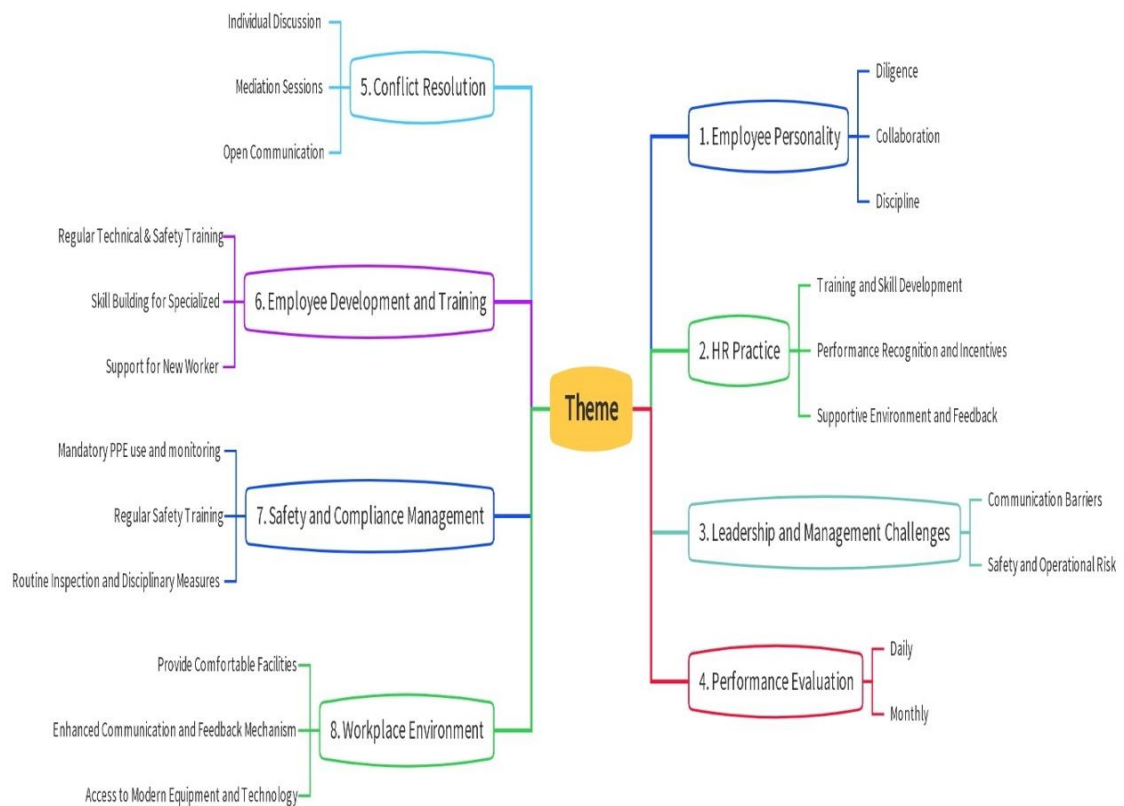


Fig. 13. Overview of All Themes and Sub-themes

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

This study emphasises on how employee efficacy is influenced by personality traits, management leadership, and workplace conditions within Malaysia's SME oil palm plantations. The findings are vital for improving management practices, guiding strategic interventions, and shaping future research in the sector. Key issues identified include leadership shortcomings, inadequate work environments, and the influence of individual traits on productivity. Addressing these challenges can foster a more motivated and efficient workforce, enhancing plantation performance and sustainability.

7.0 LIMITATIONS

This research provides practical solutions for improving employee engagement, leadership, and working conditions in small and medium-sized oil palm plantations. Using qualitative methods, including thematic analysis and in-depth interviews, enhanced the study's validity. However, limitations include the use of purposive sampling, which, while effective for gathering relevant insights, resulted in a sample of only male participants, reflecting the industry's gender imbalance. This homogeneity may have limited the diversity of perspectives. Additionally, translating interview transcripts from Malay to English may have led to some loss of nuance despite peer review. Future studies should aim for a more diverse participant pool and improved translation techniques.

8.0 CONCLUSION

SME oil palm plantations in Malaysia face challenges that impact employee productivity, including personality issues, work environment conditions, management leadership, financial support, safety protocols, and HR practices. To enhance workforce engagement and competitiveness, it is recommended to apply the resource-based view (RBV) strategy. The RBV focuses on leveraging internal resources such as skilled management, supportive leadership, and optimized work environments to gain a competitive advantage. Implementing the RBV can address productivity concerns, improve employee performance, workplace conditions, safety compliance, and financial sustainability, thereby supporting the long-term success of the oil palm sector.

9.0 RECOMMENDATION FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Future studies should address specific research gaps with clear justifications. While this study examines personality traits, leadership, and work conditions, future research should include a more diverse sample, particularly female employees and lower-level workers, for a broader understanding of workforce challenges. Additionally, exploring the impact of digital technology and automation on efficiency would provide valuable insights. Further research should also assess the psychological factors and mental health considerations influencing employee motivation and retention in the oil palm industry. Comparative studies across small, medium, and large plantations could identify best practices for optimizing employee efficacy. Strengthening these recommendations with relevant literature would further enhance their contribution to the field.

10.0 CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS

Liana Anak Anggak carried out the research and wrote the article. Benedict Linang supervised the research, reviewed the paper, and served as the corresponding author for submission. Su Sueh Ing reviewed, revised, and improved the writing and format of the article.

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12.0 CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

All authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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