



Research Article

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The Effects of Confucius Management Culture on Work Engagement and Career Growth: A Case of Public Universities of Shandong Province, China

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to identify Confucius management culture (CMC) that impacts work engagement (WE) and career growth (CG) and to explore the relationship between work engagement and career growth. A sample of 402 Chinese staff of public universities in Shandong province in China was selected random sampling and purposive sampling. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) were used to validate the model and test the hypotheses. The factor loading of all items was up to the criteria (> 0.6). The empirical findings of this study were: (1) CMC has significant direct effects on WE and CG; (2) Work engagement was positively related to career growth; and (3) CMC also had an indirect effect on WE and CG separately through psychological contract fulfillment (PCF). The examination of these relationships makes a significant contribution to the existing research on Confucius management culture. The study provides a theoretical basis and practical direction for the future dissemination of Confucius management culture in universities. The contributions of this study will be useful for managers to enhance staff work engagement and promote staff career growth in public universities in Shandong province, from the management culture perspective.

Keywords: Confucius Management Culture, Work Engagement, Career Growth, Psychological Contract Fulfillment

Introduction

University organizations support regional economic and social development, staff play a key role in the healthy and harmonious development of the university. Successful organizations regard employees' work engagement as one of the most important elements for the survival of the organization (Strom et al., 2014), improved organizational performance (Kompaso & Sridevi, 2010), and can lead to the achievement of organizational sustainability (Kim et al., 2016). Likewise, successful organizations regard employees' career growth as one of the most important elements for their sustainable development, because organizations that cater to employee career growth benefit from a more committed workforce, which reduces turnover (McElroy & Weng, 2015).

The performance and individual development of staff in Chinese Universities have continued to motivate widespread interest in research and practice, especially after crises like COVID-19. The pandemic spurred a series of changes in universities' operations, an unsafe environment led to scattered employees' work attitudes and poor career prospects. Each organization must get back on track after the pandemic. How to make employees engage in work as soon as possible, and how to make employees get better career growth has become the biggest challenge facing the organization. In this case, universities need high levels of management to maintain harmonious development.

The management culture of universities is the most important for staff. Organization members feel the cultural orientation of the organization and judge the degree of fulfillment of organizational psychological contracts to guide their attitude and behavior towards work in the future and change the organization or not. Confucius management culture is the embodiment of Confucius cultural characteristics in management. As the hometown of Confucius, it is common to practice the harmonious management culture of Confucius in Shandong Province. Another reason for choosing research at public universities in Shandong is that one of the researchers works at a public university in Shandong and it is convenient for the implementation of a questionnaire survey. Confucius management culture is mainly embodied in the management of humans and summarized in four aspects, which are people-oriented, etiquette promotes harmony, rules of virtue, and appointing people by abilities.

The mission of universities in China was to generate a new generation of graduate students, create research projects, and deliver service to society. A high level of teacher engagement is required to maximize students' outcomes (Kulophas, 2022). Work engagement is a positive, completely emotional, and cognitive state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Mobilizing the enthusiasm of employees improves the individual attitude to work and increases work engagement. Employees with a positive and identification attitude towards work tend to have a high work commitment, high attendance rate, and low turnover rate. As an employee's most important need, career growth is a process in which an individual can obtain more resources and higher status within the organization, which can be seen as career development within an organization (Weng & McElroy, 2012).

A worker needs to satisfy both the organization and the individual. What organizations want most is for staff to engage in work, and staff want career growth. The study of the influence of organizational culture on individual values, attitudes, and behaviors promotes the study of the relationship between people and organizations, which provides strong support and reference for the process of selecting, employing, and retaining employees in organizations (Zhang, 2015). From the perspective of CMC, this study explores the theory of individual WE and CG and further reveals the influence mechanism and specific action process of Confucian culture on WE and CG, which guides universities to further improve the content of organizational culture. Therefore, the researchers are interested in the Confucius management culture through the effective implementation in universities to enhance staff work engagement and promote their career growth, ultimately achieving effective management and harmonious development of universities.

Research objectives

1. Identify the Confucius management culture that impacts work engagement and career growth in public universities in Shandong province.
2. Explain the relationship between work engagement and career growth.
3. Explore the mediating role of psychological contract fulfillment.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

In the literature on Chinese management, a recurring theme is the influence of culture, particularly values derived from Confucianism, on Chinese management practices (Wong & Slater, 2002). The existing literature has documented more evidence supporting the influence of organizational management culture on individual attitudes, behavior, and performance. Culture can serve as the compass of individual behavior.

Confucius Management Culture (CMC) and Work Engagement (WE)

WE is linked to the cultural characteristics of the workplace, and it is necessary to rethink WE in a specific cultural context (Lyu, 2020). Acknowledging the importance of a cultural lens in the study of Chinese phenomena (Yao et al., 2020), scholars around the world pay more attention to Confucius culture. Confucius management culture fosters a positive and harmonious relationship, which is evident in Chinese organizations, the characteristics and development trend of modern management activities, and influences individual attitudes and behaviors in work. If the organizational culture and values were in line with employees' expectations, employees were often willing to make positive behaviors (e.g., higher WE) for the benefit of the organization (Pu et al., 2022). It has been proven that excellent CMC makes employees think of the organization as a big family and feel harmony and warmth, where staff are more actively engaged in work. Much research on WE has been done in the context of Confucius management culture, which can be learned from the existing literature. The research of Burke et al. (2009) contributed to understanding the WE of managers in a large Confucian country in transition to a market economy. Lyu (2020) studied the WE of Chinese Civil Servants in the context of Confucian culture. Under the Confucius cultural environment, staff are more actively engaged in work. Based on the above analysis, we predicted the following hypothesis:

H1: Confucius management culture has a positive effect on work engagement.

Confucius Management Culture and Career Growth (CG)

A strong identification with an institution's cultural orientation is paramount for its success (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2000). Specific management culture influences the CG of an individual. Managers could create a specific organizational culture for employees' CG. Confucius culture is a cornerstone for injecting further empirical and theoretical energy into Chinese career literature (Yao et al., 2020). Enterprise managers should pay great attention to Confucius culture. Wong and Slater (2002) found that the inheritance of the Chinese cultural tradition had a significant impact on CG in the subjects' view, particularly aspects of Confucius culture. Yao et al. (2020) summarized a profile of the current development of career research in China from a theoretical perspective of Confucius. Through their analysis of Chinese career research, Confucius's harmony has a significant influence on career. Harmony represents stability, and people in organizations with Confucian values will reduce career mobility and promote their CG. Based on these arguments, we propose the following hypothesis:

H2: Confucius management culture has a positive effect on career growth.

Work Engagement and Career Growth

As for the relationship between WE and CG, researchers have given different answers. Bai and Liu (2018) revealed the internal mechanism of CG affecting WE. Son and Kim (2021) supported the hypothesis that the intrinsic function of CG was positively correlated with WE. Zhu and Song (2022) analyzed the positive influence of CG on WE by taking knowledge workers as samples. The positive relationship between CG and WE was also found in the different occupational groups such as knowledge workers and middle managers (Li, 2012). These pieces of literature have confirmed the positive relationship between CG and WE. Nevertheless, scarce

scholars (exception: Chen & Wu, 2018, and Chen et al., 2018) focus on the influence of WE on CG. Individuals will be more engaged in their work if they can achieve CG in an organization, and individuals with a high level of WE in an organization will also accumulate various resources and improve their skills to achieve CG. The effect between them is reciprocal. Verifying the impact of WE on CG is regarded as one of the research goals of this study, it can be hypothesized that:

H3: Work engagement has a positive effect on career growth.

Confucius Management Culture and Psychological Contract Fulfillment (PCF)

Achieving and maintaining the psychological contract should take a harmonious and upward organizational culture as the atmosphere. A healthy and upward organizational culture can create an enterprise atmosphere and spirit of striving, enterprising, harmonious, and equality in the enterprise, and make a strong spiritual pillar for all employees. Create a good atmosphere and space for reaching and maintaining the psychological contract, enhance the enthusiasm and faith of staff to work hard, and inspire both enterprises and employees to abide by the corresponding commitment implied by the contract.

Confucianism is the foundation of PCF and has a positive effect on PCF (Liu & Zhang, 2022). As Confucianism is characterized by humanism, there is an emphasis on harmonious relations, interpersonal trust, and avoidance of conflict. This kind of harmonious culture can promote the long-term employment relationship between the organization and the employees and is conducive to the fulfillment of the psychological contract between the two sides. When CMC is internalized, the Chinese workplace environment can be effectively managed through relational psychological contracts (Kwon et al., 2018). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Confucius management culture has a positive effect on psychological contract fulfillment.

The Mediating Role of Psychological Contract Fulfillment

The psychological contract is the psychological link between employees and the organization. Blau (1964) emphasized that PCF is an essential determinant of employees' attitudinal, and behavior based on social exchange theory. If the staff's expectations are met, they would like to increase the level of WE as reciprocation (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014). It is pointed out that a direct connection exists between PCF and WE although relatively limited research in the existing literature. WE is a process behavior, and the degree of WE is dynamically regulated by individual motivation. Employees are active participants in psychological contracts, organizations should pay more attention to and manage the exchange needs captured by employees from psychological contracts. The degree of psychological contract fulfillment will affect the staff's attitude and behavior related to work. Excellent management culture promotes PCF, which has an incentive effect on employees and stimulates them to have a high degree of trust and satisfaction in their work, thus stimulating their stronger motivation and higher WE, and ultimately promoting sustainable development of the organization. Based on the above theories and analysis, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5: psychological contract fulfillment has a positive effect on work engagement.

H6: psychological contract fulfillment mediates the effect of Confucius management culture on work engagement.

The achievement of CG requires not only the efforts of the staff themselves but also the support of the organization. According to the literature review from the perspectives of organizations, individuals, and professions, organizational support behaviors can best promote staff's CG. The acquisition of an employee's CG is a kind of reciprocal behavior between the organization and the employee and is also a kind of psychological contract, which can be regarded

as the result of psychological negotiation between an organization and an individual (Tzabbar et al., 2003). There are short studies on the effects of PCF and CG. The professional development of teachers in universities is influenced by the psychological contract. Zhang (2022) suggested that universities should fulfill the psychological contract to improve the professional development level of their teachers. Excellent management culture promotes PCF, which in turn lets employees experience positive emotions, certain positive emotions guide their thoughts and behaviors, such as willingness to cooperate, and assimilate new knowledge, experience, and skills (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008), promoting their career goal progress and professional ability development, and achieve CG in the organization. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H7: psychological contract fulfillment has a positive effect on career growth.

H8: psychological contract fulfillment mediates the effect of Confucius management culture on career growth.

The conceptual framework was created according to the hypotheses (Figure 1).

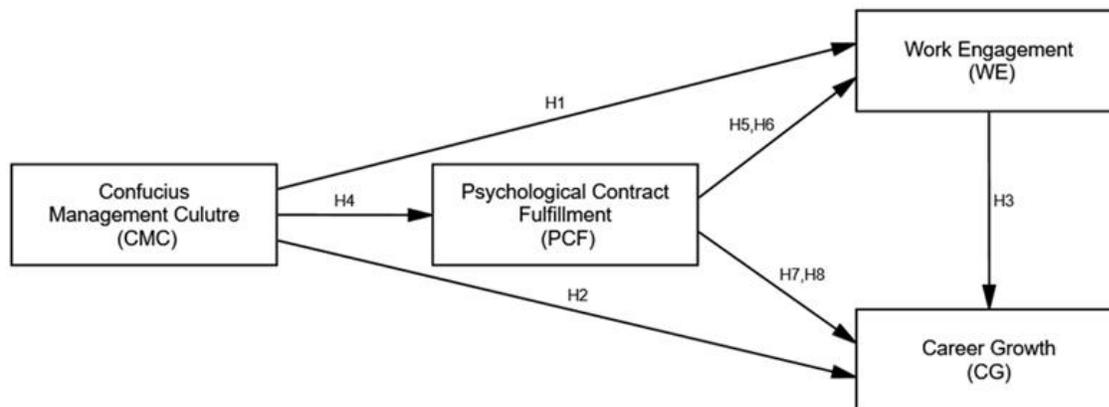


Figure 1 Conceptual framework diagram

Methodology

The respondents, who answered the web questionnaire, were the full-time staff of public universities in Shandong province, using random sampling and purposive sampling strategy. Simple random sampling was used to scope the public university by choosing two universities in each region (a total of 8 universities). The sampling size for interpreting data must be at least 400 with purposive sampling for statistics analysis. The appropriate parameter estimation of this study was the Maximum Likelihood method. All survey items were measured using a 5-point Likert scale.

The items of latent variables were taken from a review of relevant literature and theories, and the measures adopted from previous studies. CMC was the independent variable. It was assessed with a 13-item scale with four dimensions, which are people-oriented, etiquette promotes harmony, rules of virtue, and appointing people by abilities. The PCF scale included 5 items, which were modified from the fulfillment dimension of Deas and Coetzee's (2022), which detected PCF from an employee perspective. The dependent variables are WE and CG. WE is a positive, completely emotional, and cognitive state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption, measure scale is UWES-9 of Schaufeli et al. (2006). The CG scale, modified from Weng and McElroy's (2012) scale, included 15 items with four dimensions (career goal progress,

professional ability, organizational rewards, and social resource access). The questionnaire adjusted items by the reliability testing and CFA.

Research results

Discriminatory Power of Measurement Models

Table 1 The result of confirmatory factor analysis for the four measured models.

| Variables | Construct | CR | AVE |
|-----------|--------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| CMC | people-oriented (PO) | 0.875 | 0.701 |
| | etiquette promotes harmony (ETI) | 0.917 | 0.735 |
| | rules of virtue (VIR) | 0.928 | 0.813 |
| | appointing people by abilities (APA) | 0.898 | 0.745 |
| WE | vigor (VIG) | 0.932 | 0.821 |
| | dedication (DED) | 0.921 | 0.797 |
| | absorption (ABS) | 0.878 | 0.706 |
| PCF | -- | 0.946 | 0.778 |
| CG | career goal progress (CGP) | 0.950 | 0.826 |
| | professional ability (CAD) | 0.941 | 0.842 |
| | organizational rewards (ORe) | 0.963 | 0.839 |
| | social resource access (SRA) | 0.934 | 0.825 |

Table 1 displays the result of CFA. The composite reliability (CR) value is higher than 0.7 representing high internal consistency for each construct of the variable (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The average variance extracted (AVE) of the latent variable is above 0.5, indicating a fine convergent validity (Hall, 2004). Discriminant validity is achieved when the square root of the AVE values (bold values on the diagonal in parenthesis) are greater than correlation values between the variables in their rows and columns respectively (Table 2).

Table 2 Discriminant validity analysis.

| Variable | Alpha | CMC | PCF | WE | CG |
|----------|-------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| CMC | 0.961 | (0.865) | | | |
| PCF | 0.945 | 0.849** | (0.882) | | |
| WE | 0.953 | 0.744** | 0.792** | (0.880) | |
| CG | 0.967 | 0.822** | 0.868** | 0.780** | (0.913) |

Hypothesis Test

The structural equation model is constructed (Figure 2). The study used the Bollen-Stine bootstrap method (Bollen & Stine, 1992) to generate the excellent model fit ($\chi^2/df = 1.54$, CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.94, AGFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.98, IFI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.04) before testing the hypothesis.

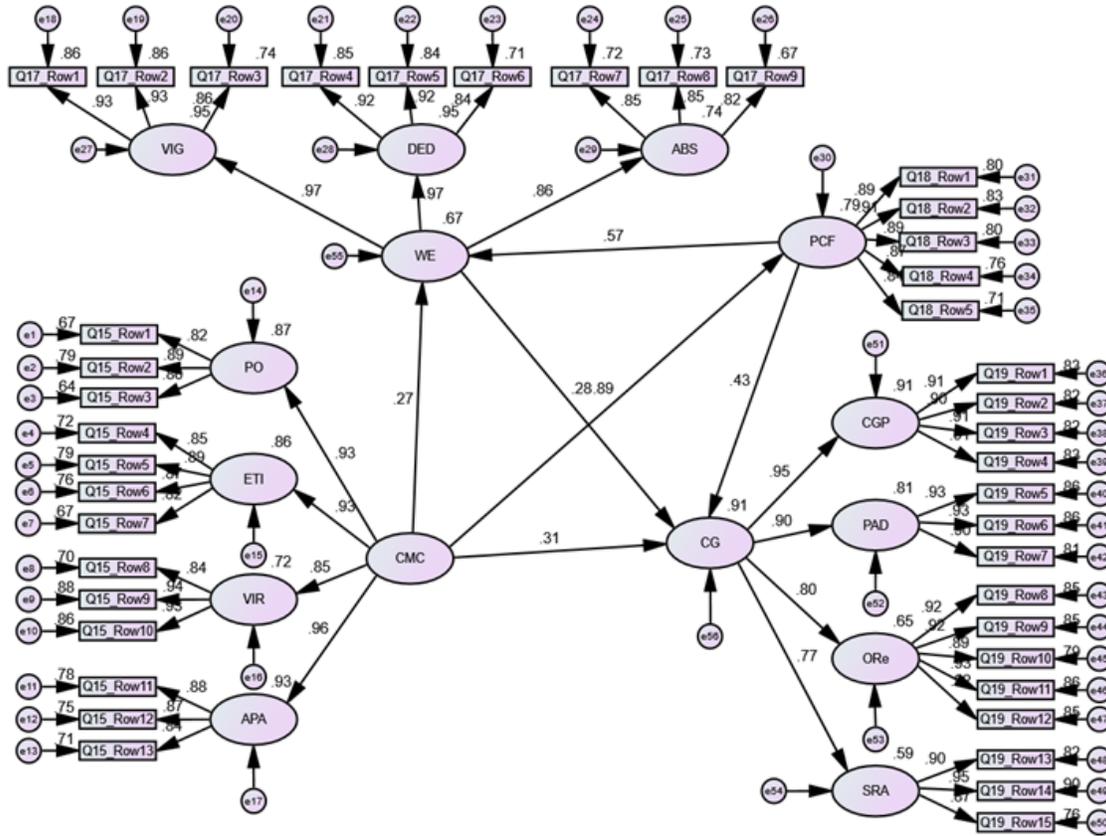


Figure 2 The structural equation model of this study

The direct relationships between CMC, PCF, WE, and CG were tested (Table 3). The statistically significant paths are those from CMC to WE ($\beta = 0.269, p < 0.01$), CMC and CG ($\beta = 0.307, p < 0.001$), WE and CG ($\beta = 0.275, p < 0.001$), CMC and PCF ($\beta = 0.891, p < 0.001$), PCF and WE ($\beta = 0.570, p < 0.001$), and PCF and CG ($\beta = 0.429, p < 0.001$).

Table 3 Direct effects of variables.

| Hypotheses | Std. Estimate (β) | S.E. | T | Significance |
|----------------|---------------------------|-------|--------|--------------|
| H1: CMC -> WE | 0.269 | 0.085 | 3.035 | 0.002 (**) |
| H2: CMC -> CG | 0.307 | 0.064 | 4.941 | *** |
| H3: WE -> CG | 0.275 | 0.046 | 6.340 | *** |
| H4: CMC -> PCF | 0.891 | 0.058 | 17.938 | *** |
| H5: PCF -> WE | 0.570 | 0.074 | 6.397 | *** |
| H7: PCF -> CG | 0.429 | 0.059 | 6.430 | *** |

***p < 0.001, **p < 0.01

The researchers illustrate the mediating effects, following the bootstrap method (Hayes, 2009). Under a criterion of $p < 0.05$, 5000 resamples were utilized to bring about the confidence interval (CI). The mediator is significant if the CI doesn't pass through 0, conversely, the mediator isn't significant (Mackinnon, 2008). The researcher utilized two CIs (95 % Bias-corrected percentile CI and 95 % percentile CI) to measure indirect effects (Table 4). The result suggests that PCF plays a mediating role.

Table 4 Bootstrapping results in indirect effects.

| | Point Estimate | Bootstrapping | | | | P |
|--------------|----------------|------------------------|-------|--------------------|-------|-----|
| | | Bias-corrected 95 % CI | | Percentile 95 % CI | | |
| | | Lower | Upper | Lower | Upper | |
| CMC->PCF->WE | 0.488 | 0.305 | 0.685 | 0.288 | 0.678 | *** |
| CMC->PCF->CG | 0.392 | 0.209 | 0.571 | 0.209 | 0.571 | *** |

*** $p < 0.001$

Discussion

The study provides crucial information that can be applied in organization management and delivers public university organizations with empirical and practical guidelines on how to survive competition in public and private educational institutes. The CMC is one of the principal beliefs in China, they will create a good environment between leaders and fellows, which is goodwill for employees in Shandong's management for career paths with good staff behavior.

1. The significance of CMC, WE, and CG is necessary for organizations and employees. The values emphasized by CMC directly affect employees' WE, which is consistent with Lyu's (2020) and Pu's et al. (2022) view. Under a culture environment like CMC, employees are more actively engaged in work, and engaged employees often experience positive emotions (Schaufeli & Van Rhenen, 2006), which guides their thoughts and behaviors. CMC has a significant positive effect on CG, which further corroborates Yao's et al. (2020) view that Confucius's harmony has a significant influence on a career. In this culture, staff feel respected and valued, stimulate inner motivation, and see work as a dedication and mission, thus enhancing WE (Xu, 2022). Confucius emphasized the cultivation of interpersonal and social skills. A good network of relationships and effective communication skills can help a person gain access to resources, support, and CG.

2. WE has a positive effect on CG, which is consistent with the conclusion of Chen and Wu (2018) and Chen et al. (2018). although most literature claims that CG affects WE (Son & Kim, 2021; Zhu & Song, 2022), this finding is a good supplement about their relationships. Engaged employees are often actively engaged in learning and growth, are more open to training and exploring new techniques and methods, and may be promoted to higher-level positions. These opportunities help individuals achieve faster growth in their careers.

3. The result showed that CMC has indirect effects on WE and CG via PCF. PCF is closely related to organizational culture (Kwon et al., 2018). CMC focuses on the needs and well-being of employees and respects their value and development. In this culture, staff focus more on the organization being able to meet their individual needs and hopes. If the organization can deliver on these promises, employees will be more willing to engage in their work (Rayton & Yalabik, 2014). When organizations follow the ideals of the CMC, staff are more likely to feel the fulfillment of the organizational psychological contract and staff will be more inclined to actively

behaviors, such as assimilating new knowledge, experience, and skills (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008) and pursue CG.

Recommendations

Recommendations on Management Practices

1. CMC advocates harmony. The university should create a respectful and harmonious working atmosphere, establish good communication and feedback mechanisms, and fulfill organizational psychological contracts. Firstly, university administrators should maintain close contact with staff, understand the needs and opinions of employees, timely solve problems, and establish a good relationship of trust. Secondly, university administrators should communicate with staff about work tasks and goals on time, give positive feedback and constructive suggestions, and help them constantly improve their work performance. Finally, university administrators should have a deep understanding of the staff's abilities, interests, and needs, and then make a reasonable allocation of work according to the ability and specialty of the staff.

2. The finding verifies that CMC positively affects WE. The university should motivate staff work engagement and establish a fair and just evaluation mechanism. Firstly, university administrators should set up incentive mechanisms to stimulate the enthusiasm and creativity of staff. Secondly, university administrators should recognize and reward staff timely who are committed to their work and outstanding performance, which can not only enhance the work motivation and enthusiasm of staff but also set a good example and stimulate other staff's desire to learn and progress. Finally, university administrators should establish a fair and impartial evaluation mechanism to evaluate the work performance of staff based on their performance and contributions, which can motivate them to work hard and increase their motivation for WE.

3. According to the results of CMC positively influence CG, the university should establish a management model that pays attention to the personal development of staff and respects their needs. Firstly, university administrators should pay attention to the needs and well-being of staff and ensure that they are adequately supported in their work. Secondly, university administrators should provide continuous education and development opportunities for staff and provide rich resource support to help them enhance their professional skills. The university administrators should, ultimately, pay attention to the training of leadership and help staff to improve their leadership and management skills and promote their CG.

4. The result shows that WE has a positive effect on CG. This finding suggests that staff should be actively engaged in their work in addition to the support of the organization, and gain access to resources and skills on the work to facilitate career growth.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study specified the importance of the CMC combined with the context of the public university system in Shandong province. More comprehensive and in-depth research on CMC should be carried out in the future, such as studying the influence of CMC in various dimensions. Confucius's culture is a part of China's excellent traditional culture, and the practice of CMC is proposed for future research to study the practice of CMC in different types of organizations and organizations in different regions. The superb traditional Chinese culture should be better spread.

Ethics committee approval

The research article was approved by the research ethic committee of Panyapiwat Institute of Management (PIM-REC 002/2567).

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