

# Servant Leadership and Sustainable Workforce Development in Asia: A Case Study of Pakistan

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study examines the impact of servant leadership on sustainable workforce development, focusing on the mechanisms through which it enhances workforce sustainability in Pakistan. Given that 65% of Pakistan's population consists of youth, sustainable employability is a critical concern. This research explores how servant leadership can contribute to long-term employability and workforce resilience.

**Methodology:** This study collected data from bankers working in public and private commercial banks in Islamabad. A total of 315 responses were obtained through a combination of online and in-person surveys. The proposed theoretical model was analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 to ensure robust statistical assessment and hypothesis testing.

**Findings:**

The findings will be shared after data analysis.

**Originality/Value:**

This study contributes to the existing literature by examining the role of servant leadership in fostering sustainable workforce development, a relatively underexplored area in the context of Pakistan. Unlike previous research that primarily focuses on economic and policy-driven approaches to employability, this study highlights the leadership-driven mechanisms that enhance workforce resilience. The findings offer valuable insights for policymakers, organizational leaders, and HR professionals seeking to develop leadership strategies that promote long-term employability and skill retention, particularly in emerging economies.

**Keywords:** Servant Leadership, Sustainable Workforce Development, Sustainable Employability.

## **1. Introduction:**

In today's rapidly evolving global landscape, organizations increasingly recognize sustainable workforce development as a fundamental driver of long-term success and competitiveness (Wang, Kang, & Choi, 2022). Sustainable workforce development involves fostering an environment that supports employees' long-term well-being, engagement, and productivity (Das & Pattanayak, 2023). Beyond enhancing organizational performance, these strategies contribute to broader societal benefits by cultivating a skilled, motivated, and resilient workforce (Swanson et al., 2022).

Among various leadership approaches, servant leadership has emerged as a compelling strategy for achieving workforce sustainability (Kaltainen and Hakanen, 2022). Rooted in ethical and people-centered leadership principles, servant leadership prioritizes the needs, growth, and development of employees. It is characterized by empathy, humility, and a strong commitment to employee well-being (Yan et al., 2023). By fostering a supportive work environment that enhances engagement, reduces stress, and promotes long-term job satisfaction, servant leadership facilitates sustainable workforce practices (Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2024). Its emphasis on moral and ethical leadership further distinguishes it as an effective approach for driving sustainable workforce outcomes (Meuser & Smallfield, 2023).

This study explores the impact of servant leadership on sustainable workforce development within Pakistan's unique socio-economic and cultural context. With 65% of its population comprising youth, Pakistan faces both opportunities and challenges in workforce sustainability. High unemployment rates, skill mismatches, and the need for long-term employability make sustainable workforce development a pressing issue (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2024). Understanding how servant leadership can be effectively implemented in this context is crucial for organizations aiming to cultivate a resilient and thriving workforce.

By examining the mechanisms through which servant leadership fosters workforce sustainability in Pakistan, this study seeks to provide valuable insights for organizations, policymakers, and HR professionals. It aims to offer practical and theoretical contributions by demonstrating how leadership practices can enhance long-term employability, workforce resilience, and organizational success in an ever-changing global environment.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Servant Leadership and Sustainable Workforce**

The concept of sustainable workforce development has gained prominence amid an increasingly dynamic and competitive global business environment (Wang, Kang, & Choi, 2022). It emphasizes the ability of individuals to maintain employment and well-being over the long term (Arokiasamy *et al.*, 2024). This is particularly relevant in Asia, where countries like Pakistan face unique demographic and economic challenges. Given that two third of its population consists of young people with prevailing highest ever youth unemployment rate, sustainable employability is a critical concern.

Servant leadership, characterised by humility, concern for others, empowerment, and stewardship, represents a promising approach to address these challenges (Kaltiainen and Hakanen, 2022). Unlike traditional leadership styles that prioritise organisational objectives, servant leadership focuses on the growth and well-being of followers (Swanson et al., 2022). This approach is believed to foster a positive work environment, enhance employee engagement, and promote long-term employability (Wang, Kang, & Choi, 2022; Kim, Kim, & Lee, 2024)

## **2.2 Theoretical Grounding**

There are several seminal theories in the literature which substantiate the conjecture that servant leadership plays role in development of sustainable workforce. Conservation of Resources (COR) theory suggests that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect resources (Wang, Kang, & Choi, 2022; Babu et al., 2024). Servant leadership, by prioritising employee needs and providing support, can help employees conserve their resources, reduce stress and burnout, and enhance their overall well-being (Mahon, 2024). Likewise, Person-Environment Fit Theory posits that a good fit between individuals and their work environment leads to positive outcomes such as job satisfaction and well-being. Servant leadership can enhance this fit by aligning employee values and needs with organisational goals (Yan et al., 2023). Lastly, Social Learning Theory suggests that individuals learn by observing others. Servant leaders, by modelling ethical behaviour and concern for others, can inspire employees to adopt similar values and behaviours, fostering a culture of service and sustainability (Yan et al., 2023).

## **2.3 Empirical Grounding**

There are many studies which empirically establish that servant leadership is associated to several concepts which are related to or constituent concept of the sustainable workforce. Employee well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing job satisfaction, engagement, and overall mental and physical health (Das & Pattanayak, 2023). Studies have shown that servant leadership is positively related to various aspects of employee well-being. Servant leadership has been found to enhance employees' overall life satisfaction by fostering a supportive and caring work environment (Quinteros-Durand et al., 2023). Servant leaders promote psychological safety by creating a space where employees feel comfortable expressing their ideas and taking risks without fear of negative consequences (Mahon, 2021; Wang, Kang, & Choi, 2022). Servant leadership also has been shown to mitigate burnout by providing employees with the resources and support they need to manage stress and maintain a healthy work-life balance (Mahon, 2021).

In addition to well-being, servant leadership has also been linked to improved employee performance (Kaltiainen and Hakanen, 2022). By empowering employees and providing them with opportunities for growth, servant leaders can enhance their motivation, creativity, and overall job performance (Quinteros-Durand et al., 2023; Yan et al., 2023). Specifically, servant leadership has been associated with increased task performance, enhanced adaptive performance, higher organizational commitment. Servant leaders foster a supportive environment that enables employees to perform their tasks more effectively ((Kaltiainen and

Hakanen, 2022). Servant leadership promotes adaptability by encouraging employees to develop new skills and embrace change (Grobler and Flotman, 2021). Servant leaders cultivate loyalty and commitment by demonstrating genuine care for their employees' well-being (Meuser & Smallfield, 2023).

## **2.4 Contextual Factors in Asia (Pakistan)**

The effectiveness of servant leadership may be influenced by cultural context. Some studies suggest that servant leadership may be more readily accepted in cultures with low power distance and high individualism. However, other research indicates that servant leadership can be effective across various cultural contexts, including those with higher power distance (Babu et al., 2024). In the context of Pakistan, where collectivism and a hierarchical power structure are prevalent, the application of servant leadership principles may require careful consideration. Research is needed to explore how servant leadership can be effectively adapted and implemented to align with the cultural values and norms of Pakistani organisations (Grobler and Flotman, 2021).

## **2.5 Gaps in the Literature and Research Questions**

The literature review indicates that body of research is growing on servant leadership. Impact of servant leadership was measured on various outcome variables, however, there is limited research on the specific mechanisms through which servant leadership enhances sustainable workforce development. Furthermore, there is lack of studies examining the role of servant leadership in promoting long-term employability and workforce resilience in the Pakistani context.

To address these gaps, this study examines the impact of servant leadership on sustainable workforce development, focusing on the mechanisms through which it enhances workforce sustainability in Pakistan. Given that 65% of Pakistan's population consists of youth, sustainable employability is a critical concern. This research explores how servant leadership can contribute to long-term employability and workforce resilience.

## **3. Methodology:**

The data on role of servant leadership in developing sustainable workforce was collected from employees of commercial banks (public and private) of Islamabad. The Pakistani banking sector employs individuals at different career stages, from entry-level staff to senior management. This diversity allows for a comprehensive analysis of how servant leadership affects workforce sustainability across different professional levels.

The 16-item questionnaire was used to measure servant leadership and sustainable workforce (employee well-being and sustainable employability). The scales for all variables were adopted from existing literature, and participants responded using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Servant leadership is measured using a five-item scale adopted from (Liden *et al.*, 2015). The sustainable workforce is comprised of two sub constructs: sustainable employability and employee well-being. The sustainable

employability construct was measured using a five-item scale adopted from Berntson and Marklund (2007). Likewise, the employee well-being variable is measured by 4 items measure of Brunetto, Farr-Wharton and Shacklock (2011).

To mitigate selection bias and prevent oversampling from any single institution, a simple random sampling technique is employed. This ensures that responses are drawn from a diverse pool of participants. Furthermore, cluster sampling is applied to categorize the sample into four groups: public, private, local and international banks.

For the purpose of data analysis, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) has been employed. PLS Path Modeling, a widely utilized variance-based SEM approach in business and social science research, is particularly effective for studies involving emerging technologies due to its capacity to model composites and latent variables (Henseler, Hubona, and Ray, 2016). Its capability to handle complex models and small to medium sample sizes makes it a preferred analytical tool in exploratory research.

#### **4. Results:**

To be provided upon completion.

#### **5. Discussion:**

To be developed following the availability of results.

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