

FACTORS AFFECTING INNOVATIVE WORK BEHAVIOR AMONG GENERATION Z OF STARTUP EMPLOYEES IN JAKARTA



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the influence of Ethical Leadership and Proactive Personality on Innovative Work Behavior mediated by Work Engagement among Generation Z employees working in startup companies in Jakarta. A quantitative approach was applied through the distribution of questionnaires to 145 respondents using a purposive sampling method. The findings indicate that Ethical Leadership has a positive effect on Innovative Work Behavior, while Proactive Personality shows a negative direct influence. However, when mediated by Work Engagement, Proactive Personality exerts a positive effect on innovative behavior. These results suggest that proactive traits do not always directly result in innovation but can foster it when employees feel engaged and energized in their work. This study is limited to startups in Jakarta; therefore, future research is encouraged to broaden the geographical scope and incorporate additional variables to enhance understanding.

Keywords: Ethical Leadership; Proactive Personality; Work Engagement;
Innovative Work Behavior

Received : 28-11-2025

Revised : 03-12-2025

Approved : 04-12-2025

Published : 05-12-2025



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INTRODUCTION

In an era of globalization and rapid technological advancement, organizations are required to continuously innovate and adapt in order to remain competitive. A company's success is determined not only by technology and financial capital but also by the quality of its human resources as a strategic organizational asset (Sella & Riofita, 2024). Since human resources shape an organization's capacity to innovate and adapt, this aspect becomes even more crucial for startup companies that operate in fast-changing and uncertain environments. Startups rely heavily on the creativity and innovative capabilities of their employees to navigate market uncertainties and accelerate growth (Amelia, 2017). Based on data from StartupRanking (2025), Indonesia has 3,126 startups, reflecting approximately 12% growth from the previous year. However, despite this increase, the industry faces significant challenges in sustaining innovation and enhancing employee engagement (Syavitra & Ardianto, 2023).

Generation Z, now the dominant workforce in startups, is known for being dynamic, creative, and challenge-driven (Arum et al., 2023). They also have high expectations regarding autonomy and work values, prompting companies to create environments that encourage continuous innovation and active contribution (Alvianita et al., 2023). Innovative work behavior is a critical component of building competitive advantage, as it reflects employees' ability to generate new ideas and solutions essential for organizational sustainability (Khan et al., 2021). Therefore, startup companies must balance business needs and employee expectations, especially those of generation Z, by providing spaces that support development and sustain innovative work behavior.

Khairunnisa and Setiasih (2023) state that employees who actively contribute to generating new ideas and creative solutions strengthen an organization's ability to respond to unexpected changes. Consequently, innovative work behavior becomes a vital requirement for every individual, as it plays a significant role in creating organizational competitiveness (Shin et al., 2017). Such innovative attitudes are often driven by leadership characteristics within the workplace (Setyowati & Etikariena, 2019). The better the leadership style, the better employee performance tends to be. This is because employees who feel valued by their leaders demonstrate higher performance and stronger innovative attitudes (Fanani et al., 2023).

Ethical leadership plays an important role in building a work culture that supports innovation through integrity, fairness, and trust between leaders and employees (Rahmat & Seswandi, 2023). Beyond fostering trust and a positive work environment, ethical leadership also cultivates a sense of responsibility and moral commitment among employees. The role of leaders who implement ethical leadership is believed to enhance employees' innovative work behavior, as implementing ethical leadership in the workplace can encourage employee commitment and create optimal performance, thus having both direct and indirect impacts on overall organizational performance (Emilisa et al., 2025). Likewise, proactive personality contributes to the emergence of innovative work behavior, as individuals with proactive tendencies are more inclined to take initiative and bring positive change to the workplace (Widiaristi & Etikariena, 2024).

Employee work engagement is also an important mediating factor in the relationship between leadership and innovative behavior. Employees with high work engagement tend to be more energetic, focused, and committed to achieving organizational goals (Riswan et al., 2021). Thus, ethical leadership and proactive personality can foster innovative work behavior through the enhancement of employee engagement.

Previous studies have examined these relationships in various contexts, such as in educational institutions and public organizations Zargar et al. (2025) and Aloulou et al. (2025). However, similar research remains limited in the context of Indonesian startups, especially among Generation Z employees who play a critical role in supporting organizational competitiveness and innovation within an increasingly dynamic business ecosystem.

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of ethical leadership and proactive personality on innovative work behavior, as well as the mediating role of work engagement within Indonesian startup companies. By focusing on startups dominated by Generation Z employees, this research aims to provide a more contextual understanding of how leadership and individual traits shape employees' innovative actions in fast-changing work environments. The study contributes to the limited empirical research on innovative behavior in Indonesian startups by offering evidence on the importance of ethical leadership, proactive tendencies, and engagement in fostering innovation. These findings are expected to guide organizations in developing human resource strategies that better support employee engagement and sustain innovation.

LITERATURE REVIEW, RESEARCH FRAMEWORK, AND HYPOTHESES

Ethical Leadership

According to Brown et al. (2005), ethical leadership is defined as a leadership approach that demonstrates normatively appropriate behavior through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, while encouraging similar behavior among employees through two-way communication, positive reinforcement, and decision-making processes. A leader is not only responsible for resolving conflicts among employees but must also provide guidance and train employees regarding appropriate behavior (Agustian & Darmawan, 2024). In summary, ethical leadership is a leadership style grounded in moral and ethical values, where leaders model appropriate conduct through personal behaviors and interactions, and actively encourage such behavior among subordinates through communication and positive reinforcement.

Proactive Personality

According to Li et al. (2022), individuals with a proactive personality actively gather information, identify and capitalize on opportunities, and reshape their environment or move to more ideal settings to bring about substantial change in the workplace. Sari and Najmudin (2021) describe proactive personality as behavior characterized by active initiative to improve current conditions or create something new. Individuals with proactive personality traits believe that their actions can bring change to their environment (Azzahra et al., 2025). They also tend to have a long-term perspective and are willing to go the extra mile to achieve predetermined goals (Fitwaturnusuliyah & Sawitri, 2017). In conclusion, proactive personality refers to an individual's tendency to take initiative, create opportunities, enact positive change, and persist despite external barriers by seeking solutions and improving situations to achieve better outcomes.

Work Engagement

According to Emilisa et al. (2024), work engagement is a condition in which employees feel involved, enthusiastic, and energized by their work without perceiving it as burdensome or stressful. Meanwhile, Novrandy and Tanuwijaya (2022) describe work engagement as a psychological state emerging from positive employee experiences that fosters enthusiasm in performing job tasks define work engagement as a positive

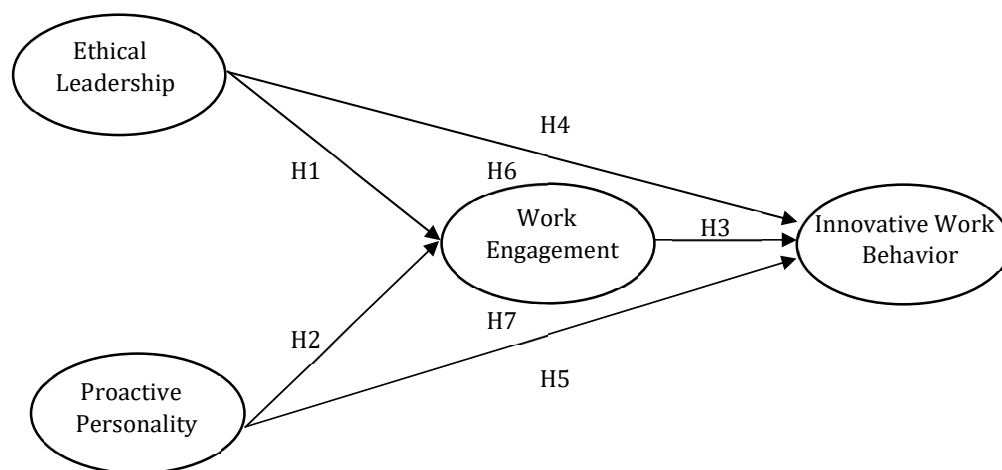
motivational state in which employees experience fulfillment in their job, characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Based on these definitions, work engagement can be understood as a positive psychological condition marked by full physical, cognitive, affective, and emotional involvement in one's work, where employees feel energized, find meaning in their tasks, and remain committed to achieving organizational goals.

Innovative Work Behavior

According to Hastari and Emilisa (2023), innovative work behavior refers to a series of actions aimed at introducing new ideas that can be developed and implemented to enhance employee performance within an organization. Its importance is emphasized by Hibatullah and Berliyanti (2024), who state that innovative work behavior serves as a crucial source of personal innovation that supports continuous improvement of business processes and products, ultimately becoming a key determinant of success in dynamic environments. Furthermore, Purdiarini and Tanuwijaya (2023) describe innovative work behavior as a comprehensive set of behaviors related to idea generation, idea promotion within the organization, and the implementation of those ideas. Organizations increasingly rely on employees to continuously innovate in order to maintain competitiveness and respond to rapidly changing market conditions. Based on the various definitions presented, it can be concluded that innovative work behavior is a strategic set of actions undertaken by employees that encompasses the creation, promotion, and implementation of new ideas within the organization to achieve performance that exceeds established standards. This concept is more comprehensive than creativity, as it not only involves generating ideas but also realizing them—making it a key element that determines an organization's competitive advantage in an ever-evolving business environment.

Research Framework

Based on the previous explanation, the research framework was developed by positioning Ethical Leadership and Proactive Personality as independent variables, Work Engagement as a mediating variable, and Innovative Work Behavior as the dependent variable. This framework can be outlined as follows:



Source: Constructed by the authors, 2025

Figure 1
Research Framework

Research Hypotheses

In conducting the analysis, the hypotheses formulated for this study are as follows:

- H1: Ethical leadership has a positive influence on work engagement among generation Z employees in Jakarta-based startup companies.*
- H2: Proactive personality has a positive influence on work engagement among generation Z employees in Jakarta-based startup companies.*
- H3: Work engagement has a positive influence on innovative work behavior among generation Z employees in Jakarta-based startup companies.*
- H4: Ethical leadership has a positive influence on innovative work behavior among generation Z employees in Jakarta-based startup companies.*
- H5: Proactive personality has a positive influence on innovative work behavior among generation Z employees in Jakarta-based startup companies.*
- H6: Ethical leadership positively influences innovative work behavior through the mediating role of work engagement among generation Z employees in Jakarta-based startup companies.*
- H7: Proactive personality positively influences innovative work behavior through the mediating role of work engagement among generation Z employees in Jakarta-based startup companies.*

METHOD

This study is an associative research employing a quantitative approach, aiming to examine the influence of ethical leadership and proactive personality on innovative work behavior with the mediating role of work engagement among generation Z employees in Jakarta-based startup companies, referring to studies by Zargar et al. (2025) and Aloulou et al. (2025).

A quantitative method was chosen because all data are analyzed statistically. The research utilized a cross-sectional design conducted once during the period of September–October 2025 in a non-contrived setting or real work environment (Fubian & Emilisa, 2024). Based on the total number of 29 questionnaire items, the minimum sample size was determined using the formula by Hair et al (2020), which requires five times the number of items. Therefore, a minimum of 145 respondents was needed, and this number was adopted as the sample for the study. Primary data were collected through a Google Form questionnaire distributed to Generation Z employees aged 18–28 working in startup companies in Jakarta.

The data were analyzed using statistical tools, including descriptive analysis with SPSS 22 and direct as well as mediating effect testing through Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) using AMOS. Secondary data were obtained from journals, reports, and other supporting documents. The sampling technique used was purposive sampling based on respondent criteria aligned with the research objectives. The variables in this study were measured using a Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (5), agree (4), neutral (3), disagree (2), to strongly disagree (1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Validity Test

The purpose of a validity test is to ensure that the questionnaire items adequately and accurately represent the intended construct (Sanaky et al., 2021). The validity test indicates that all indicators across the measured variables meet the minimum factor loading criterion of >0.50 (Hair et al., 2020). However, three indicators within the work

engagement variable fall below the acceptable threshold, rendering them invalid; therefore, these items were removed and not included in subsequent analyses.

Reliability Test

The reliability test is conducted to evaluate the extent to which respondents' answers remain consistent in measuring a variable (Iba & Wardhana, 2023). To determine whether a research instrument is reliable, an instrument is considered acceptable and reliable if it attains a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient value >0.60 ; otherwise, it is deemed unreliable (Hair et al., 2020). Reliability analysis was performed on the variables of ethical leadership, proactive personality, innovative work behavior, and work engagement. All constructs recorded Cronbach's alpha values exceeding the threshold of 0.60, indicating that the measurement instruments used in this study possess adequate internal consistency.

Hypothesis Testing

The results of Hypothesis Testing is as follows:

Table 1
Hypothesis Test Results 1-7

Variable	Estimate	p-value	Decision
WE <--- EL	0,380	0,000	H1 Supported
WE <--- PP	0,297	0,000	H2 Supported
IWB <--- WE	0,637	0,000	H3 Supported
IWB <--- EL	0,231	0,010	H4 Supported
IWB <--- PP	-0,240	0,008	H5 Not Supported
IWB <--- EL (WE as Mediator)	0,242	0,001	H6 Supported
IWB <--- PP (WE as Mediator)	0,189	0,002	H7 Supported

Source: Primary Data, 2025.

Discussion

H1: Ethical leadership has a positive influence on work engagement

After testing the first hypothesis, it was found that there is a positive and significant influence between ethical leadership and work engagement among employees of startup companies in the Jakarta area. This study supports the previous findings by Arsyad et al. (2025), who found that ethical leadership has a positive influence on work engagement. The study explains that leaders with high moral values and fair behavior are able to increase employees' trust in the organization. This trust encourages emotional attachment, so that employees feel more enthusiastic and committed to carrying out their duties.

The study by Adawiyah et al. (2021) also shows similar results, where ethical leadership has a significant effect on increasing work engagement. The study explains that ethical behaviors of leaders, such as honesty, responsibility, and transparency, can create a positive work environment and increase employees' enthusiasm to work better. When leaders treat employees fairly and appreciate their contributions, employees tend to show higher levels of engagement. The application of ethical leadership in startup companies also contributes to the formation of a healthy and inclusive organizational

culture, where employees feel valued and listened to. Ethical leaders not only emphasize the achievement of targets, but also pay attention to moral values in every decision-making process. Therefore, ethical leadership is expected to result in higher work engagement.

H2: Proactive personality has a positive influence on work engagement

After testing the second hypothesis, it was found that there is a positive and significant influence between proactive personality and work engagement among employees of startup companies in the Jakarta area. This study supports previous research conducted by Anugrahito and Muafi (2021), which found that proactive personality has a positive and significant influence on work engagement. The study explains that employees with proactive personality tend to show high enthusiasm for their work and are able to manage work stress better. Proactive individuals do not just wait for instructions, but actively seek solutions and new opportunities to improve performance. This attitude makes them feel more emotionally and cognitively involved with their work, thereby significantly increasing their level of work engagement. The research by Purnomo and Nuraya (2023) also reinforces these findings by stating that proactive personality contributes positively to increasing employee work engagement.

The study explains that proactive individuals have high intrinsic motivation to develop and tend to have a strong sense of responsibility towards their work. When employees take the initiative to act without waiting for orders, they feel more empowered and in control of their work, which ultimately increases their sense of work engagement with the organization. In a startup work environment that demands creativity and independence, this proactive nature is a valuable asset in maintaining team spirit and productivity. This shows that startup employees in Jakarta with proactive personalities tend to take initiative, face challenges with enthusiasm, and strive to create positive change in the workplace, ultimately increasing their work engagement.

H3: Work engagement has a positive influence on innovative work behavior

After testing the third hypothesis, it was found that there is a positive and significant effect between work engagement and innovative work behavior among employees of startup companies in the Jakarta area. This study supports previous research conducted by Hasanah et al. (2025), which found that work engagement has a positive and significant effect on innovative work behavior. The study explains that employees with high levels of work engagement tend to have an intrinsic drive to perform at their best, think creatively, and find new ways to carry out their tasks. Individuals with high work engagement not only focus on completing their work, but also strive to improve efficiency and added value through innovation.

This shows that startup company employees in Jakarta who have high enthusiasm, dedication, and focus on their work will be more motivated to generate new ideas, try creative approaches, and provide innovative solutions to solve problems in the workplace. Indriyani et al. (2024) research also supports these findings, stating that engaged employees have greater initiative and courage in exploring new ideas. The study explains that employees with high work engagement show strong enthusiasm and dedication to their work, which ultimately triggers creative ideas to improve work processes and results. Employees who feel emotionally involved with their organization will be more motivated to contribute maximally and seek innovations that can help the company achieve its goals. This is particularly relevant to startups, which require adaptive human resources oriented toward developing new ideas.

H4: Ethical leadership has a positive influence on innovative work behavior

After conducting a hypothesis test for the fourth hypothesis, it was found that there was a positive and significant influence between ethical leadership and innovative work behavior among employees of startup companies in the Jakarta area. This study supports previous research conducted by Riani and Harsono (2024), which found that ethical leadership has a positive influence on innovative work behavior.

The study explains that ethical leaders are able to build trust and psychological security among employees, which ultimately encourages them to be more open to new ideas. When employees feel that their leaders value honesty, transparency, and responsibility, they will be more willing to take risks to innovate without fear of negative judgment. An ethical work environment also encourages healthy collaboration among team members, thereby strengthening the culture of innovation within the organization. This shows that startup company leaders in Jakarta who uphold moral values, fairness, and integrity are able to create a work atmosphere conducive to creativity and innovation.

The research by Supriandi et al. (2022) also supports these findings by stating that ethical leadership behavior can increase employee creativity and innovation through the creation of a positive organizational climate. Ethical leaders do not only focus on achieving targets, but also ensure that the process of achieving them is carried out fairly and responsibly. Thus, employees feel valued and motivated to contribute more through creative ideas. In a startup work environment that demands rapid innovation, the role of ethical leadership is key to maintaining a balance between productivity and organizational moral values.

H5: Proactive personality has a negative influence of innovative work behavior

Testing of the fifth hypothesis shows that there is a negative and significant influence between proactive personality and innovative work behavior. This study is in line with the findings of Zhang et al. (2024), which states that proactive personality does not always have a positive impact on employees' innovative work behavior, especially in stressful or unsupportive work environments. This is because individuals with proactive personality sometimes cause envy or ostracism from coworkers, which ultimately reduces motivation and desire to display innovative work behavior.

In startup companies, where work dynamics are fast-paced and competitive pressure is high, proactive personality without adequate social support can trigger interpersonal conflict and psychological fatigue. These conditions can hinder the emergence of innovative work behavior, as employees focus more on adjusting to the social environment than on creating new ideas. This shows that startup employees in Jakarta do not yet feel that they have sufficient social support and a conducive work environment to express their proactive personalities optimally. When proactivity is not balanced with a collaborative work environment, openness to new ideas, and a culture of mutual respect, proactive tendencies can actually create social pressure that hinders innovative behavior. Thus, these findings confirm that the development of innovative work behavior depends not only on individual characteristics, but also on the quality of interpersonal relationships and organizational support.

H6: Ethical leadership has a positive influence on innovative work behavior mediated by work engagement

After testing the sixth hypothesis, it was found that there is a positive and significant influence between ethical leadership and innovative work behavior mediated by work

engagement among employees of startup companies in the Jakarta area. This study supports previous research conducted by Liu et al. (2023) and Jia et al. (2022), which showed that ethical leadership has a positive effect on innovative work behavior through the mediation of work engagement.

The study explained that leaders who behave ethically can increase employees' psychological security and trust in the organization, which implies increased enthusiasm and work engagement. When employees have a high level of work engagement, they tend to be more courageous in taking initiative, open to change, and actively participate in creating innovative ideas that are beneficial to the progress of the organization. This shows that the higher the ethical behavior exhibited by a leader, the higher the level of work engagement of employees, which ultimately encourages the emergence of innovative work behavior among employees of startup companies in Jakarta.

H7: Proactive personality has a positive influence on innovative work behavior mediated by work engagement

After conducting a hypothesis test for the seventh hypothesis, it was found that there was a positive and significant effect between proactive personality and innovative work behavior mediated by work engagement among employees of startup companies in the Jakarta area. This study supports previous research conducted by Tekeli and Gökhan Özkoç (2022) and Kong and Li (2018), which states that proactive personality has a positive effect on innovative work behavior through work engagement. Both studies explain that proactive individuals find it easier to feel emotionally and cognitively engaged in their work because they have a sense of personal responsibility for their work results.

This high level of work engagement is the main driver in generating creative and innovative ideas. When employees have an internal drive to contribute and adapt to change, they will be more open to new opportunities and dare to take risks to create innovations that are beneficial to the organization. This shows that the higher the level of proactive personality possessed by employees of startup companies in Jakarta, the higher their level of work engagement, which ultimately encourages innovative work behavior. Individuals with proactive personalities tend not to wait for change to happen, but rather create change themselves through innovative ideas and actions.

Proactive employees will show high enthusiasm for their work, seek new ways to solve challenges, and take the initiative in improving team effectiveness. This shows that the combination of proactive personality and high work engagement plays an important role in encouraging innovative work behavior among startup employees in Jakarta. Therefore, organizations that strengthen work engagement will be more successful in maximizing their employees' proactive potential for innovation.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on the analysis conducted, this study reveals that both Ethical Leadership and Proactive Personality have positive and significant effects on Work Engagement. Furthermore, Work Engagement is shown to have a positive and significant influence on Innovative Work Behavior, indicating that the more engaged employees feel with their work, the more likely they are to exhibit innovative behaviors. In terms of direct effects, Ethical Leadership also demonstrates a positive and significant impact on Innovative Work Behavior. However, Proactive Personality demonstrates a negative and significant influence on Innovative Work Behavior, suggesting that proactive tendencies do not

necessarily translate into innovative behavior in the absence of sufficient Work Engagement.

Additionally, the mediation analysis shows that Work Engagement plays a crucial role in mediating the effects of both Ethical Leadership and Proactive Personality on Innovative Work Behavior. The significant indirect effects indicate that ethical leadership and proactive tendencies foster innovation particularly when employees feel engaged, energized, and psychologically connected to their work. These findings emphasize the need for organizations to cultivate a work environment that enhances engagement in order to fully actualize the innovative potential of employees.

Based on these findings, future research is encouraged to expand the geographical and industrial scope of the study to enhance generalizability. Researchers may also consider employing different research designs, such as longitudinal or mixed-method approaches, to gain deeper insights into the dynamics of work engagement and innovative behavior over time. Increasing sample size and utilizing more diverse sampling techniques could further improve the accuracy and external validity of future research outcomes.

Furthermore, to deepen the understanding of the mechanisms underlying work engagement and innovative work behavior, future studies may incorporate additional variables that are theoretically relevant but were not examined in the present research. For instance, Perceived Organizational Support is an important construct because employees who feel valued and supported by their organization tend to develop stronger psychological attachments, which can enhance their engagement and willingness to express innovative ideas. Psychological Safety is also crucial, as it determines whether employees feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks such as proposing new ideas without fear of negative consequences, thereby helping explain why proactive tendencies do not always lead directly to innovation. Integrating these variables into future research would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the contextual and psychological conditions that enable employees to translate motivation and personal traits into meaningful innovative actions (Fairnandha, 2021)

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Appendix

Table 2 Measurement scales

Measurement Items Construct	Items	Sources
Ethical Leadership	EL1 : My leader treats all employees fairly without discrimination. EL2 : My leader provides an objective assessment of employee performance. EL3 : My leader considers ethical values in every decision-making process. EL 4 : My leader always ensures that the decisions made do not morally harm others. EL5 : My leader serves as a role model in applying behaviors consistent with ethical values. EL6 : My leader demonstrates high moral standards through their actions. EL7 : My leader encourages employees to openly discuss ethical issues. EL8 : My leader is willing to listen to suggestions from employees regarding moral issues. EL9 : My leader appreciates employees who demonstrate ethical behavior in their work.	(Gunarso et al., 2025)

	EL10 : My leader encourages employees to always act in accordance with ethical principles.	
Proactive Personality	PP1 : No matter what the obstacles, if I believe in something, I will make it happen. PP2 : I love being a champion for my ideas, even against others' opposition. PP3 : If I believe in an idea, no obstacle will prevent me from making it happen. PP4 : I am excellent at identifying opportunities.	(Zulhapiz & Rahayu, 2025)
Work Engagement	WE1 : At my work, I feel bursting with energy. WE2 : When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work. WE3 : At my job I feel strong and vigorous. WE4 : I am proud of the work that I do. WE5 : I am enthusiastic about my job. WE6 : My job inspires me. WE7 : I get carried away when I am working. WE8 : I feel happy when I am working intensely. WE9 : I am immersed in my work.	(Schaufeli et al., 2006)
Innovative Work Behavior	IWB1 : I am able to search out new technologies, processes, techniques and/or product ideas. IWB2 : I am able generate creative ideas. IWB3 : I am able to promote and champion ideas to others. IWB4 : I am able to investigate and secure funds needed to implement new ideas. IWB5 : I am able to develop adequate plans and schedules for the implementation of new ideas. IWB6 : I am able to innovate new ways to perform my work.	(Al-Azab & Al-Romeedy, 2024)