

# Enhancing Workplace Harmony in Malaysia: Integrating Japanese Kaizen and Ringi Management Practices into Industrial Relations

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## Abstract

This study examines the adoption of Japanese Kaizen and Ringi management practices to address workplace challenges in Malaysia. Kaizen fosters continuous improvement by involving employees at all organizational levels, leading to enhanced productivity and job satisfaction. Ringi emphasizes consensus-based decision-making, promoting inclusivity and addressing communication barriers in Malaysia's traditionally hierarchical management structures. These practices align with recent industrial relations reforms, such as the Industrial Relations Amendment Act 2020, to create a more cooperative and engaging work environment. The findings underscore that adapting these methods to Malaysia's cultural and legal contexts can drive significant improvements in workplace harmony, reduce turnover, and foster sustainable organizational growth. Gradual implementation, pilot programs in key sectors, and tailored training modules are recommended to ensure effective integration. This study highlights the potential of Kaizen and Ringi to revolutionize Malaysian industrial relations by aligning employee motivation with organizational goals for long-term success.

## 1. Introduction

Workplace harmony refers to a balanced state of constructive relationships among employees that supports higher productivity, lower stress, and greater job satisfaction in an increasingly competitive global environment. Approaches to cultivating such harmony vary across countries and are shaped by cultural, social, and economic factors. Japan is frequently cited for exemplary workplace practices, particularly Kaizen and Ringi, which emphasise continuous improvement and collaborative decision-making. These practices have been associated with sustained productivity and positive employee relations, making Japan a compelling reference point for jurisdictions seeking to strengthen their industrial relations frameworks. Consistent with this tradition, the Kaizen philosophy encourages employees at all organisational levels to propose process improvements, fostering shared responsibility and creativity (Takaoka, 2024). Complementing this, the Ringi system institutionalises bottom-up decision-making in which proposals circulate across levels for deliberation prior to approval (Takaoka, 2024).

As a developing nation in Southeast Asia, Malaysia recognises workplace harmony as foundational to sustainable economic development and social stability (Economic Planning Unit, 2021). Persistent challenges ranging from industrial disputes and evolving work cultures to limited direct employee participation in decision-making suggest that selected elements of Kaizen and Ringi could offer contextually relevant remedies. Their emphasis on inclusivity, effective communication, and consensus aligns with Malaysia's current needs. These considerations are particularly salient amid rapid reforms to the country's labour legislation, including the

Industrial Relations Amendment Act 2020 and the Trade Unions Amendment Act 2024, which took effect on 15 September 2024. The reforms are designed to harmonise domestic labour standards with international norms, notably the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998; revised 2022). Yet, despite these advances, core issues endure industrial disputes, shifting workplace norms, and centralised decision-making, often exacerbated by communication gaps. Reports from the Department of Statistics Malaysia highlight frequent disputes related to rights claims, communication breakdowns, and dissatisfaction with decision processes (International Labour Organization, 2024). In practice, hierarchical structures can impede open dialogue and limit cooperation across ranks.

Recent labour-market indicators show a decline in unemployment between 2023 and 2024, signalling a modest improvement. However, these gains coexist with stubborn workplace challenges, including job dissatisfaction and higher mobility among employees who feel undervalued. Such dissatisfaction carries wide-ranging implications for individuals and organisations. According to the State of the Global Workplace (Gallup, (2024).), only 26% of employees worldwide report being engaged in their work, while 67% are not engaged and 8% are actively disengaged; these patterns are consistently linked to lower productivity, higher absenteeism, and elevated turnover. Taken together, the evidence underscores the need for more participatory, people-centred management approaches such as Kaizen and Ringi that can bolster engagement and reinforce organisational harmony.

In parallel, the International Labour Organization recently convened stakeholders to discuss further reforms aimed at strengthening workplace relations in Malaysia (International Labour Organization, 2024). Continued innovation is therefore essential to embed collaboration and mutual respect within the evolving industrial relations system. Persistent concerns over productivity and retention further underscore the value of management models that systematically encourage employee voice and distributed problem-solving. Against this backdrop, the present study examines how Japanese practices can be adapted to Malaysia's cultural and legal context and evaluates their fit with existing statutes, including the Industrial Relations Act 1967 and the Employment Act 1955.

## 2. The Role of Kaizen and Ringi in Malaysian Organizations

Kaizen and Ringi are widely recognised as world-class methodologies for cultivating productive, collaborative, and harmonious workplaces. Kaizen is a management strategy that invites participation from top management to frontline staff in making changes that enhance organisational processes, products, and services (Kariua Peter, n.d.). The term "Kaizen" combines two Japanese words *kai* (change) and *zen* (better) (Maarof & Mahmud (2018). This approach nurtures a culture of employee ownership and idea sharing. In Malaysia's automotive industry, Kaizen has been applied to raise operational efficiency and product quality. Empirical evidence indicates that Kaizen training and satisfaction with cross-functional teams directly predict the success of bottom-up Kaizen initiatives, while perceived motivation to participate partially mediates the relationship between training and success (Kamal Sabri Kamarudin et al., 2024). A case study of a Malaysian automotive components manufacturer likewise reported substantial improvements in production processes and waste reduction following Kaizen implementation (Muslimen et al., 2021). Kaizen targets three domains of improvement *muda* (waste), *mura* (unevenness), and *muri* (overburden) (Maarof, M. G., & Mahmud, F. (2018) and is supported by tools often grouped under the "Kaizen umbrella," including Total Productive Maintenance, Total Quality Control, Zero Defect initiatives, quality improvement methods, automation, Kanban, just-in-time, quality control circles, and formal suggestion systems. More broadly, Kaizen frames continuous learning and incremental change as sources of durable competitive advantage (Samadhiya et al., 2023; Biadacz, 2024; Goni et al., 2018; Sordan et al., 2023).

Ringi, by contrast, is a consensus-oriented decision-making process in which proposals move upward from subordinates to superiors and are refined through group deliberation and mutual consent (Takaoka, B. Y. 2024). The term comprises *rin* presenting a proposal for approval and *gi* ideas and decisions (Bicer, 2023). By structuring consultation across units and hierarchical levels, the Ringi system facilitates open dialogue, reduces structural barriers, and incorporates diverse stakeholder perspectives; its bottom-up flow increases responsiveness to operational realities (Bicer, 2023). Beyond procedural value, Ringi signals a cultural commitment to inclusivity and respect for employee insight (Standard Insight, 2024). In contexts such as Malaysia, where formal hierarchies can constrain participation in decision-making, combining Kaizen and Ringi can help cultivate a courteous, collaborative culture that strengthens retention and job satisfaction (International Labour Organization, 2024).

## 3. Implementing Kaizen and Ringi in Malaysia: Strategies, Challenges, and Success Factors

For Kaizen and Ringi processes to be effectively implemented in Malaysia, organisations must understand the cultural, structural, and managerial conditions that shape local workplace dynamics. While these Japanese management practices emphasise teamwork, inclusiveness, and continuous improvement, their successful transfer requires adaptations that respect Malaysia's hierarchical organisational culture. Kaizen and Ringi offer

substantial potential to enhance communication, employee involvement, and organisational efficiency; however, their integration is contingent upon the implementation of appropriate strategies, mitigation of implementation challenges, and the establishment of key success factors. The following section presents a structured analysis consisting of three components: (a) strategies, (b) challenges, and (c) success factors that organisations must consider when adopting Kaizen and Ringi in the Malaysian industrial environment.

### 3.1 Strategies for Implementing Kaizen and Ringi in Malaysia

To effectively implement Kaizen and Ringi in Malaysia, organisations must adopt strategies that acknowledge cultural differences while promoting principles of teamwork and continuous improvement. Kaizen and Ringi should be introduced with cultural sensitivity, recognising that Malaysia's organisational hierarchy may inhibit open communication and limit employee participation. A key strategy is enhancing cultural alignment: although Malaysian culture values collaboration, hierarchical norms may restrict employees from voicing ideas, which undermines the bottom-up participation central to Kaizen (Arumsari et al., 2019). Organisations should therefore establish structured platforms such as suggestion systems, improvement meetings, and cross-functional teams to encourage contributions across all organisational levels. Training is another foundational strategy. Employees should receive comprehensive instruction in Kaizen methodologies, including root cause analysis, the 5S system, and value stream mapping. Evidence from an engineering company in India demonstrates that extensive training and open communication across hierarchical layers significantly improved productivity and quality (Lingappan, 2019). Such training equips Malaysian employees with the skills and confidence to engage effectively in continuous improvement activities.

Strengthening communication systems also supports successful implementation. Consistent with recommendations by the Lark Editor Team (2023), organisations should establish and maintain feedback channels throughout their decision-making processes. Digital communication tools can democratise participation and provide safe avenues for employees to express opinions without fear of reprimand. Additionally, involving neutral third parties in implementation can increase credibility and reduce perceived bias in decision-making. Finally, implementation should be guided by change management principles that emphasise transparent communication, employee participation, capacity-building, and reinforcement of Kaizen's benefits. This approach helps reduce resistance, build trust, and foster organisational readiness for transformation (Mike Wilson, 2023b).

### 3.2 Challenges in Implementing Kaizen and Ringi in Malaysia

Despite their potential benefits, the implementation of Kaizen and Ringi in Malaysia faces several challenges. The most significant challenge is Malaysia's entrenched organisational hierarchy, which may discourage employees from sharing ideas or engaging in participatory processes (Arumsari et al., 2019). Traditional power distances weaken upward communication, limiting the collaborative problem-solving central to Kaizen and the consensus-building required in Ringi. Resistance to change also poses a considerable challenge. Research shows that experienced or long-tenured employees may resist Kaizen due to unfamiliarity with continuous improvement concepts or discomfort with new expectations (Maarof & Mahmud, 2018). Misconceptions about Kaizen can lead to reluctance, confusion, and low motivation. Further barriers include the absence of appropriate incentives, inadequate training, and delays in processing employees' improvement suggestions, all of which undermine employee commitment to Kaizen activities (Maarof & Mahmud, 2018).

Communication constraints further complicate implementation. Malaysian organisations traditionally adopt top-down communication patterns, challenging the multi-level review and dialogue central to Ringi processes. Without cultural alignment or supportive leadership, Ringi risks being reduced to a procedural formality rather than a meaningful participatory practice. Additionally, weak alignment between upper management and lower-level employees may hinder implementation. When strategic directions are developed without adequate input from employees at operational levels, misunderstandings arise, which compromise trust and reduce enthusiasm for adopting Kaizen and Ringi initiatives (Maarof & Mahmud, 2018).

### 3.3 Success Factors for Kaizen and Ringi Implementation

Three major success factors determine the effectiveness of Kaizen and Ringi in Malaysian organisations. The first is strong leadership commitment. Leaders must champion continuous improvement, model collaborative behaviour, and visibly support Kaizen and Ringi initiatives. Leadership engagement is crucial, as demonstrated by Japanese organisations where management sets behavioural standards and reinforces a culture of improvement throughout the hierarchy (Mostafa et al., 2023).

The second success factor is comprehensive and continuous training. Employees must develop the technical and analytical skills required to engage in improvement activities. Training in Kaizen tools such as root cause analysis, the 5S methodology, and value stream mapping cultivates problem-solving capabilities and instils a

proactive mindset (Baht Hassan,2024). This supports long-term organisational development and fosters a culture aligned with Kaizen principles.

The third success factor is systematic monitoring and performance measurement. Organisations must establish Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) aligned with improvement goals. Continuous monitoring allows organisations to identify successes, detect bottlenecks, and adjust initiatives based on data-driven insights (Baht Hassan,2024) A holistic cultural approach encompassing mindset shifts, structured methodologies, and sustained employee involvement is essential for realising the full benefits of Kaizen and Ringi (Chandresh, 2023).

In summary, implementing Kaizen and Ringi in Malaysia requires strategic planning, cultural sensitivity, and strong organisational commitment. Effective strategies include comprehensive training, structured communication systems, and culturally appropriate change management interventions. However, challenges such as hierarchical norms, resistance to change, and communication barriers must be proactively addressed. Ultimately, the success of Kaizen and Ringi hinges on leadership support, employee empowerment, and systematic performance monitoring. When these elements are aligned, Malaysian organisations can leverage Kaizen and Ringi to foster continuous improvement, enhance productivity, and strengthen workplace harmony.

#### **4. A Comparative Analysis of Kaizen and Ringi in Japanese and Malaysian Workplaces**

A comparison between Japanese management styles specifically Kaizen and Ringi and established Malaysian management practices reveals substantial contrasts, particularly in organisational hierarchy and decision-making processes. Japanese companies such as Toyota are well known for their Kaizen philosophy, whereby continuous improvement involves employees at all organisational levels in identifying inefficiencies and proposing solutions. This approach is inclusive and employee-driven, with innovation emerging through bottom-up participation and collaborative engagement. By contrast, Malaysian management practices are largely hierarchical and characterised by top-down decision-making, in which organisational goals are determined primarily by senior managers and junior employees have limited opportunities to provide input. Consequently, compared to the Japanese model where employee participation is fundamental to operational processes, innovation is less likely to occur in Malaysian organisations due to restricted cross-level interaction and communication (World Bank, 2020).

Kaizen and Ringi differ markedly from conventional Malaysian management practices with respect to decision-making autonomy, decentralisation, and cultural assumptions. Kaizen, as practised in Japanese organisations such as Toyota, empowers employees across all levels to contribute to incremental improvements, thereby promoting creativity, accountability, and shared ownership. Conversely, Malaysian management tends to operate within bureaucratic and centralised systems, where authority is concentrated at the top and decisions are frequently made without extensive consultation with subordinate employees (Commisceo Global, n.d.). The Ringi system further accentuates these differences. Within Ringi, proposals move through several organisational layers for review and discussion before a final decision is reached. This process ensures that diverse perspectives are considered, fosters transparency, and cultivates collective responsibility. In Malaysia, however, traditional decision-making practices rarely incorporate lower-level input, and senior leadership commonly retains exclusive authority over both strategic and operational decisions (Commisceo Global, n.d.).

Despite these contrasts, Malaysian workplaces may benefit from adopting selected elements of Kaizen and Ringi. Greater employee involvement in decision-making has been shown to enhance job satisfaction and align individual motivations with organisational goals. Nevertheless, the successful implementation of these practices requires considerable cultural adjustment. Malaysia's industrial environment is characterised by high power distance, strong hierarchical norms, and deference to authority, all of which may inhibit the open communication and egalitarian participation that Kaizen and Ringi require. Research indicates that Malaysian employees value social harmony and collective well-being, which may discourage dissenting views or open critique of existing processes. Leaders therefore need to cultivate psychologically safe environments that support participatory behaviour and shift managerial practice from autocratic tendencies toward more inclusive and facilitative leadership.

The cultural and structural distinctions between Japanese management practices and Malaysian organisational traditions underscore the complexities associated with transferring Kaizen and Ringi across national contexts (World Bank, 2020). In Japan, employees are expected to participate actively in identifying inefficiencies and generating solutions, which embeds continuous improvement into organisational culture. In Malaysia, however, the centralised hierarchical model distances subordinates from strategic decision-making and may inhibit creativity, initiative, and motivation (World Bank, 2020; Bicer, C. 2023). The Ringi system further illustrates these contrasts, as its emphasis on consensus-building and multi-level consultation requires cultural norms of transparency and shared accountability that are not commonly embedded in Malaysian organisations. Nonetheless, research suggests that adopting Ringi-inspired practices may enhance workplace harmony and accountability in Malaysia by aligning organisational objectives with employee motivation and expanding opportunities for participation in decision-making (International Labour Organization, 2024; Bicer, C. 2023).

Importantly, the transferability of Kaizen and Ringi is not straightforward and requires thoughtful contextual adaptation. Japanese organisations operate in cultural environments characterised by low power distance, long-term employment relationships, and strong collective responsibility. Malaysian organisations, on the other hand, exhibit higher power distance, more individualised employment arrangements, and managerial preferences for authoritative decision-making. These cultural differences have direct implications for the implementation of Kaizen and Ringi. For example, Kaizen's dependence on open suggestion-sharing may not function effectively in contexts where employees are reluctant to challenge or contradict superiors. Similarly, Ringi's emphasis on extensive consultation may conflict with Malaysian organisational expectations for efficiency and rapid decision-making. Consequently, successful adaptation requires adjustments to communication practices, recalibration of leadership expectations, and the implementation of gradual cultural change. Without such contextualisation, the integration of Kaizen and Ringi risks becoming superficial, limited to procedural compliance rather than meaningful behavioural transformation.

#### 4.1 The Role of Kaizen and Ringi in Supporting Legislative Reforms

The derivatives of these changes are in the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2020 that has taken effect since 1st of January 2021. Such changes are removal of the discretion of the Minister in relation to the referral of unfair dismissal cases to the Industrial Court by the Director General of Industrial Relations, to mention but name a few. Further, the Act also seeks to provide the Industrial Court with the legal mandate to affect interest rates of up to eight per cent per annum on monetary awards and raise the punitive measures for failure to observe the court rulings (Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2020).

The Trade Unions (Amendment) Act 2024 came into force on September 15, 2024, and repeals the provisions in the Trade Unions Act 1959 to eliminate restrictions on the new formation of trade unions. This change enables the recognition of one or more trade unions within the same establishment, trade, occupation or industry with a view of putting into practice freedom of association prevailing in most countries including Malaysia (Trade Unions (Amendment) Act 2024, 2024). However, all these legislative changes Malaysia has been experiencing some challenges in industrial relations such as, industrial disputation, dissatisfaction with decision making, and lack of communication between super ordinate and subordinate institutions. By introducing Japanese-style management including Kaizen and Ringi, some of these problems could be solved, increased workplace cooperation, as well as complement the recent changes to the labor laws.

#### 4.2 Adapting Kaizen and Ringi for Malaysian Organizations: A Strategic Implementation Framework

Hence it is crucial to understand that practices such as the Kaizen and the Ringi system needs to be customized with the Malaysian context. Applying Kaizen means gradual changes with the participation of every employee on the organization chart, while the Ringi approach is focused on a decision reached after its submission has received approval from all levels of the hierarchy. Based on this literature, organizations must therefore develop a specific implementation plan to fully incorporate these practices efficiently. First, organizational goals must be set in uncomplicated and quantifiable terms to meet Malaysia's hierarchical business organizational culture, with these goals mirroring the company's strategic plan and cascaded across the organizational structure. Cross functional teams should be employed to comprise of members from different organizational departments and at different organizational levels to enhance inter-group cooperation and membership besides hierarchical. Other tools such as 5 Whys or fishbone diagrams can then be used to do root cause analyses that allow employees to proactively address operational issues and find solutions themselves. While brainstorming for solutions and implementing these solutions at an experimental level guarantees their efficiency, it also provides for adaptability to local peculiarities. When solutions are improved, an update of the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) is required to incorporate new changes and must be followed by a training session to ensure staff are familiar with novel procedures. Speaking of continuous monitoring, it is carrier-oriented with feedback mechanisms used regularly and practices modification based on their outcomes obligatory for sustaining improvement. For the Ringi system, one should determine the decision points which need the collective contribution and the secondly the proper approval level depending on the Malaysian hierarchy. Within the framework of this system, documentation templates and training programs should be developed to increase transparency and explain employees' responsibilities to them. It avoids inconvenience by adopting a phased timeline for the integration of the partnership. The first two months are suitable for planning and developing goals as well as staffing. It is during the third and fourth months that root causes analysis and solutions can be implemented, pilot tested, and comments gathered in the fifth and sixth months. It is recommended that the standardization of such key successful practices and updating the SOPs should be done in the 7th and 8th months of the plan while implementation and further modification of the Ringi system should be done over 9th to 12th months of the plan accordingly. The gradual approach used herein also enables the Malaysian organizations to integrate Kaizen and Ringi strategies in a timely manner that drives a culture of change, improvements, engagement of employees

alongside an encouragement of Group-thinking that supports sustainable efficiency and increased satisfaction in the workplaces.

There are 5 steps to implement the Ringi system effectively which organization needs to follow these steps. Identify the decision points: Identify the points and classify them according to their impact and the level of stakeholder involvement required. Define approval levels: Define clear criteria for the approval levels so that decisions are escalated properly according to their importance. Ensure the steps are noted: Among the promising methods to facilitate and secure clear and consistent communication for children and their parents and to confirm their choices during the rehabilitation process, the usage of the standard forms and instructions for documentation is prescribed. Fourth, all will be trained and educated sufficiently on the Ringi system by being informed of a great amount of information concerning their responsibilities. And lastly, the Ringi system will be gradually implemented. It will be constantly checked to make sure that it is working well and changed to improve the process. (Ringi System: A Productivity Tool Transforming Decision-Making, 2023).

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that Japanese management practices particularly Kaizen and Ringi can serve as strategic approaches for strengthening workplace harmony within Malaysia's evolving industrial landscape. Kaizen, grounded in continuous and incremental improvement, encourages employees to participate actively in identifying operational inefficiencies and proposing solutions. This participative ethos enhances workflow effectiveness, employee engagement, and a sense of shared responsibility. Similarly, the Ringi system introduces a consensus-oriented decision-making model that promotes transparency and inclusiveness by allowing proposals to be reviewed across several organisational levels. In doing so, Ringi offers a constructive alternative to Malaysia's traditionally hierarchical and centralised decision-making structures.

Collectively, these practices address persistent organisational challenges in Malaysia, including communication barriers, limited employee involvement, and rigid top-down authority patterns. Although recent labour reforms such as the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2020 and the Trade Unions (Amendment) Act 2024 aim to modernise Malaysia's industrial relations framework, structural issues continue to impede effective collaboration. The findings of this study suggest that the incorporation of Kaizen and Ringi can complement these legislative developments by fostering more participatory, communicative, and accountable work environments. However, meaningful adoption requires context-sensitive implementation, strong leadership commitment, and employees who are adequately prepared for behavioural and procedural changes. To support the effective integration of Kaizen and Ringi, Malaysian organisations should prioritise the development of targeted training modules that familiarise employees with key Kaizen tools, including 5S, root cause analysis, and process mapping, while simultaneously introducing the principles and operational stages of the Ringi system. Human resource practitioners, in particular, play a central role by embedding continuous improvement competencies into performance evaluations, leadership development initiatives, and organisational culture-building strategies. Establishing accessible channels for employee feedback such as structured suggestion systems, regular dialogue sessions, or digital platforms can also help normalise upward communication and support more inclusive decision-making practices.

Management consultants can further enhance implementation by conducting organisational readiness assessments and designing phased, culturally attuned integration roadmaps. Pilot projects in selected departments can provide valuable insights into the feasibility and impact of Kaizen and Ringi, allowing organisations to refine their approaches before expanding them more broadly. The use of measurable performance indicators, including improvements in process efficiency, employee engagement, and implementation rates of employee suggestions, will enable organisations to evaluate the effectiveness of these practices and make data-informed adjustments.

From a policy standpoint, the study highlights the importance of embedding principles of continuous improvement and participatory governance into national workforce development frameworks. Government agencies such as HRD Corp and the Public Service Department could strengthen guidelines and training programmes that promote these values. Incentives for organisations that adopt structured improvement systems, along with strategic collaborations between Malaysian institutions and Japanese industry partners, would further facilitate the diffusion of Kaizen and Ringi across sectors. Overall, the structured, gradual, and contextually grounded implementation of Kaizen and Ringi holds significant potential to transform workplace culture in Malaysia. These practices can reduce hierarchical rigidity, enhance communication flows, increase employee satisfaction, and elevate organisational performance. As Malaysia continues to advance its industrial relations reforms, adopting these Japanese management principles represents a viable and impactful strategy for cultivating long-term workplace harmony and sustainable organisational growth.

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## Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interests regarding the publication of the paper.

## Author Contribution

*The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: **study conception and design:** Fadillah Ismail; **literature review:** Fadillah Ismail, Tai Wei Hong; **analysis and interpretation of results:** Fadillah Ismail, Tai Wei Hong; **draft manuscript preparation:** Fadillah Ismail. All authors reviewed the results and approved the final version of the manuscript.*

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