THE ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF HALAL EXECUTIVES IN FOOD MANUFACTURING IN MALAYSIA: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

Nur Shamira Jamil Nasri[1a], Anis Najiha Ahmad[2a*], Yumi Zuhanis Has-Yun Hashim[3a], and Irshad A. Cader[4ab]

[a]International Institute for Halal Research and Training (INHART), International Islamic University Malaysia, Jalan Gombak, 53100 Kuala Lumpur, MALAYSIA.
[b]Globothink, 16, Goldsmith Avenue, Edmondson Park, NSW 2174, AUSTRALIA
E-mail: nshamirajamil@gmail.com[1]
E-mail: anisnajiha@iium.edu.my[2]
E-mail: yumi@iium.edu.my[3]
E-mail: irshad.cader@globothink.com[4]

*Corresponding Author: anisnajiha@iium.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The halal certification application process in Malaysia is not overly complex, it can be smooth and straightforward if guided by competent Halal Executives (HEs) with a strong understanding of the requirements outlined in guidelines and standards such as MS1500:2019, the Malaysian Manual Procedure for Halal Certification 2020 (MPPHM 2020), and the Malaysian Halal Management System 2020 (MHMS 2020). Despite the importance of HEs to the food manufacturing halal system, a gap exists in stakeholders' understanding of their roles and responsibilities. This study addresses this gap by exploring the roles and responsibilities of HEs in halal food manufacturing (HFM), providing practical guidance to support them in their halal industry management role. We employed qualitative analysis to interpret informant narratives and used thematic analysis to analyze the interview data and extract themes. The research method used was qualitative phenomenological research, and the data was collected through an in-depth interview which consisted of 18 informants (practitioners and experts) from food manufacturing companies in Klang Valley and academic institutes. The analysis revealed four themes: (i) training and education, (ii) establishing and sustaining the halal system, (iii) certification management, and (iv) stakeholders' coordination. These findings suggest that HEs are not only responsible for compliance and certification but also serve as facilitators of internal systems and external communication. The results underscore the importance of capacity building and organizational support to empower HEs in maintaining effective halal assurance throughout the supply chain.

Keywords: *Halal executive, Food manufacturing, Qualitative study, Role, Responsibility.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of halal plays a vital role in individuals' decisions when choosing halal food products, and this role is greatly influenced by their level of understanding and personal conviction. Even without halal certification from the authorities, individuals who are confident about their knowledge are free to make assessments (Hassim & Hamid, 2019) and choose food products they believed to be halal (Billah et al., 2020). However, most Muslims today prefer to seek food products with an authorized halal logo (Suki et al., 2018). This preference stems from their awareness and understanding of the complexities of the modern food supply chain, where food ingredients can originate from diverse sources (Yusoff et al., 2015; Ibrahim et al., 2023; Nurshafiqah et al., 2023; Maifah et al., 2022).

Halal certification plays an essential role in ensuring adherence to halal principles in any halal food manufacturing (HFM) company (Talib & Chin, 2018; Muhammad & Sari, 2021). The halal certification process includes thorough inspections from upstream to downstream of the food manufacturing industry to ensure that each step meets the company's halal standards and guidelines (Jais, 2022). Hence, halal certification not only ensures the purity of the product but also provides consumers with confidence that every product produced is safe and guaranteed halal for consumption within the context of Islamic teachings.

In Malaysia, halal executive (HE) plays a crucial role in helping companies comply with the standards and guidelines of the certification authority (Affendi et al., 2022). The presence of HEs as 'front-liners' in HFM companies is crucial in ensuring that the company's halal certification process runs smoothly in accordance with the company's current state and standards required (Ahmad et al., 2017). The presence of knowledgeable HEs with a certain set of skills and positive attitude is a fundamental basis for maintaining the reputation and trust in halal food products (Rosli et al., 2022).

Role refers to an individual's function or position within an organization, reflecting the expectations regarding their duties and contributions toward achieving specific objectives (Kumar et al., 2020). While responsibilities relate to the specific tasks and obligations that an individual must fulfil based on their designated role within the organization (McGrath & Whitty, 2018). Over the past few years, the role of HEs has been increasingly recognized as critical in ensuring the integrity of halal compliance across industries. However, this ambiguity about the HE role and responsibilities often leads to misunderstanding among stakeholders. Without clear guidelines and adequate training, many HEs face difficulties in balancing the food manufacturing

company's operational needs and halal compliance. This situation not only limits the development of HEs but also reduces their functionality and effectiveness in addressing challenges and opportunities in HFM.

Previous studies have explored the roles and competencies of HEs in the industry, including technical skills, legal knowledge, and the challenges faced in ensuring halal compliance within the food supply chain (Hassan et al., 2015; Ahmad et al., 2017; Nizar et al., 2022; Rosli et al., 2022). Recognizing the scarcity of input from individuals with first-hand experience, including HEs and industry experts, this study aims to explore the roles and responsibilities of HEs, focusing on their lived experience and knowledge in the context of food manufacturing companies in Malaysia. While Affendi et al. (2022) examined similar topics through a library research approach, this study adopts a phenomenological qualitative method to provide deeper insights from direct informant perspectives.

2.   METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of halal executives (HEs) regarding their roles and responsibilities within HFM companies. The target demographic comprised HEs from food manufacturing companies located in the Klang Valley, including Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, and Putrajaya. According to data from the Halal Malaysia Directory (2024), a wide range of HFM companies operate in the Klang Valley. These companies vary in size, including both small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and large or multinational corporations (MNCs). A purposive sampling method was employed to recruit HEs from 14 different HFM representing both SMEs and large/MNCs as informants, and three educational institutions between March 2023 and February 2024.

To be included in the sample, informants were required to have at least one year of experience in HFM, to be certified as HEs by JAKIM, to have worked in Halal JAKIM-certified HFM facilities, and to hold the status of halal executive. The job titles, however, varied depending on the company or establishment.

Table 1. Informant's criteria.

Criteria	General	Expert
Industry Sector	HFM companies	HFM companies or academia
Experience Requirement	Minimum of 1 year in HFM	Minimum of 10 years in the halal food industry-related fields

Certification	Certified as Halal Executive by JAKIM	Certified Halal Executive by JAKIM or TTT certification
Workplace Requirement	Employed in JAKIM-certified HFM facilities	Experience in halal-related roles in industry or academia

In this study, a total of 18 informants with experience related to the phenomenon were selected. This number falls within the recommendation range of 5 to 25 participants for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2013). Face-to-face interviews were conducted whenever practical, with online interviews used as an alternative when in-person meetings were not possible.

Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with HEs, managers and researchers to facilitate an in-depth exploration of their experiences. These interviews were guided by a pre-developed question framework designed to elicit detailed responses on various aspects of HEs work in food manufacturing companies. The interview guide is used as a general overview of the topic to ensure it concentrates on a few specific issues connected to the study, although it is not strictly adhered to. These included challenges in implementing and maintaining halal assurance systems, competency requirements, and perceptions of support for halal related functions.

The topic guide was collaboratively developed by the researchers to align with the study's aims. To ensure the quality of the interviews, pre-interviews were conducted with one halal industry experts in the food manufacturing industry who did not participate in this study. Based on the results and feedback, the formal topic guides were adjusted to ensure the clarity and comprehensiveness of key questions.

The following questions were included: (i) 'Can you tell me about yourself and what did you do as HE?' (ii) 'How do you feel about your current role and responsibility at work as a halal executive?' (iii) 'Based on your experience as HE, how did you handle when there is a problem that you cannot handle it alone?' (iv) 'What is the process/journey have you've been thru as HE to be at your competency level right now?'

To ensure trustworthiness in this qualitative study, triangulation, member checking and peer review were employed. These were used respectively to enhance the credibility of the findings, ensure accuracy of informants' responses, and reduce researcher bias while strengthening the study's confirmability.

Before the interviews, researchers fostered a comfortable rapport with informants through polite and respectful greetings, encouraging them to share their thoughts and emotions willingly and readily (Arifin, 2018). Informants were also provided with a concise explanation of the interview's objective, processes, and recording and transcription procedures. In addition, informants are informed that all information will be kept confidential (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023).

The interviews were performed in both Malay and English, depending on informant preference, because not all informants were proficient in English. Each interview lasted between 40 and 50 minutes on average and was recorded using a digital recorder with the consent of the interviewees to ensure the completeness of the data collected. After analyzing each interview, the fresh ideas were evaluated before going on to the next informant.

The 18 informants (halal executives, managers and researcher) transcripts were divided and independently coded into (HE_# & EP_#). Transcriptions of the interviews were read and interpreted numerous times to identify patterns and themes connected to the factors influencing the halal executive's competency. After then, each transcription was thoroughly scrutinised several times. Once this process is complete, the dominant ideas and themes are grouped and assigned a conceptual label in code. The data analysis was conducted using ATLAS.ti Version 24 software.

Thematic data analysis was conducted by identifying key terms or phrases that encapsulated informants' experiences, emotions, and opinions, guided by the "6Rs" framework highlighted by Naeem et al. (2023), which offers a comprehensive structure for interpreting qualitative data. This framework consists of six elements: realness (authenticity and sincerity in responses), richness (depth and detail of information), repetition (patterns and recurring themes), rationale (logical reasoning behind statements), repartee (interactive dialogue and dynamic during interviews), and regal (significance and value of insights shared). This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions. During the coding process, data segments were assigned short phrases or "codes" that summarized their core meanings, followed by the interpretation of emerging themes and the exploration of connections among them to develop a cohesive understanding of the research question.

3.   RESULTS

Data saturation was reached by the 16th interview, as no new information surfaced (Edwards & Holland, 2013). However, two additional

interviews were conducted to confirm saturation and ensure consistency across informants (Cresswell, 2013).

This study included informants from SMEs and large/MNCs and academic institutions. It is evident that most informants responsible for managing the halal system in food manufacturing hold the position of halal executive, followed by managerial roles. Additionally, four informants from academic institutions also serve as advisors and trainers in the halal food industry. In this study, informants who meet the general criteria are labelled as HE_#, while those who meet the expert criteria are labelled as EP_#.

Table 2. Informants Demographics

Informant	Gender	Work experience (years)	Position	Food manufacturing categories (SME/BIG/MNC)
HE_1	Male	7	Executive	SME/ BIG
HE_2	Female	7	Executive	SME
HE_3	Female	5	Manager	SME
HE_4	Female	7	Executive	SME/ MNC
HE_5	Female	7	Executive	MNC
HE_6	Female	5	Senior Executive	SME/ MNC
HE_7	Female	5	Executive	BIG
HE_8	Female	9	Executive	SME
HE_9	Male	8	Executive	SME/ MNC
EP_1	Female	12	Senior Executive	SME /BIG
EP_2	Female	16	Manager	MNC
EP_3	Female	13	Manager	MNC
EP_4	Male	25	Manager	MNC
EP_5*	Male	16	Director	-
EP_6	Male	13	Senior Executive	MNC
EP_7	Female	15	Academician	-
EP_8	Male	14	Academician	-

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| EP_9 | Female | 15 | Academician | - |

Note: HE = general's level; EP = expert's level; *director at an academic institution

The interviewed informants described the HEs' roles as encompassing multiple tasks, including training and education, establishing and sustaining the halal system, certification management, and collaborating with stakeholders. Many informants highlighted their responsibilities as HEs in HFM and expressed challenges in adhering to certain standards/requirements and maintaining the halal system.

Table 3. Themes and subthemes associated with HE role in HFM

Theme	Sub theme	Theme description
1. Providing training and education	1.1 Conduct Internal Training for Employees 1.2 Ensure Halal Awareness	This theme refers to the role of HEs in enhancing knowledge and skills related to halal compliance.
2. Establishing and Sustaining the Halal System	2.1 Internal Halal Control System (IHCS)/ Halal Assurance System (HAS) development and Implementation 2.2 Monitoring and Auditing 2.3 Documentation and Record-Keeping	This theme emphasizes HEs responsibility to strategize the development, implementation and maintenance of a robust IHCS/ HAS in HFM.
3. Certification Management	3.1 Application and Renewal Processes 3.2 Compliance Enforcement	This theme highlights the administrative and operational responsibilities of HEs in managing halal certification.
4. Stakeholders Coordination	4.1 Negotiator 4.2 Collaboration with Stakeholders' 4.3 Engagement with Certifying Bodies	This theme addresses the collaborative aspect of HEs role, requiring effectives relationships with various halal industry stakeholders to ensure smooth halal operations.

HE, Halal Executive; HFM, Halal Food Manufacturing.

3.1 *Providing Training and Education*

The role of HE is a crucial role because not only they have to ensure that HAS is functioning well in their factory but they also are being rely as someone who carry the wisdom of halalan toyyiban. Hence, it is the responsibility of HE to deliver the knowledge with full of wisdom, whether directly or indirectly. At the same time, as someone regards as a representative of halal, they must not only be cautious about their actions but also know how to manage themselves, as they embody the company's halal image.

3.1.1 *Conduct Internal Training for Employees.*

One of the key insights from the informants was the need for specialized training programs tailored by HE to different departments. As EP_3 explained, training is an essential tool for ensuring compliance with Halal procedures across the company's outlets and central kitchens:

"In (company name), we have more than 300 outlets and several Central Kitchens (CKs). For example, as Halal Malaysia, I need to ensure that all our CKs and outlets comply with Halal procedures. One of the ways to comply is to do training."(EP_3)

A particularly important aspect raised by HE_7 was the role of training in educating non-Halal-focused departments, such as marketing, on the legal and ethical implications of Halal compliance:

"For example, what I do at (company name) is I call the marketing department to conduct training, like Halal awareness training, but I focus on the marketing aspect. For example, according to the Trade Description Act, if your outlet is not yet Halal certified, you cannot say things like 'Let's have Iftar at (outlet name) during Ramadan.' You can't do that."(HE_7)

3.1.2 *Ensure Halal Awareness*

Halal awareness is a vital responsibility for HEs, as they play a central role in promoting Halal understanding and ensuring that all employees, regardless of their background or position, are well-versed in Halal principles and practices. The importance of these campaigns is underscored by the insights shared by HEs, who emphasized the need for comprehensive, company-wide initiatives to raise awareness about Halal standards.

Informant EP_2 clearly explained the broader role of HEs beyond handling applications, stressing that their responsibility extends to actively

promoting Halal awareness across the organization:

> *"Actually, for a Halal executive, it's not limited to just handling applications. A Halal executive also needs to be involved in promoting awareness among workers, everyone, and the staff within the company."(EP_2)*

Moreover, the challenges associated with diverse workforces, such as those involving foreign workers, require tailored approaches to awareness campaigns. Informant HE_1 highlighted this challenge and the need to educate foreign workers who may not have prior knowledge of Halal principles:

> *"For example, in the company I work for, we have foreign workers. So, my task is to make these foreigners understand what Halal is. They need to understand what Halal awareness is."(HE_1)*

3.2 *Establishing and Sustaining the Halal System*

The halal system in food manufacturing refers to the system that adhere to Islamic dietary laws and principles in the production, processing, and handling of food products from farm to fork. In Malaysia, all halal certified food manufacturing needs to follow the general guideline that are in MS 1500:2019. Many people mistakenly believe that the responsibility of a Halal Executive is limited to the application process for halal certification. Once halal certification is obtained, the Halal Executive's job is to ensure that every batch and every item produced remains halal, maintaining compliance at every stage. From the beginning of production all the way to the customer, the Halal Executive ensures that halal standards are consistently applied, reinforcing the importance of continuous monitoring and control.

3.2.1 *Develop and Implement The Internal Halal Control System (IHCS)/ Halal Assurance System (HAS)*

Internal Halal Control System (IHCS) (for small and micro industry) and Halal Assurance System (HAS) (for large and medium industry) is a structured and systematic approach implemented by organizations to ensure continuous compliance with halal requirements throughout the supply chain. It is designed to maintain the integrity of halal products by incorporating halal policies, procedures, and monitoring mechanisms (MHMS, 2020). Developing and implementing IHCS/HAS is a core responsibility of HEs, ensuring that Halal compliance is maintained throughout the entire production chain. The informants highlighted the complexities involved in this process, emphasizing the need for a deep understanding of the entire Halal system, from raw materials to final products.

Informant HE_4 stressed the importance of comprehending the entire Halal chain, describing it as a "farm-to-fork" process that requires more than just knowledge of Halal certification:

> *"Halal is about the chain from farm to fork. If you only know about Halal certification without understanding the process from start to end, you may not fully control the Halal system."(HE_4)*

Another key competency highlighted was the ability to establish standards and monitoring mechanisms for the company. As HE_1 noted:

> *"One of the benchmarks for a Halal executive's competency is whether they can set a standard or monitoring limit for the company's use."(HE_1)*

The practical challenges of implementing a Halal system were further elaborated by Informant EP_4, who discussed the process of creating new Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and adapting to varying manufacturing environments:

> *"When Halal Executives (HE) implement a new system, they will have to develop new SOPs. Next, you would deal with equipment. Moving from one manufacturing site to another means encountering different equipment. For instance, different approaches may be needed for performing sertu on various equipment. This, for example, adds to the challenges of being a Halal Executive."(EP_4)*

3.2.2 *Monitoring and Auditing*

Monitoring and auditing are essential components of ensuring that Halal standards are consistently met and maintained throughout the food manufacturing process. The interviews revealed that HEs play a crucial role in overseeing compliance and participating in audits, but they do not do so in isolation. Effective monitoring and auditing require teamwork, coordination, and systematic processes to ensure that the Halal system remains robust and transparent.

Informant HE_8 emphasized that working in Halal compliance is not a solo task but a collaborative effort. This point was underscored when they stated:

> *"Working in halal isn't always a one-person job. There's a team. Like I mentioned, there's a purchasing team. Ideally, the purchasing team handles procurement, and we just monitor, like a coordinator. It can't be done alone. If done alone, it'll be slow. For small industries, it's okay. If there are only one or two raw materials, it's manageable. But if there are many, it's impossible to*

handle alone."(HE_8)

In addition to general monitoring, HEs are also responsible for participating in and handling audits, which are essential for validating compliance with Halal standards. Informant EP_2 explained:

"As a Halal Executive, it's not just about handling halal applications. We also have to attend audits. When we submit an application, the auditor will conduct an audit, including a documentation audit. From there, sometimes we have to justify certain issues."(EP_2)

Furthermore, Informant HE_4 mentioned their direct involvement in various types of audits:

"I also handle JAKIM audits, internal audits, and surveillance audits."(HE_4)

3.2.3 *Documentation and Record-Keeping*

Effective documentation and record-keeping are critical aspects of a Halal executive's role, ensuring that all processes comply with Halal standards and can be verified during audits or inspections. The importance of thorough documentation is evident in the experiences shared by HEs, who emphasized that accurate records are essential for maintaining compliance and facilitating smooth audits.

Informant HE_8 discussed the organizational positioning of HEs and their access to important documents:

"Halal Executive should be placed under the technical department as well, under QAQC. So, they are part of the technical department. This way, they can access all the documents. Because Halal starts from raw materials all the way to finished goods. The process they need to control starts from purchasing, R&D, to delivery."(HE_8)

Additionally, Informant EP_1 underlined the critical role of knowledge in documentation and record keeping:

"As a Halal Executive, you need to know everything: every process, every document. When auditors or authorities come for an audit, they will definitely ask you questions. If you lack the knowledge, it reflects poorly on you. So, it's really important for us to know both Shariah and technical knowledge."(EP_1)

Furthermore, Informant HE_1 spoke about the creation and use of checklists and forms:

"I have many checklists and forms that I've created. Some checklists are registered and made official for the company's use, while others I use internally."(HE_1)

3.3 *Halal Certification Management*

Based on MHMS 2020, the responsibility for managing halal certification in a company lies with the Halal Executive (HE), as they are individuals who have undergone training and examinations in Malaysia's halal certification management and are recognized by the Halal Professional Board, JAKIM. This study found that the roles and responsibilities of HEs in certification management include handling application and renewal processes, engaging with certifying bodies, and enforcing compliance.

3.3.1 *Application and Renewal Processes*

The process of obtaining and renewing Halal certification is a critical responsibility for HEs, ensuring that all products and outlets within a company meet the required standards for Halal compliance. The Halal executive's role in managing these applications and renewals is fundamental to maintaining the company's Halal certification status, as it directly impacts product sales and business operations.

Informant HE_7 shared their experience with managing Halal certification applications for multiple outlets, describing how they started the process from scratch due to a lack of valid certifications for most outlets:

"When there's a central kitchen, the factory must first obtain halal certification before the outlet can apply for halal certification. So, when I joined, the factory had already received halal certification. My role was to handle the halal application for the outlets. At that time, there were 28 outlets, but only one had a valid halal certificate. The rest had none. So basically, I started everything from scratch. Starting from scratch was actually easier because we revamped the application and reorganized the submission by grouping. For halal applications, we know that for new outlet applications, the submission is done by zone, with a maximum of 10 outlets per application. So, I suggested to the company to apply in groups of 10, as we had 28 outlets. We started with 9 for the first group, then 9 for the second group, and continued gradually."(HE_7)

Informant HE_3 discussed the importance of timely planning and the Halal executive's role in ensuring that new products are Halal-certified before they reach the market:

> *"In the industry I'm in now, any product that's going to be released must have halal certification. Without halal certification, the product won't be sold. This will cause losses to the company. For example, there's a new product coming out but it's not ready yet. Let's say it's currently January and it's set to release in March. A competent Halal Executive can already plan the necessary actions. They'll know when to submit the application, when the audit will be conducted, and by the time production starts, the halal certificate should already be in place."(HE_3)*

3.3.2 *Compliance Enforcement*

Compliance enforcement is one of the core responsibilities of HEs, ensuring that all stages of food production, from sourcing to consumption, meet the stringent requirements of Halal and toyyibah standards. This includes not only overseeing the certification process but actively enforcing internal policies, procedures, and training programs to guarantee continuous compliance throughout the production chain.

Informant EP_6 emphasized the significance of a Halal executive's role in maintaining 100% compliance with Halal standards across the entire production process:

> *"If we don't take care of it and just rely on the authorities, who may only audit once a year or conduct monitoring every two years, it may not be enough to ensure that something is truly halal and toyyibah. That's why the role of a Halal Executive is so important. They are fully responsible for ensuring that every step of the process, from purchasing, processing, packaging, and so on, up to the customer, is 100% halal. Halal cannot be partly halal and partly not halal, or mixed. The positive must not mix with the negative in the concept of halal. Everything must be halal for the entire chain to be considered halal toyyibah."(EP_6)*

Informant HE_7 further illustrates how HEs take a proactive approach to compliance by identifying gaps in operational procedures and establishing new standard operating procedures (SOPs):

> *"For example, previously, there was no color-coding SOP for chopping boards or knives, and there was no clear guideline for the arrangement of items in the chiller and freezer. So, when halal is involved, we review the operational SOPs*

and advise on the necessary changes related to food safety. From these SOPs, we create templates and conduct internal halal audits. These audits also cover food safety aspects because we don't have a separate food safety team. While doing the internal halal audits, we also conduct halal training for all staff. A key shortcoming in companies before this was that they didn't require all employees to take a typhoid vaccination, and some employees had worked for years without it. This highlights the importance of having someone with the right knowledge to address these basic issues. So, the basics like typhoid vaccination, food handling, and halal training were the first things I tackled."(HE_7)

3.4   Stakeholders' Coordination

From the interview, we found that the Halal Executive also serves as a coordinator between the company, consumers, and regulators. This includes acting as a negotiator and participating in planning and implementing collaborations or engagements with stakeholders to enhance the company's halal branding.

3.4.1   Negotiator

In the food manufacturing industry, HEs play a crucial role as negotiators, acting as intermediaries between the company, regulatory bodies like JAKIM, and other stakeholders. Their ability to balance compliance with Halal requirements while safeguarding the company's interests is a key part of their responsibilities. Effective negotiation ensures that both the company's objectives and Halal certification standards are met.

Informant HE_6 describes the multifaceted role of a Halal executive as an intermediary who must not only ensure compliance with Halal standards but also communicate the rationale behind these requirements to management:

"As a Halal Executive, you are the intermediary, and you cannot be biased. First, we must ensure that we comply with the requirements. We need to make sure we follow the requirements closely without compromising the company's interests. In this role, we must understand how to explain to the management why certain requirements exist, why they were implemented, and what the expectations are. We also need to teach them how to fulfil those requirements. It's not just about stating what needs to be done, but also how it should be done. We all need to share this responsibility."(HE_6)

Informant HE_4 further highlights the negotiator's aspect of the Halal executive's role, explaining that HEs must navigate between complying with JAKIM's regulations and meeting the company's needs:

"Halal Executive must follow all the rules and guidelines set by Jakim. However, at the same time, you need to be fair to the company that hired you. How you maintain that fairness is up to the Halal Executive. It's about how you negotiate with your boss to follow the rules and guidelines, and how you communicate with Jakim about the company's demands and requirements."(HE_4)

Informant HE_5 describes how HEs often take the lead in communicating new requirements from authorities, further emphasizing their role as negotiators between the company and external stakeholders:

"Whenever there's something new in the halal industry, halal markets, or halal requirements, HEs are always the frontliners because they typically receive all this information from the authorities. Since they are the frontliners, they need to communicate all this information to the management. In order to execute effectively, they must ensure that what is being produced complies with the requirements."(HE_5)

3.4.2 Collaboration With Halal Industry Stakeholders'

Halal industry stakeholders may consist of halal-related authority bodies, business entities, NGOs, and consumers. Stakeholder collaboration is a vital component of a Halal Executive's role, encompassing both internal and external engagement to ensure comprehensive Halal compliance and promote Halal values.

Informant EP_2 emphasizes the proactive approach required in fostering external partnerships:

"Then, we also need to look for opportunities for collaboration. For example, for this company, we need to explore what other opportunities we have for collaboration externally, whether with JAKIM, JAIS, or others. We must always seek collaboration opportunities. In a way, we are also promoting to the public that our company is halal and practices halal. Moreover, we are doing something to elevate the status of halal."(EP_2)

Informant HE_9 further underscores the dual role of HEs in handling both internal and external collaborations:

"For halal alone, we handle both internal and external engagements. Internally, it involves halal certification and engaging with staff to raise awareness within the company. Externally, it includes collaboration with agencies like JAIS,

JAKIM, and others."(HE_9)

The It has been widely, discussed that the HFM sector in Malaysia faces increasing challenges as the industry grows and the demand for halal-certified products rises. This changing landscape, shaped by stricter regulations, evolving consumer expectations, complexity of modern food ingredients and supply chain. To help Malaysia's food manufacturing industry address these demands, the roles of HEs must be further analysed and strengthened. As a crucial part of the HFM system, HEs hold significant responsibility in ensuring that companies comply with all requirements outlined by authorized agencies. By strategically developing the roles and responsibilities of HEs in food manufacturing can further boost the productivity and quality of halal industry operations.

3.4.3   *Engagement with Certifying Bodies*

Engagement with certifying bodies is a pivotal responsibility for HEs, as it involves regular communication with regulatory authorities to ensure compliance with Halal standards and to address any challenges faced during the certification process. HEs must navigate complex regulations and advocate for their company's needs, often balancing business objectives with certification requirements.

Informant HE_6 highlighted a critical challenge in the certification process related to production timelines and Halal certification, particularly when businesses face a gap between operational readiness and certification availability:

> *"For example, when we want to use a production line for a product application, they say we can only apply after three months of running. But how can we run without the halal logo? At the same time, we need to understand that from a business and sales perspective, we can't proceed until we get the halal certificate because customers won't trust it. They still want the halal logo. So, at that point, we go to the authority to discuss our issue. During that time, we share the situation and actions taken to find a feasible solution for the business."(HE_6)*

Another informant, HE_5, highlighted the ongoing challenges in ensuring compliance with not only Halal standards but also other regulatory requirements such as labelling and food hygiene, which are intertwined with Halal certification:

> *"Every day, there are a lot of issues with materials, or sometimes you change the recipe, and it's often related to labelling. When we talk about halal, it's also*

connected to KKM and MOH requirements regarding labelling. Halal requirements also refer to the Malaysia Food Act and food hygiene standards. So, you cannot avoid these regulations."(HE_5)

Furthermore, Informant HE_6 provided insight into the ongoing dialogue necessary when certification requirements are perceived as impractical or impossible to fulfil:

"At the same time, for the requirements, if there are any that are too impractical or impossible for the company to fulfil, we can't just give up. We can't say, 'I can't do it because we can't fulfil the requirement.' We need to constantly discuss with the authority, explain our challenges, and seek their input. Communication is the key."(HE_6)

The role of a Halal Executive also involves a delicate balance between ensuring that the company complies with Halal standards set by authorities, while also advocating for the company's best interests. As mediators between external regulatory bodies and internal company management, HEs play a pivotal role in bridging the gap between compliance and practicality.

Informant HE_6 articulates this responsibility effectively:

"As a Halal Executive, you are the intermediary, and you cannot be biased. First, we must ensure that we comply with the requirements. We need to make sure we follow the requirements closely without compromising the company's interests. In this role, we must understand how to explain to the management why certain requirements exist, why they were implemented, and what the expectations are. We also need to teach them how to fulfil those requirements. It's not just about stating what needs to be done, but also how it should be done. We all need to share this responsibility."(HE_6)

Informant HE_4 further elaborates on the Halal Executive's balancing act between adherence to Halal regulations and company needs:

"Halal Executive must follow all the rules and guidelines set by Jakim. However, at the same time, you need to be fair to the company that hired you. How you maintain that fairness is up to the Halal Executive. It's about how you negotiate with your boss to follow the rules and guidelines, and how you communicate with Jakim about the company's demands and requirements."(HE_4)

Additionally, Informant HE_5 underscores the Halal Executive's proactive role as a frontliner in handling new developments in Halal requirements:

"Whenever there's something new in the halal industry, halal markets, or halal requirements, HEs are always the frontliners because they typically receive all this information from the authorities. Since they are the frontliners, they need to communicate all this information to the management. In order to execute effectively, they must ensure that what is being produced complies with the requirements."(HE_5)

4. DISCUSSIONS

The roles and responsibilities of a Halal Executive are often misunderstood by certain parties, leading to their placement in positions that do not align with their expertise (Hilmi et al., 2021). Some are even burdened with tasks unrelated to their role. This misunderstanding stems from the perception that a Halal Executive's job is only to handling halal certification applications. The finding shows that trainings and education, establishing and sustaining the halal system, certification management and stakeholders' coordination part of the rules and responsibility of HEs.

4.1 *Providing Training And Education*

Training and education are essential and effective elements for improving employee performance (Rivaldo & Nabella, 2023; Arulsamy et al., 2023; Gidey & Perumal, 2023). Previous literature included that providing training and education for employees as one of the major roles of HEs (Rosli et al., 2022). Meanwhile, this study proves that HEs also play a role in providing focused training and education tailored to the needs and situations of every department involved, either directly or indirectly, in halal compliance within the manufacturing company. This study also found that different levels within an organization present distinct logistical and operational challenges for HEs (Lee at al., 2010). This aligns with the findings of Rodriguez & Walters (2017), who highlighted that the level and variety of training and education inputs in a company increase as the organizational level grows. Thus, for HEs to conduct training and education for employees, they need to possess a specific set of competencies (Rosli et al., 2022). In addition to training and education, continuing professional development (CPD) are highlighted as a substantial and structured system for professional working individuals (Friedman, 2023; Mlambo et al., 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2020).

4.2 *Establishing And Sustaining The Halal System*

In this study, it is found that the role of HEs in establishing and maintaining a robust Halal system is critical to ensuring continuous compliance with Halal standards in food manufacturing. One of their key responsibilities

is the development and implementation of a Halal Assurance System (HAS), which requires a comprehensive understanding of the entire production process, from raw materials to finished products (Rosli et al., 2022). This aligns with previous studies highlighting the importance of a complete "farm-to-fork" approach to Halal compliance (Ahmad et al., 2018; Harsanto et al., 2024; Yunan et al., 2020). Monitoring and auditing also form essential components of their role, as these processes ensure Halal standards are consistently met. Besides, the result reflex the HEs role in creating robust halal system and benchmark to ensure all the processes, from sourcing to distribution, comply with the halal requirement. Additionally, the importance of thorough documentation and record-keeping is underscored by Brooks, (2021), who highlighted the need for accurate records to support audits and inspections. Thus, to ensures transparency, smooth audits process, and continuous compliance supports across all stages of production in food manufacturing, HEs must have access to all relevant documents (Stevens & Pickering, 2010). These allows them to understand both technical and shariah requirements and maintain accurate records through checklists and forms. However, this task should be handled by the company's halal team and not solely rely on the HEs, as it may reduce their productivity in fulfilling other responsibilities (Groot et al., 2022).

4.3   *Halal Certification Management*

As outlined in the Malaysian Halal Management System (MHMS) 2020, the management of halal certification is one of the core responsibilities of HEs. Moreover, certification has been found to influence productive efficiency and the total quality management of a company (Vivanco & Bernardo, 2023; Lepisto et al., 2021). One of the key areas of certification management is the application and renewal process, where HEs must ensure that all outlets and products meet halal standards. The study findings highlight the critical role of HEs in manufacturing, particularly in planning ahead for certification requirements and aligning them with production timelines to avoid delays that could negatively impact on the company's product launches and sales. Subsequently, HEs role also to engage with the certifying bodies and advocating for their company's interests while ensuring that the company's practices align with halal regulations. In addition, company's operations can remain aligned with both halal and food safety (Toyyib) requirements and standard through the enforcement of compliance in HFM by their HEs. These actions ensure compliance as a matter of internal responsibility and continuous improvement for halal management system from procurement to final product delivery.

4.4   *Stakeholders' Coordination*

Effective stakeholders' coordination can strengthen an organization's

position and system implementation as it promotes better cooperation, solutions to challenges, and the transfer of information and knowledge (Alqaisi, 2018; AFI, 2019). As a frontliner, HEs plays a crucial role in staying updated on new changes, information and knowledge in the halal industry and communicating these to the management team. Their position as a mediator between the agencies and company can be an added value for effective communication. Concurrently, HEs is a cornerstone for negotiating a fair solution between company and regulatory bodies without compromising on halal integrity. Moreover, HEs roles required strong communication and educational skills to translate complex regulations into actionable steps for the company to follow. Besides, HEs should seek external collaboration opportunities, aiming to go beyond compliance by becoming an ambassador in promoting Halal values to amplify awareness. This, indirectly, can enhance the company's public trust, credibility and loyalty (Bimpong & David, 2024; Suhaemi, 2021).

4.5   *Limitation Of The Study*

This study had several limitations. First, the research only focuses on the HEs from HFM companies. Second, most of the interviews were conducted through online meetings due to the informant's unavailability and preference, therefore it was unclear if the informants were able to express their perspectives and thoughts as in face-to-face interviews. Lastly, this study may not fully represent the experiences of HEs in other regions of Malaysia, as it was limited to those working in HFM companies located in the Klang Valley.

4.6   *Recommendations*

Future studies should consider including HEs from other halal certification schemes such as cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, food premises, etc. In addition, human resources executives should also be included as informants to explore their perspectives on the role and responsibilities of HEs, and to further emphasize the importance of these roles within organizations. It is also recommended to involve informants from various geographic areas, including rural or less industrialized states. Conducting similar research in other areas may help uncover context-specific challenges, cultural differences, or organizational practices, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the national halal ecosystem.

5.   CONCLUSION

Competent HEs play essential roles in developing and maintaining the halal system in their respective HFM. This study recognized the discrete but

divers roles and responsibilities of the halal executive in HFM companies in Malaysia. Additionally, competent HEs were able to demonstrate an excellent understanding of their duties, as well as facing challenges throughout the process of preserving and improving the halal compliance. This study emphasizes the hand-on nature of halal executive's role in HFM to ensure that halal and toyyiban practices are embedded in daily operations.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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