



Research Paper

## Employee Engagement: The Now And The Prospect

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**ABSTRACT:** The need to optimally explore employee engagement has been a topical issue for both the industry and academia. This development has increased the quest to understand employee engagement and inherently, necessitated the need for this study. This study has observed the paucity of empirical evidence with a core focus on employee engagement, hence, addresses employee engagement as its core focus, this is in contrast to other studies which have simply examined employee engagement as a variable against other organisational factors, hence, the study provides a unique insight to understanding the concept of employee engagement for organisations' that are stirred up to the activation and optimization of employees' engagement as a tool to gain strategic and sustainable advantages. The study was qualitative in nature; it explored relevant related literature and narrowed its scope to examine the antecedent of employee engagement, forms of employee engagement, critique of employee engagement, the social exchange theory perspective to employee engagement, and prospect. The study through analysed literature discovered that the increasing interest in employee engagement in both the industry and academia positions employee engagement as a competitive and strategic necessity for optimal performance of organisations in this present time. Hence, postulate that employee engagement practices should be prioritized and actively engaged as a core policy philosophy and culture in organisations and effectively supported by top management for it to yield a competitive and sustainable advantage.

**KEYWORDS:** Employee engagement, Social exchange theory, Cognitive engagement, Behavioural engagement, Emotional engagement.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement (EE) was first captured in an article on “engagement and disengagement at work” by William Kahn (Kahn, 1990). In recent times, EE is a high-interest issue for organisations globally, as change is becoming unpredictable and competition is increasing; organisations are searching for ways to increase productivity, improve client service, reduce organisational turnover and absenteeism, and gain higher profits (Masson, Royal, Agnew & Fine, 2008; Wollard & Shuck, 2011), EE is currently the core tool to achieving these goals.

In a globalised world that is subject to constant change and competition, leaders of organisations have been required to do more with less, to succeed in their marketplaces; EE is seen as an important component of “doing more with less”; it has been associated with enhanced levels of productivity, improved client service, lessened organisational turnover and absenteeism, and higher profits (Masson et al. 2008; Wollard & Shuck, 2011). EE is a significant business issue for organisations who desire to take their business to tomorrow's competitive landscape; organisations are increasingly required to be swift to explore advantageous opportunities and manage threats (Sriram, 2012), and this makes the utilisation of employees who optimize discretionary effort a necessity (Amah & Sese, 2018).

EE connotes employees' involvement, productivity, motivation, satisfaction, and passion for work (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002; Wollard & Shuck, 2011). EE also connotes a heightened emotional, social, spiritual, intellectual, and behavioural relationship employees possess for their task, organisation, manager, or coworkers which influence the application of discretionary effort to their job (Kahn, 1990; Gibbons, 2006).

There is extant studies on EE, these studies have canvassed that EE notably decreases turnover (Shuck, Reio & Rocco, 2011), enhance performance, advance productivity, motivate behaviours, enhance affective and continuance commitment, increase discretionary effort, increase profit, and advance customer service (Richman, 2006; Fleming & Asplund, 2007; Rich, LePine & Crawford, 2010; Christian, Garza & Slaughter, 2011). While these advantages are evident, the studies that have reported these results are majorly focused in western context (Rich et al. 2010; Wollard & Shuck, 2011), which is supported by the analysis that EE is a western-centric concept (Shokunbi, 2016); nonetheless, it is interesting to note that studies outside the above geographical context are springing up (Amah, 2018; Amah & Sese, 2018) and its mostly due to the facts that organisations generally strive to mirror and pace the best standards in their industry, hence the need for this study.

The study aims to provide a qualitative insight to understanding the theme of EE for organisations' that are stirred up to the activation and optimization of employees' engagement as a tool to gain strategic and sustainable advantages.

The remaining sections in this paper address the following headings in achieving its aim; the antecedent of EE, forms of EE, a critique of EE, the social exchange theory perspective to EE, conclusion and prospect.

## **II. ANTECEDENT OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

Studies have postulated that the antecedents to engagement must be observed in other to fully optimise an engaged workforce (Saks, 2006; Wollard & Shuck, 2011). Notwithstanding the paucity of empirical studies on the antecedent of EE, Kahn, (1990); Saks, (2006) observe the following antecedent; job characteristics, recognition and rewards, perceived supervisor and organisational support, distributive and procedural justice (Kahn, 1990). Job characteristics (i.e. skill range, job distinctiveness, task importance, autonomy, and feedback) that offer challenging work, utilization of different skills, self discretion, and the privilege to make significant contributions provide psychological meaningfulness to employees (Hackman & Oldham, 1980; Kahn, 1992). Kahn (1990) posits that employees vary in their engagement due to their interpretations of the reward and recognition they receive from a task. With regards to perceived organisational and supervisor support, Kahn (1990) observes that supportive and trusting interpersonal relationships, and supportive management, enhanced psychological safety. Distributive and procedural justice must be predictable and consistent; distributive justice connotes an employees' perception of fairness to decision outcomes, while procedural justice denotes the interpreted fairness of the means and procedures utilized to establish resource quantity and distribution (Rhoades, Eisenberger & Armeli, 2001; Colquitt, 2001).

Shuck, Reio and Rocco (2011) empirically examined a series of antecedents, which includes affective commitment, work fit, and psychological climate, to comprehend how they might influence EE. Affective commitment connotes an emotional connection between an employee and his work (Saks, 2006; Macey & Schneider, 2008), which has a significant influence on productivity, turnover, satisfaction, and task-related behaviours and attitudes (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Good work fit was observed to motivate cognitive and behavioural employees' engagement to their organisation, hence, enhancing the organisational performance (Hoffman & Woehr, 2006), psychological meaningfulness (Kahn, 1990; Resick, Baltes & Shantz, 2007), and passions to actualise their tasks (Hater et al., 2002). Brown and Leigh (1996); D'Amato and Zijlstra (2007) assert that a positive psychological climate is significantly related to increased EE.

The critic to these antecedent states that it lacks significance in practice, theory, and research as they mostly result from hypotheses testing studies which are considered abstract and general (Shokunbi, 2016), nonetheless, its antecedent is tolerably, relatively acceptable, and arguably empirical for a relatively new concept.

## **III. FORMS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

### **III.I Cognitive Engagement**

Cognitive engagement captures the apparent significance or importance employees attach to the task/job, to such an extent that the job moves toward becoming internalised to the self and characterises who the employee is (Cardon, Wincent & Singh, 2009; Vallerand & Houliort, 2003). Employee cognitive engagement denotes one's psychological presence and focus at work (Kahn, 1990, 1992; Rothbard, 2001). Engagement is in a moderately stable cognitive state where an employee is psychologically present and focused at work and allied activities, and this has been observed to possess a satisfying and positive effect (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma & Bakker, 2002).

Cognitively engaged employees will invest and harness their selves when carrying out their jobs. In contrast, cognitively disengaged employees have a propensity to detach or uncouple their selves from the job mentally. Cognitive engagement involves two factors; absorption and attention (Rothbard, 2001). Absorption alludes to the intensity of focus and immersion that one encounters when working, and employees who are absorbed would be profoundly fascinated and not easily distracted by different activities. Attention pertains to the number of cognitive resources, including concentration and psychic energy, that an employee spends

thinking about work, and can be thought of as a finite cognitive resource that employees can allocate in various ways (Kahneman, 1973; Gardner, Dunham, Cummings & Pierce, 1989). Attention articulates the number of cognitive resources utilised and deals with the quantity of such cognitive efforts (Rothbard, 2001). Absorption entails an intense level of concentration and immersion in one's work and relates to the quality of cognitive endeavours and interest in work.

According to the identity perspective employees will invest their cognitive attention and time in a role they find pleasurable and important, because it furnishes them with a source of self-esteem and self-actualisation (Kanungo, 1979; Lobel, 1991; Rothbard & Edwards, 2003). Also, based on the utilitarian perspective, individuals tend to put additional time and exertion in roles that they find pleasurable and enjoyable because of basic hedonistic inclinations (McAllister, 1953; Vallerand et al., 2003); subsequently, these employees will have greater absorption compared to those without such passion.

### **III.II Behavioural Engagement**

Behavioural engagement is an adaptive behaviour projected to serve an organisational purpose (Macey & Schneider, 2008). This engagement form is perceived as an observable behaviour in the work environment and involves innovative behaviours, initiative, proactive behaviours, going beyond what might otherwise be expected (Jonnie, 2009).

This viewpoint is unswerving from Kahn's (1990) position on the behavioural manifestation of engagement. Kahn specifically emphasised the adaptive requirements of modern organisations and asserted that engaged employees can adapt, take the initiative and be responsive in ever-changing circumstances. Kahn (1990); Maslach and Leiter (2008); Saks (2008) place a caveat on the conception of discretionary effort, and argue that behavioural engagement denotes how effective employees express themselves vigilantly and competently in their roles and are "psychologically present", rather than the postulation of doing above expectation, hence, the employee dedication to remaining with the organisation, notwithstanding the probability that they may be approached by other employers.

Behavioural engagement is more achievable under certain conditions; which connotes that the management under which employees function and the extent of trust in the workplace is essential to their engagement levels (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Although the management does not have full control over employee behavioural engagement, they can hire an employee who possesses the potential to be engaged and create an environment in which these employees are inclined to optimize engagement, hence, behavioural engagement can be divided into individual behaviours and behaviour of others (i.e. coworkers and supervisors; workplace activities) which influence an employee's behaviour at work (Paul, 2013).

### **III.III Emotional Engagement**

Emotional engagement connotes employees' feelings and attitudes towards the organisation and its leaders. Emotionally engaged employees possess a feeling of pride in their task/job and organisation; hence, employees who emotionally connect positively with an organisation possess an ownership mentality and are dedicated to delivering superior performance (Robert, 2011; Dale, 2012). Emotionally engaged employees are enthusiastic and excited at work, and their motive is not centered on the paychecks or the next promotion, they care about the organisation and strive to actualize its goals (Bishop, Scott & Burroughs, 2000; Lewis, 2011; Dale, 2012; Dorothea, 2013). Conventional strategies for recruiting and retaining employees focused on practical rewards (i.e. increase in remuneration, bonuses or flexible working hours), however, it's emotional-based personal relationships that possess the greatest influence, causing emotionally engaged employees to optimise work performance, stay in their organisation and operate as promoters for their organisation (Dale, 2012).

Employee emotional engagement is the extent employees value, enjoy, and believe in their tasks/jobs, managers, teams, and organisations; employee emotional engagement is not limited to work-happiness; rather, emotional engagement is shown by an employee's commitment and connectedness level to their organisation (Dale, 2012). It is quantified by an employee's zeal and enthusiasm to advocate their organisation as a firm to carry out business.

Employees' emotional engagement is majorly driven by the organisation's activities as a whole and their supervisors in particular, hence, supervisors who encourage positive emotions to advance a significant sense of satisfaction; get top satisfaction ratings. Conversely, when supervisors evoke negative emotions in employees, their satisfaction ratings are below average (May, Gilson & Harter, 2004; Mendes & Stander, 2011; Dale, 2012).

## **IV. CRITIQUE OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

Despite the obvious success of EE in gaining significant attention in both the industry and academia, there is a range of critiques for EE that must be noted.

The first critique for EE is the ambiguous or overlapping nature in its definition. There are lots of juxtaposed definitions of EE (Harter, Schmidt & Keyes, 2002; MacLeod & Clarke, 2009); while this is revealed in literature, there are recurrent themes that feature in these definitions, and that is the advocating niche for unifying EE theme.

The second critique of EE is the paucity of standardised measures. Different authors use different factors; Fine, Horowitz and Weigler (2010) calibrate EE in three factors, which are satisfaction, commitment, and discretionary effort. The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) evaluates employees' engagement in three dimensions; absorption, dedication, and vigour (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003, 2004; Salanova, Augt & Peiro, 2005). The Aon Hewitt EE Scale (AHEES) measures EE with three key components, say, stay and strive (Markos & Sridevi, 2010; Dash, 2013). These conflicting evaluation scale questions the validity of their result. Nonetheless, organizations should customize their EE scale with regard to the peculiarities of their task/work environment.

The third critique for EE is the general implied assumption that employees seek engagement (Guest, 2014). Evidently, in most literature, there is almost a normative assumption that they are engaged. Some employees are more inclined to engagement for the following reasons; individual differences (proactivity and conscientiousness, personal characteristics, self-efficacy), differing orientations to work, priority to work-life balance (Guest, 2014). Employees who notice some advantages in engagement will not be reluctant in been engaged; hence, there are also cases of "engagement deficit" (Guest, 2014).

The fourth critique for EE is that strategies to EE focus on the advantages to the organisation, but offers no return to employees (Guest, 2014). EE is targeted at how willing an employee seeks to apply discretionary effort in actualizing goals important to the organisation (Keenoy, 2014). Any strategy that seeks to promote EE must offer employees benefits to optimize engagement (Guest, 2014).

A final critique to EE is that of the uncertainty to the factors that advance engagement (Guest, 2014). Even purported approaches such as the MacLeod Report (i.e. leadership, management, values, and voice), provided no operational guidance and are viewed superficially in organisations; consequently, it is uncertain what organisations should do to promote engagement (Guest, 2014). A better approach is getting the employees whose optimal engagement is needed, to contribute in setting the measures that advance engagement.

## **V. THE SOCIAL EXCHANGE THEORY PERSPECTIVE TO EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

Social exchange theory (SETy) is essential to understanding organisational behaviour and offers a structure with which to assess how EE might be developed (Coyle-Shapiro & Conway, 2004; Saks, 2006; Guest, 2014). It is anchored on the "norm of reciprocity" (Gouldner, 1960), where an employee is offered something positive (i.e. training, maximised job design, strong organisational support, optimal reward, fairness and trust, effective communication, job security, autonomy, etc.), such employee possess high propensity to reciprocate (i.e. increase engagement level) and vice-versa. Hence, organisations should promote mutual exchange; ensuring that both (i.e. employee and organisation) benefit. A fundamental assumption of the SETy is that the benefits offered generates an obligation to reciprocate; such recurrent interdependent transactions create loyalty, trust, and shared commitments. Steven (2007) posits that the SETy possesses three key philosophies: (a) norm of exchange defines interdependent transactions. (b) social exchange quality denotes features of the exchanged resources. (c) social exchanges advance into relationships between involved parties.

## **VI. CONCLUSION AND PROSPECT**

EE although a topical issue still has a lot of exposition to undergo, this is mostly with regards to it being confused with other variables in human resources concepts (i.e. satisfaction, commitment, motivation, etc.). There is no hesitation that the theme of EE has come to stay; this reinforces the motive for its clear examination and interpretation. Having noted the obvious, organisations who are implementing EE practices should detail their experiences and actively involve the employee in this process; as there cannot be an EE without the employees.

The increasing interest in EE in both the industry and academia positions EE as a competitive and strategic necessity for optimal performance of organisations in this present time. Hence, EE practices should be prioritised in organisations agendas and effectively supported by top management for it to yield a competitive and sustainable advantage.

The EE of tomorrow would feature employees' with an ownership mentality in the discharge of organisational tasks. This will mostly be propelled by the necessity to find meaningfulness in their task/work and an organisational culture that promotes such an attribute. Arguably, the certainty of this prospect is already perceived in the trajectory of employee demanding more involvement in decisions that affect their performance in organisations. The future of EE would also feature a greater commitment of management for its success; nonetheless, there is a necessity for more studies in building relevant knowledge for the reality of this EE prospect.

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