Influence of Employee Engagement on Organisational Performance at the Zimbabwe Open University (2019-2023)

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Abstract

The study sought to find out the influence of employee engagement on organisational performance at the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU), which is a state university. The study was informed by the persistent feature of ZOU in the media for wrong reasons, which suggested that it was very likely that some of its staff members were exposing the institution. The study used the interprevitism philosophy which resonated with the qualitative paradigm. A case study design was applied. Data were generated using face-to-face interviews. The population was eight hundred (800) staff members, and a convenience sampling method was used to identify the number of participants who could provide qualitative data, and the actual size was determined by data saturation. An analysis of the qualitative data which characterised the study was done by using thematic analysis. The major finding was that there was low engagement among ZOU employees. Major recommendations included revisiting both the internal and external fairness of remuneration, adopting a flexible working model, employer-assisted occupational stress management, and providing good working conditions.

Keywords: Employee engagement, Organisational performance, Teamwork

Introduction

Organisations from around the world strive to keep employees engaged, according to Perry (2019). The dramatic variations in employee engagement between countries in the workplace, according to the data from the ADP Research Institute, indicate that employee engagement was a global problem (Perry, 2019). Only 16% of employees globally were totally engaged, according to a poll of more than 19,000 workers conducted by the ADP Research Institute (Perry, 2019). While the rest of the workforce was not necessarily completely disengaged, this indicates that there is much opportunity for development in employee engagement globally. A few nations, such the United Arab Emirates and India, scored highly on the survey's engagement index scale compared to other nations, whereas the average engagement index for industrialised nations hovered around 16%. Netherlands and China, on the other hand, trail behind. Eight of the 13 countries that were studied in 2015 and 2018 showed an increase in engagement. China was the developed nation that saw the highest decline in the percentage of workers that were fully engaged between 2015 and 2018. Nearly 1 in every 5 employees were fully engaged in their work in 2015, but three years later, that number fell to 1 in 16. Even while it was a concern, it was challenging to pinpoint the precise reason for a decline in the percentage of totally engaged workers in China (Perry, 2019).

In a separate study, the 38 organisations in wealthy nations that scored highly on employee engagement were found to be employee-centric, (Harter and Rubenstein, 2020). In the study, they discovered that only 15% of workers worldwide were engaged. 35% of the workforce in United States of America was actively engaged. The results support Perry's (2019) estimate that just 16% of the global workforce was totally engaged.

Employee engagement scores are much higher in sub-Saharan Africa than other parts of the world, according to a poll conducted by Africa-based HR Consultancy Emergence in collaboration with international HR consultancy Aon Hewitt (Maurer, 2013). A total of 300,000 employees from 75 organisations in sub-Saharan Africa participated in the poll. The model examined important factors that influence employee engagement, such as work procedures, connections with managers and senior leadership, total compensation, career options, and business practices, much like any employee engagement survey would. According to the Sub-Saharan Africa Employee Engagement Survey, which was released in January 2013, 72% of employees in the region were deemed to be engaged. Despite this, there were notable regional variances in the involvement indices, with South Africa scoring 68%, East Africa scoring 74%, and Southern Africa (comprised of Zambia, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, and Swaziland) scoring 70%. Although sub-Saharan Africa had a high engagement index (72%), there were several organisations that had substantial staff turnover (Maurer, 2013). Given that high employee engagement should be positively connected with employees' willingness to remain with a given organisation, this appears counterintuitive.

A study by Eldor and Harpaz (2016) show that work engagement was instrumental in explaining the relationship between the organisation's learning climate, employees' creativity and their ability to adapt to the work environment. Work engagement was more useful in explaining that relationship than related concepts, such as job satisfaction and job involvement. Work engagement was found to perform a moderating role in assisting employees to adapt or cope with the work environment.

Work engagement has a lot of positives at the workplace. Work engaged employees perform better than non-engaged workers (Jones & Daigle, 2018). Work engagement contributes to employees experiencing good health, as well as favourable or positive work outcomes (Li et al., 2017). Work engagement improves workers' performance, and this usually provides an organisation with a competitive advantage (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2014). There has been a marked increase in scientific studies on engagement (Albrecht, Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008; Breevart et al., 2016). Work engagement has been linked to outcomes such as job performance (Bakker & Bal, 2010; Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2008; Van Wingerden et al., 2017), customer satisfaction (Salanova, Agut, & Peiro, 2005), financial rewards and returns (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). These studies also provide better insights about why WE is important (Demerouti & Cropanzano, 2010), including for academics employed at universities (Jordan & Weller, 2018; Kenny, 2018).

According to a study by Industrial Psychology Consultants, Zimbabwe's national employee engagement index has been averaging 72% for the past three years (Nguwi, 2022). This demonstrates unequivocally that employee engagement appeared to be higher in developing nations than in industrialised nations, where it averaged between 15% and 16% as described above. Such substantial discrepancies have not yet been adequately explained (Nguwi, 2022). High levels of employee engagement boost workplace morale and reduce the likelihood of personnel turnover. Employee commitment, according to Nguwi, is based on the principles of reciprocity and mutuality between the employer and the employee. When employees commit

to a firm, they also become interested in what the company can do for them. Therefore, a large worker turnover rate in Zimbabwe would not be anticipated given the country's high employee engagement rating of 72%.

Mandibaya and Khan (2020) claim that the bulk of Zimbabwe's public universities have been impacted by the human factor movement brought on by globalisation, which has resulted in high staff turnover. Zimbabwe is currently facing an economic catastrophe. As such employees out of state institutions in large numbers in quest of better pay and benefits elsewhere. Additionally, the media is rife with damaging information that could have remained within universities if staff members had a strong sense of loyalty to their employer.

On April 24, 2023, Dziva (2023) reported that some Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) staff were receiving negative pay. It is clear that there are some staff members who leaked such information to media. Where employees are engaged to their organisation, they cannot say badly about their organisation, and they do not easily leave that organisation for another. On 02 December 2021, ZimEye (2021) reported that the Department of Peace, Leadership and Conflict Resolution at ZOU was characterised by high levels of corruption. It is alleged that some staff members were involved in arbitrage activities with foreign students who were supposed to pay foreign currency for their studies. As if that is not enough, there is poor service delivery at the University. According to ZOU MyVista portal, at the beginning of the 2023 First Semester examinations, only a deplorable 25% assignments for Master of Business Administration had been marked and submitted on the portal. Ordinarily, 100% of assignments are supposed to be marked and submitted on the MyVista portal before the commencement of examinations. Further to that, since January 2023, ZOU lost 84 employees due to voluntary resignations only, against a granted staff establishment of 851 employees (ZOU Human Resources Report, 2023). The rate of turnover is just high.

It can, thus, be deduced that because of work engagement, employees become highly energetic, proactive, self-motivated individuals who can exert influence over activities that affect their lives from the literature studied. Because of their positive mind-set and activity level, these workers provide their own positive feedback due to their appreciation of being recognised, after accomplishing their tasks (Bakker, 2010; Reijseger, Peeters, Taris & Schaufelli, 2017). Although at times, the employees may feel exhausted after a day's hard work, they tend to interpret their tiredness as a desirable state, because it is linked with positive achievements (Abu-Shamaa, Al-Rabayah & Khasawneh, 2015). Work engagement results in employees enjoying other activities outside their actual work, but still relevant to keep the work tempo and they view work as naturally providing enjoyment and inspiration (Demerouti et al., 2015)

Kahn's 1990 Employee engagement theory
The theory comprises three dimensions, namely physical, cognitive, and emotional, according to Jha et al. (2019). On physical engagement or interaction refers to the level of physical and mental effort people put out while performing their jobs. According to Barton and Kahn (2018), some employees may be so engaged at work because they are extremely pleased. This indicates that they are determined to give their all to their work. Because of this, according to Kahn, being able to exert both physical and cerebral energy at work might increase confidence.

On cognitive engagement, according to Jah et al. (2019), it has to do with how cognitively linked employees are to their workplace. When workers are aware of their employer's vision and strategy as well as the degree of performance necessary to create the greatest possible impact, they are said to be cognitively engaged. Kahn also emphasised the importance of a

person's relationship to their work since he believed that having more information spurred better creativity and self-assurance in decision-making.

According to Barton and Kahn (2018), the third component of Kahn's employee engagement theory is based on the employee's emotional attachment to their employer or organisation. The corporation must find ways to establish a feeling of community among its employees if it wants people to believe in and support the company's core principles and mission. Kahn highlighted the need of positive interpersonal interactions, group dynamics, and management styles in order to establish a safe and reliable workplace.

Three factors which determine employee engagement.
Kahn's work focuses on building workplace conditions where employees may be their "full selves" (Dhir and Shukla, 2019). There are three crucial factors that will determine whether a person can meaningfully connect with the organisational mission, corporate culture, and his/her day-to-day duties or role. These are meaningfulness, safety, and availability.

According to Kahn, the term "meaningfulness" refers to the driving force behind the labour, or the justification behind the accomplishment of a given task or piece of work. Popescu (2019) quotes that if employees are aware of how a company's product or service benefits society and believe they play a crucial role in accomplishing that goal, they are more inclined to put out significant effort.

On safety according to Kahn, a worker who feels psychologically safe at work and does not worry about being judged by coworkers or upper management or suffering the consequences of those judgments is more likely to contribute and feel good about those contributions (Blackman et al., 2015).

The third aspect that affects employee engagement is availability (Popescu, 2019). According to Blackman et al. (2015), an employee's availability relates to their ability, both physically and intellectually, to carry out a job. Kahn acknowledges the limitations of every person. He continues by saying that while challenges are necessary for development and job happiness, an employee should think the demands of the job are fair and doable. The work-life balance is another topic covered by availability, according to Barton and Kahn (2018). In other words, the proportion of time spent on personal interests and hobbies, or with family and friends, can be used to measure employee engagement.

Components of work engagement
Major components of work engagement are supervision, teamwork, remuneration and working conditions (Demerouti et al., 2015). These were used as the research constructs and are explained below;
- Supervision generally refers to the process of overseeing and guiding the activities, work, or behavior of individuals or groups to ensure that tasks are performed correctly, efficiently, and according to established guidelines or standards (Boiadjieva, 2021). It involves providing support, direction, feedback, and monitoring performance.
- Teamwork is the process of individuals working together collaboratively to achieve a common goal or complete a task (Etherington et al., 2021). It involves sharing ideas, responsibilities, and skills to maximize efficiency and success. Effective teamwork relies on communication, trust, mutual respect, and a willingness to support one another. Key elements of teamwork include collaboration, communication, trust and respect, shared goals, support and adaptability (Guaman-Quintanilla et al., 2021),

- Remuneration refers to the compensation or payment provided to an individual in exchange for their work or services. It can include a variety of components, such as salary or wages, bonuses, benefits, allowances (Kinicki & Williams, 2020), equity or stock options. In summary, remuneration is the total financial and non-financial rewards that an employee receives in exchange for their work.
- Working conditions refer to the environment, terms, and circumstances under which employees perform their tasks. It includes both physical and psychological aspects of the workplace. Key elements of working conditions include physical environment, hours of work, health and safety, compensation, job security, work-life balance, employee relations (Dessler, 2020). In summary, working conditions encompass all aspects of the work environment that affect the well-being, comfort, and efficiency of employees (Stewart & Brown, 2019).

Organisational perfomance

The study's dependent variable was organisational performance, which involves analysing the attainment of an organisation's outcomes against its objectives and goals (Corvellec, (2018). Measures of organisational performance for universities are key indicators used to evaluate how effectively the institution is achieving its goals, particularly in areas such as education, research, and community service. Some common measures according to Alhadabi and Karpinski (2020) and Rudolph (2021) include:

- Academic performance: This is measured by graduation rates, staff retention rates, student satisfaction and faculty performance.
- Research output includes publications, research funding, collaborations and partnerships.
- Financial performance: revenue growth, expenditure management and endowment
- Community engagement and social impact: outreach programmes, employment outcomes and social responsibility

In summary, university performance is evaluated through academic quality, research impact, financial health, community engagement, and global standing, among other factors. These measures help assess the university's effectiveness and guide strategic planning for improvemen (Flexner, 2021).

Research Methodology

The study adopted the interpretivism research philosophy. According to Tammien and Poucher (2020), interpretivism research philosophy focuses on understanding the subjective meanings and experiences of individuals within their social context (Gupta & Gupta, 2022; Hurlimann & Hurlimann, 2019). An inductive approach was used. According to Misha and Alok (2022) and Josh et al (2023), an inductive approach in qualitative research is a method of deriving general propositions from specific observations. It involves condensing the raw text data into a summary format, linking the findings to the research objectives, and developing a model or theory based on the underlying structure of the data. The qualitative research paradigm/methodology was applied in this study. According to Hurlimann and Hurlimann (2019), qualitative research paradigm focuses on the process, meaning, and how participants or key informants make sense of their lives and experiences.

A case study design was used as the study focused on one organisation (Gupta and Gupta, 2022), ZOU. A case study design involves a detailed examination of a single subject, such as an individual, group, organisation, event, or community, to explore and understand complex issues in real-life contexts. By focusing on one specific case, researchers can gain a deep understanding of the factors and dynamics at play (Mishra & Alok, 2022). The target

population comprised of both full-time teaching (academics) and support staff at the Zimbabwe Open University whose size was 800 employees (ZOU Human Resources Report, 2023) the convenience sampling technique was used, and the sample size was determined by the data saturation technique. Qualitative data was generated through interviews conducted. For data analysis, the content analysis was used because it is a widely used research technique that systematically examines and interprets content to identify patterns, themes, and meanings (Josh et al., 2023). It is a cornerstone method in qualitative research (Misha & Alok, 2022). In terms of research ethics and legal implications, the researchers were guided by the following research ethics postulated by Mishra and Alock (2022) and Gupta and Gupta (2022); the researchers got permission, in this case from ZOU management to conduct the research, observed informed consent of participants, ensuring anonymity of participants in the research, guarding against plagiarism and bias.

Results and discussion

Level of teamwork in departments
Most participants agreed that teamwork was good in their departments.

Participant 3 remarked,

''Teamwork is good and in our department, we encourage and assist each other in meeting organisational goals. We make secret arrangements to alternate to come to work so that they save on transport costs''.

Participant 6 commented that

''There is unity in our department because we consult each other when handling problems''

Participant 12 said,

''We work as a team because in our faculty there are very minimal conflicts, our meetings are progressive with minimal inter-personal conflicts. There is inter-departmental collaboration. For example, staff members from another academic department can be taken to babysit the activities in another department. Further to that, the staff members develop kinship such that we can organise farewell parties'.

Findings have shown that there was indeed unity in the departments which is the basis of teamwork. This could be seen in the efficiency of meetings and interpersonal relationships as supported by Phina et al. (2023) and Pahos and Galanaki (2019). For all that, what is being referred to as unity in some departments is not unity but collusion. For example, staff members agree to alternate to come to work without the university's approval yet according to the university policy all employees are supposed to come to work on a daily basis.

Level of remuneration in the University
Majority of the participants said that the remuneration was not fair in light of the high costs of living.

One frustrated member, Participant 17 had this to say,

''*Issue of directly involved and non-directly involved' (DI&NDI) caused the remuneration not to be fair. Previously, staff members were being paid the same as long as they were in the same grade. However, the DI&NDI brought in discrimination as staff members were being paid differently depending on whether they were academic or non-academic. Academic staff members are being paid more''*.

Another Participant 6 said,

''*Remuneration was not fair considering what other Universities are paying for their staff members. Other universities are paying their staff more allowances and groceries than ZOU is doing. We get this information in social circles especially when we go out for sporting activities''*.

A frusted particpnat 14 said,

''*In some units for example, some staff members are being given responsibilities that enable them to get extra money like accompanying or escorting the vehicle which carries examination material to regional campuses, which opportunity will never be available to other staff members in the same unit. This is not fair*''.

The findings above show that staff members had a view that the remuneration in the university was not fair in light of what other jobs or employees in the organisation are getting as salaries and what other universities are paying for their staff members (allowances and benefits). The standard of fairness which workers are applying is supported by Armstrong and Taylor (2020) and Dessler (2020) who stated that the purpose job evaluation is to come up with a fair grading structure which takes into account the worth of a job in relation to other jobs in the organisation (internal) and what salary the same job fetches on the market (external)

Involvemenet in decision-making.
Majority felt that they were not involved in major decision making.

Participant 13 said,

''*Power to make final decisions was a preserve of Management, however subordinates can only be consulted*''

Participant 2 said,

''*Management should find some time to come down and interact with shop-floor staff members so that they get an appreciation of how things are happening in order to make decisions which speak to reality. Some potential clients come at the National Centre and when they are told that forms are not sold here, they would then ask for offices of other universities like Midlands State University and Chinhoyi University and that is contributing to the plummeting of the student enrolment at ZOU*''

Participant 4 had this to say, in the affirmative,

''*As lecturers we are given room to make decisions that are binding in the department or faculty. We always make suggestions in our faculty which are adopted, therefore there is a lot that we decide in the University*''.

From the findings above, it is clear that the space for participating for being heard is bigger for academics than that one for non-academics. It is also noted that some decisions are not quality because some decision-makers may be lacking practical information on the matter. Being decided upon. That view is supported by Zondo (2020), who stated that one way of improving decision-making and industrial relations climate in an organisation is to rope in all the views of every staff concerned. Of course, those views should pass the test of appropriateness (Zondo, 2020).

Inconsistencies of reporting for duty
The study found that a sizeable number of staff either reported late for duty or left early before actual closing time. Some of the reasons given were'

Paricipant 10 said,

''*Average transport fares per trip in Harare are US$1 per trip, but I pay US$1.50 because I stay in Chitungwiza. Therefore, at the end of the month, I should fork out US$66.00 (US$1, 50 x 2 trips/day x 22 working days per month). This forces me to wait for ZUPCO transport which charges US0.50 per trip. However, because of this I and other staff members in the same predicament, usually arrive at work late around 10:00 hours. We would also leave work early so that we hunt for cheap transport whilst there is still time. The US$44.00 payable in RTGS, which I get from the University as transport allowance is not enough. At times, I am forced to reduce commitment to University work to the level I feel is commensurate with the remuneration I am getting from the University''.*

Another participant 8 said,

''*It is because of economic hardships that some staff members pretend as if they are at work when they are doing personal jobs which earn them money. Some staff members actually fail to come to work because of money and they then pretend as if they were sick*''

Similar to sentiments of Participant 8, another participant 11 said,

''*Some staff members fail to come for duty on a daily basis because of social problems as they try to make ends meet. I propose that the University adopts a flexible mode of working which ensure work-life balance like what happened during the covid-19 pandemic era.''*.

The findings above show that indeed a good proportion of staff members are unilaterally adjusting their work times to suit their economic and social hardships. The remark by one participant that workers now deliberately reduce their work time to a level which they feel is equal to the value of what they get from the University is in line with what John Stacey Adams's Equity Theory says. One of the ways in which employees resolve perceived inequity in rewards is to reduce effort to the level they feel is fair (Armstrong and Taylor, 2020).

Conclusion and recommendations
Work engagement in ZOU was a little low and was largely caused by low remuneration, lack of involvement in major decisions and economic hardship. On a positive note, some were happy that there was teamwork and their involvement in making some decisions at department or faculty level.

The study made the following recommendations:

- The University to set up a task committee that should produce a report addressing the internal and external relativities. Internally it should look at the unfair allocation of tasks or duties that attract extra payment. Externally, the committee should find an analysis of extra allowances or benefits that other state universities are giving to their employees. The task committee should embrace non-managerial employees from both the academic and non-academic staff.
- Adopting a flexible working model to accommodate a work-life balance.
- Plucking out collusion, which culminated in corruption and truancy
- Employer-assisted occupational stress management to assist an average staff member who was suffering from work-related stress.
- Empowering staff members by the provision of tools of trade and employee involvement in decision-making.
- Improving the work environment by addressing work allocation and provision of furniture.

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