EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: FACTORS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: *As the world is getting engulfed by the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, workers and employees across the globe are suffering unfavourable consequences as a result of the current shifting job environment. Due to the rapid spread of COVID-19 all over the world, many organisations are swiftly modifying their processes. Several companies have made the switch to telecommuting and are adopting work-from-home routines to allow remote working for their entire workforce. "Employee engagement" has become one of the most popular topics in recent organisational behaviour research; it is believed to change during the current phase of the ongoing pandemic. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on employee engagement and suggest a few strategies for improving employee engagement. In this paper, we have considered the V-5 Model of Employee Engagement, the 5-C Model of Employee Engagement, and the "GREAT" Model of Non-monetary Levers for Enhancement of Employee Engagement. Employee morale is enhanced by employee engagement techniques, especially in this pandemic situation, employees are engaged and devoted to the company. Employee participation has thus become crucial, particularly in the present COVID-19 pandemic crisis.*

Keywords: *COVID-19, Changing HRM Practices, Employee Engagement, Work from Home*

BACKGROUND

Companies have modified their workspace substantially as a result of the global pandemic. As a result, HRM practices have changed accordingly; employees are forced to adopt the new 'work from home' (WFH) culture, thereby affecting the overall employee engagement. Employee engagement is defined as an employee's level of commitment to and participation in their company's beliefs and goals. It is not only about enhancing productivity when it comes to employee engagement, even though organisations that have a higher degree of employee engagement tend to have an elevated productivity report of 22% or more than that of other organisations, according to a newly conducted meta-analysis by Gallup Organization on 1.4 million employees. Employee engagement leads to a range of positive results for both workers and customers (Baldoni, 2013). Employees who are engaged believe in the firm, have a desire to improve their job and their work, are willing to go above and beyond to help the firm succeed, and are inspired by its representatives. Effectiveness and excitement are the trademarks of a dedicated worker. Disengaged employees, on the other hand, do the bare minimum, display little excitement for their work, and view work as a waste of time, to keep receiving paychecks. Employees who are disengaged are employees who have lost their passion for their job, and hence, hamper the performance of the organisation. Organisations usually keep in mind that engaged employees lead to increased productivity at work, which in turn leads to increased customer satisfaction and, without a doubt, increase in sales and profit for the company (Chanana & Sangeeta, 2020). Outsized returns for this investment can be achieved through thoughtful and effective performance and employee engagement, thereby benefitting our communities and stakeholders. It is up to library leaders to create the ideal conditions for optimal performance, such as pursuing evidence-based tactics that motivate individuals to do their best, and eliminating processes that demotivate and discourage them (Risley, 2020).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chaudhary et al. (2021) collected data from employees working from home in India to study the factors that can impact employee engagement level, and estimated their engagement scores using the UWES-14 (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale), which has 3 scales: vigour, dedication, and absorption, to assess the engagement of individuals and groups; the authors made a few recommendations based on the research findings to improve employee engagement.

Robertson and Cooper (2010) proposed that employee engagement is more likely to be sustained when employee well-being is also high, by conceptualising the notion of "full engagement".

Risley (2020) primarily focused on the performance and employment engagement of San Mateo County Libraries, and their adaptability to the unpredictability of a pandemic landscape.

Mani and Mishra (2020) explored non-monetary factors that HR practitioners can use to improve employee motivation and engagement. Companies have been forced to conserve funds as a result of COVID-19. HR managers who previously relied on monetary incentives, such as increment in salaries and other monetary perks to inspire their employees, must now rely on non-monetary incentives such as recognition and career advancement to keep morale up.

Nguyen and Tran (2021) examined the determinants of employee engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of coworkers' support, supervisors' support, organisational support, spousal support, and family support, with reference to a case study based in Vietnam.

Puneet Kumar (2021) suggests 5 fundamental components of employee engagement, namely value, voice, variety, virtue, and vision, which HR managers can readily avail to enhance the engagement of employees in these perilous times. This 5-element structure can be attributed to both individuals as well as organisations. This model requires very little to no monetary investment, yet it demands a high degree of attention and focus to be able to gain benefits from the application of this model.

Nguyen and Tran (2021) bring forth that perceived organisational support and perceived support of family both have a substantial beneficial impact on employee engagement.

De-la-Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021) have introduced the 5-C model of employee engagement, which introduces 5 categories as the deciding variables for the reinforcement of employee engagement, to counter balance the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This model allows for the identification of the variables and the metrics that can be utilised to assess the well-being of the employees. The authors reiterate that prior to the pandemic the firms had understood the need to recognise and implement these elements, but after the pandemic this has transformed into an extremely essential tool for the well-being of the employees. Aditama and Riyanto (2020) concluded that employees are experiencing anxiety, dissatisfaction, and fatigue as a result of the massive impact of COVID-19 on their personal and professional lives, and when left untreated, these emotions can have a negative impact on staff engagement and performance, resulting in poor job quality, blunders, and, in the long term, the company's ability to survive in difficult times. This study builds on a previous study at PT Koexim Mandiri Finance on the impact of the work environment on employee engagement and motivation. In this study, the authors have examined 2 goals, namely staff engagement and maintaining employee performance amid the COVID-19 pandemic at PT Koexim Mandiri Finance.

Ojo et al. (2021) dealt with the conservation of resources theory by looking into the job, social, and personal resources that underpin employees' resilience, as well as the role of resilience in boosting job engagement of Malaysian employees amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from various sources was used to test the model. Their findings show that managers' concerns about employees' resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic may be counterproductive. However, management can help employees become more resilient by giving them the freedom to spend quality time with their families and providing enough support for enabling working conditions.

Chanana and Sangeeta (2020) researched how different organisations engage their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organisations are continuously inventing novel and efficient ways to keep employees engaged during this difficult period. Work-from-home routine engagement activities have been found to be very beneficial for both employees and organisations.

Goestjahjanti et al. (2020) determined the impact of authentic leadership and talent management on employee work satisfaction in the automotive industry in Southeast Asia, as mediated by employee engagement. Data was collected from personnel in the automobile industry using a basic random sample technique. SmartPLS 3.0 software was used to process the data using the SEM method. Authentic leadership, either directly or indirectly through mediating staff involvement, was found to have no meaningful effect

on job satisfaction. This new study offered a paradigm for increasing job satisfaction among employees in the automotive industry in Southeast Asia, by improving talent management and using employee engagement as a mediator.

Ahmed et al. (2020) examined the influence of employee engagement on organisational performance, through the mediating effect of knowledge sharing with employees from higher educational institutions. According to the findings, employee engagement has a considerable and favourable impact on company performance. Knowledge sharing was discovered to have a large and favourable impact on organisational performance. Furthermore, information sharing only moderated the relationship between employee engagement and organisational performance to a limited extent.

Kaushik and Guleria (2020) studied employee relations and engagement in the COVID-19 era. They concluded that establishing a positive working relationship with employees through frequent communication and involvement is critical in assisting them, not just in the technology realm, but also in engaging and retaining them during COVID-19.

Research Gap

Various authors have explored and considered discrete models of employee engagement. There have been limited observable research papers pertaining to the comprehensive exploration of non-monetary levers for the augmentation of employee engagement in organisations, especially with reference to the current scenario of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Objectives

- To investigate the elements that influence employee engagement.
- To analyse the impact of COVID-19 on employee engagement.
- To recommend a few ways to improve employee engagement.

Methodology

This paper takes a qualitative approach and a thorough assessment of numerous literature towards understanding the various factors that affect employee engagement, and discusses the different strategies and courses of actions that organisations can implement to improve and enhance employee engagement. The different aspects affecting

employee engagement have been thoroughly assessed by consulting and reviewing numerous relevant literature, thereby formulating the various tactics and courses of action that organisations can adopt to promote and enhance employee engagement. The data has been taken from various secondary sources, like articles, journals, books, and so on, all of which have been duly acknowledged.

Factors Affecting Employee Engagement Levels

Employee engagement levels can be influenced by elements such as job-roles, job satisfaction, access to proper virtual tools, virtual training and virtual teamwork, gender of the employees, leadership styles, communication by the leaders and organisational support, support of supervisors and colleagues, addressing mental health and overall well-being of the employees, support of the family, employee marital status and spousal support, the number of children, entertainment tools and entertaining activities, workplace set-up (office/home), salary, frequency of contact with the organisation's top management, the speed of the Internet connection, the speed of the computer, virtual software functionality, HRM policies of the organisation, rewards and recognition, gratitude, and acknowledgement.

Effect of COVID-19 on Employee Engagement

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an inconceivably distressing and uncertain scenario, where every aspect of growth and progress in organisations has become practically impossible. Not only organisations, but also the human resources engaged with such organisations are heavily impacted. Due to lockdowns and various other restrictions, a majority of the companies are implementing a remote working policy to allow their employees to work from home. However, working from home is challenging for employees since they do not experience the organisational climate at home, as well as a loss of attention owing to frequent interruptions by family members, giving rise to work-life conflict. Numerous studies have shown that 'working from home' has caused serious problems in the personal lives of the employees, caused by the removal of a clear demarcation between working hours and family time. Misunderstanding and conflict are on the rise between employees and their families, and such conflicts are apparently not getting resolved easily in this situation. Employee engagement is proven to be negatively impacted by the number of children of the employees, that is, as the number of children increases, so does the virtual employee engagement (Chaudhary et

al., 2021). Employees are finding it difficult to remain enthusiastic about their jobs in such a situation. Productivity and performance suffer as a result, resulting in negative outcomes. Employees lack the necessary equipment and tools at home, such as a computer, mouse, printers, scanners, headphones, webcam, high-speed Internet connection, and a dedicated workspace. These disruptions result in a communication void, and avoidance of client and colleague meetings and face-to-face conversations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has sparked a sense of fear throughout the world; it has put the general public's health in jeopardy, devastated economies, induced employee turnover intentions, and thereby resulted in the mitigation of employee engagement. Employees have been suffering due to huge workload, longer hours of work, unprecedented work shifts, lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), and so on, due to this pandemic. Because of the rising number of COVID-19 cases around the world, a majority of the employees are anxious and are uncertain about their job security, as well as their pay. Employees have been suffering from the fear of being laid-off, and high degrees of stress and anxiety caused due to 'working from home' conditions. Employee disengagement caused by this pandemic has become a serious topic for research and study, as a situation like this has never been faced before. Employees are thus unable to focus on their jobs, thereby reducing employee engagement. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the employees to remain fully engaged and passionate about their jobs.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone's life has been turned upside down. People's job security is deteriorating. Many people are being laid off. There is no proper workplace, atmosphere of collaboration, or leadership. People are dealing with a terrible working environment and stagnant pay, which is decreasing morale.

Experts from all over the world predict that this crisis will not be immediately eradicated from the face of the earth. It will take some considerable amount of time to get back to normalcy. The natural flow of business might even take years to restore. The primary purpose of this paper is to recognise the various problems that COVID-19 has unravelled, understand how such turbulence is actually affecting employee engagement in organisations, and suggest a few recommendations to improve employee engagement. In a scenario like this, the employees are highly affected, their ardour for work is crushed, their mental health is at stake, and there is an overall sense of apathy and disheartenment. HR managers and professionals are developing and implementing various models to get the employees back on track and enhance employee engagement. Organisations are trying to come up with several engagement activities

during this pandemic to keep the employees engrossed and active. These activities also serve as stress-reducers for the employees and somewhat compensate for their loss of social lives to a certain extent. Employees are encouraged to maintain a routine and stick to it, to maintain a balance between 'working', 'relaxing', and 'family' time. Activities like online family engagement practices; learning and development programmes carried out virtually; alignment sessions conducted weekly; appreciation sessions; video conferencing during lunch time; online training for new skill development; online counselling for dealing with stress and anxiety; virtual gaming sessions; sharing online content like TED Talks and informational YouTube videos; brainstorming sessions; and so on, help employees, to a great extent, cope with their loss of zeal and passion for work and help them to reorganise themselves for the betterment of their personal, as well as organisational goals. There are various determinants of employee engagement, among which an important determinant is 'leadership'. Leadership has a good impact, especially when it comes to assistance and feedback. Regular communication between employees and leaders is important for employees to receive proper support (Chaudhury et al., 2021). Recognition of work and efforts is another such determinant that heavily influences employee engagement. In other words, acknowledgement of efforts promotes workers' sense of gratitude, provides valuable feedback on how well they accomplish tasks, builds confidence, boosts morale and engagement, and lowers the danger of enervation (Chaudhary et al., 2021). Face-to-face encounters are limited during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, technology should be used to keep in touch with clients and coworkers. Due to a lack of meetings and exchanges among employees, the COVID-19 pandemic is producing undesirable employee relations. Maintaining peace and harmony is becoming increasingly difficult. However, now is the time to stay focused and inspired, as well as to maintain the spirit, to achieve personal and organisational goals. It is time to stand up against all odds and negative influences, as relationships are crucial for the survival of both the individual and the organisation. When it comes to employee relations and engagement, now is the moment to rally behind one another for better growth and survival. Employers should also de-stress their employees by involving them in other activities, thereby altering their outlook and enhancing cohesion, and keeping them completely occupied with various activities, making them more productive, and forward-looking, by better utilising their time, energy, and abilities. Companies are keeping their employees engaged during the lockdown by providing opportunities for learning and development. Some firms supply their employees with webinars with industry experts, books, e-learning, and self-developed content to keep them motivated and alleviate their concerns, to enhance employee

engagement. Another suggestion is the Happy Hour Online – in this case, a group of people gather for a party on their favourite video conferencing site to share a few drinks (Plester & Hutchison, 2016 as cited in Chaudhary et al., 2021). Additional benefit packages, and fair and comparable compensation structures should be provided to employees during these difficult times to keep them engaged and motivated. Organisations should also give employees all of the tools and resources they need to do their jobs well. Managers should provide feedback and direction to their subordinates from the start to maintain strong employee engagement. Furthermore, some of the major employee engagement models produced and brought forth by various researchers from all over the world have been thoroughly discussed in this paper.

The V-5 Model of Employee Engagement

Puneet Kumar from the School of Management Studies, Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, has suggested the V5 Model of Employee Engagement (2021), after conducting an extensive literature review, which the human resource managers may easily use to boost employee engagement during and after the pandemic lockdown. The elements of the V5 model concentrate on both the individual and the organisational aspects of engagement.

The model proposes a 5-element structure for enhancing employee engagement: value, voice, variety, virtue, and vision.

- *Value:* This element comprises 3 variables – optimism, respect, and interaction at work. An optimistic workplace is more likely to produce successful results as opposed to an impossibly idolised one. When talking about respect, the model states that it is important for an employee to feel acclaimed and revered by their superiors, subordinates, and colleagues, to enhance and retain employee engagement. Social interaction also plays an integral role in creating a sense of belongingness towards the organisation.

- *Voice:* The efforts made by the employee must be recognised and acknowledged. Feedback at regular intervals must be taken from the employees, to ensure that the voices and concerns of the employees are heard. Along with this, the employees must be supported so that the fear of negative consequences is eliminated and they may raise concerns that affect

them.

- *Variety:* The model states that there should be a wide range of jobs with sufficient autonomy so that assigned jobs can be completed smoothly. The jobs must have a requirement for skills of varying nature and should be significant enough to add value so that the employee feels that they are adding something valuable to the organisation.

- *Virtue:* A cohesive culture, where employees care for each other, is very important to construct an organisation that is virtuous. Justice in treating employees and providing equal benefits for everyone is a must if the organisation is to promote virtuousness.

- *Vision:* Organisational vision must be concise, brief, and easy to understand, and must be thought-provoking. Although it should not be too clear in its expression, it should have an impressionistic, yet challenging, quality.

This model requires very less to no monetary investment; yet, it demands a high degree of attention and focus. This model of employee engagement is a ready-to-use model for HR practitioners, managers, and professionals.

The 5-C Model of Employee Engagement

The 5-C Model of Employee Engagement, as proposed by De-la-Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez, introduces 5 categories as deciding variables for the reinforcement of employee engagement, to counterbalance the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This model allows for the identification of the variables and the metrics that can be utilised to assess the well-being of the employees. According to the authors, this model may be utilised at any time, either during times of crisis like the present, or during periods of normalcy.

The model recognises the following factors that strengthen employee engagement in an organisation.

- *Conciliation:* This factor states that there should be an integrating balance between the personal life of employees and their work, considering the fact that 'work from home', otherwise known as remote working, is gaining significance in these troubled times of the COVID-19. Remote working facilitates an organisation to be more productive by utilising

an efficient workforce that uses fewer space, energy, and so on. Remote working does not only mean shifting the workplace from the office to the home, it also requires the organisation to have complete authority and dictation over certain elements, like creating regulations, eradication of confusing factors (if any), breaking down bigger tasks into smaller fragments to facilitate dynamism, and so on.

● *Cultivation:* This element relates to all the various developmental schemes that the firms will provide for the employees. The organisation needs to recognise the future prospects of an employee and his/her expectations. In addition, organisations need to encourage employees to be freer when it comes to providing feedback; they must not shy away from providing honest feedback to the people in the higher positions in the organisational hierarchy.

● *Confidence:* Employee safety and good health must be prioritised, along with helping them with the development of leadership qualities, thereby enhancing confidence in the workplace. Given that one of the most pressing issues for employees would be whether or not their workplace is safe, employee engagement will skyrocket if they believe that measures are being taken to protect their health, while properly adhering to the law.

● *Compensation:* Rightfully rewarding the employees for their efforts towards the organisation, especially during distressed times like these, is necessary to improve employee engagement. Wage fairness is an important consideration to be taken into account, to instigate confidence in the employee, who in turn will have a sense of belongingness towards the organisation, and which will ultimately boost employee engagement. Target-based incentives and non-monetary incentives based on the priorities of the employees should also be considered.

● *Communication:* In dealing with the current issues, communication is crucial. Communication in these unpredictable times should be built on a fluid 2-way discourse. Personal interactions with coworkers, managers, and reports are essential since they are an important aspect of the workplace climate and environment. Employees must be communicated with empathetically, and messages must be formulated in a way that showcases an understanding of the con-

cerns of the employees. Employee engagement and well-being are positively related to communication.

'GREAT' Model of Non-Monetary Levers for Enhancement of Employee Engagement

The GREAT model of motivation, developed by Swaminathan Mani and Mridula Mishra, proposes to identify and utilise the non-monetary variables that leverage employee engagement and motivation in organisations during COVID-19. GREAT is an acronym for the 5 essential levers that form the core ideology of this model: Growth, Renewal, Enabling, Aspirational, and Transparency levers. All of these levers, either used alone or in combination with others, have been found to boost staff morale and motivation. HR practitioners can use the GREAT framework to evaluate their employee engagement programmes using non-monetary metrics.

Puneet Kumar (2021) iterates that HR managers need to take a fresh look at their employee engagement initiatives. There must be proper recognition and acknowledgement of the endeavours undertaken by the employees. He further states that there should be respect and healthy interaction at work, along with ample autonomy and group cohesion. In the words of De-la-Calle-Durán and Rodríguez-Sánchez (2021), the psychological pressure and uncertainty caused by the current changing workplace environment have led to negative consequences for workers. In view of the predicted link between employee engagement and wellness, as well as the unprecedented scenario that impacts workers from all industries throughout the world, María-Carmen De-la-Calle-Durán and José-Luis Rodríguez-Sánchez have developed the 5-C Model of Employee Engagement, which comprises conciliation, cultivation, confidence, compensation, and communication. Likewise, the GREAT model of non-monetary levers, developed by Mani and Mishra (2020), seeks to discover and use non-monetary characteristics that leverage employee engagement and motivation in companies during the lockdown. Thus, all 3 models take into consideration most of the factors that can be incorporated by the organisations to enhance employee engagement during COVID-19. This paper comprehensively takes into account all the essential levers and underlying mechanisms that intensify and accentuate the engagement of employees in their organisations.

Various organisations are using unique and innovative employee engagement techniques to keep their employees satisfied and dedicated to the organisation.

Organisations like Genpact, Accenture, Deloitte, AMD, and Hinduja Global Solutions have added a new dimension to

employee engagement by introducing the concept of family engagement, which keeps employees' children occupied for a few hours while their parents work from home during the COVID-19 lockdown.

To boost employee morale and engagement, Cars24 introduced a variety of activities, such as sharing a picture with the pet, selfies with the family, fun awards, quizzes, online mental fitness and meditation sessions, a hidden talent show, virtual karaoke challenge, virtual campfire challenge, and various online group challenges.

Manufacturing entities like SAR, CEAT, and Aditya Birla are increasing the employee downtime. CEAT has employed fitness mentors to motivate the employees and their families through live broadcasts and podcasts.

Capgemini is conducting various structured employee engagement programmes, like communicating through video messages at regular intervals; creating virtual communities for fostering a sense of belongingness; and providing counselling services and webinars for addressing mental health and anxiety issues. The company also provides guidance for exercising and meditating for proper maintenance of health and hygiene.

According to the Brunswick Group, companies are required to develop employee engagement and communication, to maintain high morale. The employees are reminded to take sufficient precautions regarding breach of data and issues regarding cyber security. The employees are also encouraged to share tips and experiences of working from home.

Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) has introduced 'Fun Fridays' to conduct online recreational activities, like discussing one's favourite movies or games through video conferencing, sharing selfies, and so on, to boost the morale of the employees and break the monotony of working from home.

ITC Hotels has put out a variety of e-learning courses aimed at various jobs and levels through major e-learning channels, to give a chance for self-learning that may be enhanced through all-day app assistance.

During this difficult time, organisations should use online practice strategies to stay competitive, and embrace unique and creative employee engagement practices to keep employees motivated, engaged, devoted, pleased, and blissful. Working from home has become quite popular in recent years, and it would be impossible to succeed without the use of the Internet. Companies should prioritise virtual relationships, to increase employee engagement. Employees who are engaged are always able to reach their goals with ease. To foster a positive organisational culture, management should consider increasing employee involvement for attaining organisational goals.

Theoretical and Practical Implications of the Study

This article presents a thorough theoretical foundation by considering a variety of models that may be combined and used in real-world settings practically by diverse organisations to increase employee engagement.

Limitations and Scope of Future Research

This article provides a solid theoretical basis, by examining a number of models that may be integrated and utilised in real-world contexts by a variety of organisations to enhance employee engagement. With the help of adequate primary data, this paper can further be explored as a case study with reference to 2 different situations, viz., employee engagement before and after employing the above mentioned models, jointly or individually.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has had an adverse impact on entities. It has forced organisations to look at alternative ways of running operations, such as through remote working. The adoption of digital technology has been a positive change for many people, as it keeps employees productive, while allowing them to maintain a work-life balance. In this current state of lockdown, assuming the top position without the backing of the employees would be a fantasy. In this difficult time, organisations understand that engaged employees are critical to their success. That is why, in the event of a pandemic, organisations must plan on keeping their employees happy and engrossed, through various employee engagement programmes. Establishing employee engagement measures with the assistance of technology is critical for the success of businesses in the present circumstances. Employee morale is boosted through employee engagement strategies, and employees are engaged and committed to the business during the pandemic. Thus, employee engagement has become critical, especially in the current COVID-19 pandemic.

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