

The Role of Associates and Importance of Associate Engagement: A Theoretical Approach

Padamata Karthik*, Ramlal Porika**

Abstract

This paper highlights the role of associates and the importance of associate engagement in the construction industry, which is one among the frontline industries which create jobs to the people and generate revenue to the governments through construction of infrastructure projects for development. Associates are the important people who become part of every employee life with whom they will interact and work at workplace. By understanding the work demands and working conditions at construction sites, research in construction industry on various work-related aspects pointed the role of co-workers' and their importance at work. This research is carried on various concepts involving associates with the objective to know the importance and scope of associate engagement, role of associates in construction industry. This research study involves an integrated literature review method by combining different researchers' opinions, research findings and their thought-provoking suggestions to better understand and elaborate the research objective. It is observed that in the construction industry, associate engagement has become a key factor in promoting occupational safety, work learning, information transfer, knowledge management, stronger work relations, work motivation, social & emotional support and consequently employees job satisfaction which ultimately leads to increased performance and productivity.

Keywords: Leadership, Associates, Co-Workers, Engagement, Interactions, Safety, Knowledge, Motivation, Satisfaction

Introduction

The construction industry is one of the booming industries with numerous construction works happening across the world. According to International Labour Organization (ILO), construction industry produces a wide range of products, has equally diversified enterprises and generates employment for a large number of people. In many countries, construction industry plays a significant role in contributing to the country's economy and some countries have the highest level of construction outputs, especially in Asia (Hillebrandt, 2000). For example, according to the Invest India statistics (2021), the Indian construction industry is the second largest employer within the country, contributes 9% to country's GDP, expected to record the value of \$738.5 billion by 2022 and is also expected to become the third largest construction market globally. In such a huge industry where the employment scope is high, the governments and the employers have an important role to play to take care of the employees' or workers' welfare, health and well-being through sound policies and practices.

Employee engagement is a broad concept that particularly deals with the numerous factors which create interest and drive the employees to work with their full potential and contribute to the organizational success. According to Kahn (1990), the pioneer in employee engagement research, engagement is defined as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances". Engagement

* Doctoral Student, School of Management, National Institute of Technology, Warangal, Telangana, India.
Email: padamata.karthik@student.nitw.ac.in

** Associate Professor, School of Management, National Institute of Technology, Warangal, Telangana, India.
Email: ramlal@nitw.ac.in

factors will vary from industry to industry, organization to organization and employee to employee. Due to the work nature, it is of no surprise that the work-life in the construction industry is different when compared to other industries. Work-life balance is an important issue with regards to organizational effectiveness and employee occupational health in the construction industry (Lingard et al., 2007). The employees at construction sites or project offices must go through long and inflexible working hours which has been a predictor of work-life conflict among construction employees consistently (Lingard et al., 2007). The employees working at construction sites face high emotional exhaustion due to various reasons when compared to the head-office employees and attention should be paid to find the sources of burnout and work-life imbalance especially in the case of site employees (Lingard et al., 2004).

As construction of an infrastructure project depends on multiple factors, be it environmental, technical, political, social or economic, it is important to procure all the necessary resources and align all the deployed employees on a single objective as per the need. The employee relations, especially the associate relations must be strong in the construction sites as every employee will need the support of the other, irrespective of their working departments. Here comes the importance of the term “Associate engagement” or “Co-worker engagement”, which can be considered as an attribute or sub component of employee engagement, defines the level of association and levels of interaction among the associates with each other on one-on-one basis. Carmeli (2015) in his research found that the respectful engagement among the employees will have an indirect relation in creating employee behavior both at individual level and team level. Lorente (2014) identified that “personal resources of the employees like self-efficacy, emotional and mental competencies” will impact the self-rated performance and lead to work engagement.

Previous research says that the employee engagement practices being implemented in the organizations will impact the employee well-being (Harter et al., 2003; Bell et al., 2015; Caesens et al., 2014; Shuck & Reio Jr., 2014; Wieneke et al., 2019). Allocation and utilization of resources, especially the human resource, in construction sites is one of the major challenges every site manager

will face as the availability of competent labour is always challenging (Khan, 2020). As the human resource will be driven by specific roles and responsibilities, every immediate supervisor of the employee has to make sure his/her sub-ordinate is engaged at work or not. Hence, there is a need to keenly look at various factors that contribute or affect the engagement element of employees at work.

Purpose of the Study

This research study is intended to shed light on a relatively new concept named Associate Engagement and to elaborate the importance and the role of associates at work. Research findings and thought-provoking suggestions from various secondary sources related to the concept of associate engagement and role of associates are gathered from the available integrated literature with specific to construction industry and presented in this study. Also, authors views are added to the existing literature to better explain the concept.

Methodology

As this study is intended to shed light on Associate engagement with specific to construction industry only, the authors have conducted an integrated literature study from various secondary sources to gather inputs pertaining to the purpose of the study. The authors used the keywords such as “Associate engagement”, “Associate engagement in construction”, “Associate engagement in workplace” etc. to identify the relevant academic journal articles. Most of the necessary inputs are gathered from published scholarly research articles. Majority of the articles referred for this study are from journals which are published by reputed publishers like Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, Sage, and Emerald. The authors have conducted literature search by searching the articles in respective publisher database and finally Google Scholar is also referred to find the relevant published research papers apart from the above-mentioned databases. Apart from the academic journals, inputs for this study are taken from the other secondary sources like government websites, government reports, magazine articles and blog articles pertaining to construction industry and associate engagement concept. In addition, authors views are also added.

Discussion

Associate Engagement through Leadership

Having an effective leadership in the organization has become the prime necessity to implement engagement activities and an effective leader is key to initiate the engagement process to engage the employees. It is important to first understand the leaders' perception on employee engagement and his plans before making any decisions. Quang et al., (2015) in his research found that "leader's competencies like self-management, self-motivation, self-esteem, emotional literacy and interpersonal relation has statistically positive effects on employee engagement." The interaction between the employees and their leaders do matter a lot in achieving the project success and so the style of leadership decides the association level of employee in the project. Hence, research suggested that democratic style of leadership has strong association with employees in the construction sites and will result in high employee engagement (Yoa et al., 2017). The co-workers or the associates will play an important role in work engagement. The organizational success will not only depend on the individual employees' engagement and their performance, but also depends on the employees encouraging and leveraging their co-workers either individually or collectively by any means to improve their performance. The organizational members working on same-rank or at same level attempts to either encourage or discourage their colleagues in engaging at work and there should be collective influence among the employees of the organization in encouraging their colleagues to succeed and to mutually reinforce for the benefit of all (Tartari et al., 2014). Therefore, it is highly crucial for the people in leadership positions (eg: Project Manager) at construction sites to actively interact with and direct other managers at work to encourage frequent interactions with all the employees in their work division. This small initiative by the leaders would send a signal to the men at work (from managerial level to the operational level) that their management doesn't encourage or make their men to work in isolation and supports social interactions at work which might result in positive opinions about the employer followed by positive work attitudes and behaviors. Interestingly, as the construction

projects involve most blue colored workers to be working under an independent sub-contractor(s), it is very much essential for the project managers and the other managers to make his or her team interact with those blue colored workers on a frequent basis.

Learning and Knowledge Sharing through Associate Engagement

Employees can help each-other by one-on-one method in all prospective means to gain knowledge and develop themselves. The on-the-job training techniques like coaching, mentoring, guiding proved to be successful in the modern age training, especially in the construction industry. The influential relationships and other social contacts in the employee network have a strong impact gain knowledge through the system of knowledge sharing (Huang et al., 2011). In the United States construction industry, the unions started a new "apprenticeship model of education" by creating a network of craftsmen focusing on health and safety training to the apprentices by the master craftsmen in their respective crafts (Sinyai et al., 2013). The construction industry mainly works on machines and tools and a construction employee can gain knowledge on through practical exposure to the real work. As construction industry demands "know-how" method, the expert-learner engagement makes learning quick and easy when the experts share their knowledge and experiences with peers in virtual terms (Styhre, 2006). Therefore, co-workers remain as the main source of learning in the challenging construction industry.

Occupational Safety through Associate Engagement

The working conditions at construction sites are often observed as one of the most hazardous (Kanchana et al., 2015) and challenging. It is a visible fact that occupational accidents and injuries in construction work are more due to the high risk involved at work and less or zero safety awareness among the employees. Therefore, it is the primary duty of every contractor to confirm the employees' safety and to promote their well-being. Leaders can play an important role in increasing the level of work-safety at construction sites by encouraging

leader-based coaching through verbal communication on safety (Kines et al., 2010). According to the suggestions of Skeepers and Mbohwa (2015), in the construction industry, the transformational leadership style on safety management and safety motivation is a positive attribute to correct the safety behaviors and to set the safety goals. As there will be requirement of huge manpower in any construction project, there exist the necessity of a separate safety department to take special care on all the safety aspects to keep the employees safe throughout the project. Every employee will be given a safety handbook and oral demonstration on safety terms by the safety officers before the employee enters the site. It is observed that most of the workers in construction are sharing safety information present in the safety book to their co-workers and this participatory oriented safety training program among the employees is helping them to finish their daily tasks (Williams et al., 2010).

Information Transfer through Associate Engagement

Timely transfer of information is must to update the progress of the work and to estimate the future needs. According to Simmons (2019), co-workers' engagement in construction projects is very important as the work might also happen in remote areas with only limited employees. It is more important to update the necessary information daily without delays to the site office to avoid chaos in usage of both men and machinery. As transfer of employees from one site to the other creates a gap in understanding the progress of work for new team members, the effective information transfer from associates within the teams will result in in-depth involvement at specified work package and empower the capacity to act (Dunn, 2012). The active interaction between the construction workers and employees, among the employees, employees and work contractor is needed for the swift information transfer and transparency.

Work Relations through Associate Engagement

Work-place relations are very much important in engaging an employee with the other employees as well as with the organization. Work relations are termed officially formal, but they might also become informal later depending

on various factors. Especially in construction industry, which demands an employee to actively interact with all or most of the co-workers working in the project, it is very much required to maintain strong work relations. It is observed that, the absenteeism at work among the construction workers is low among the teams with high cohesiveness and high working spirit (Hinze et al., 1985). Previous research has provided evidence that stronger work relations result in good rapport between the employees and thus results in emotional support, improved teamwork, increased productivity, improved retention rate, job satisfaction, innovative behaviors, team cohesion (Jehn & Shah, 1997; Morrison, 2005; and Xerri, 2013). It is found that peers' observation on their co-workers resulted in minimization of complaints from workers to the managers as the peer monitoring helps in consulting and self-correction of issues before reporting the issue to the management (Aina & Omoniyi, 2014). But, according to Asch (2019), the social relationship with peers may intentionally or unintentionally influence the employee behaviors and a careful understanding on this social influence make the employee ignore or overcome these peer pressures and influences.

Support through Associate Engagement

It is inarguably agreeable that co-workers are the best supporters to most of the employees' not only at work but also in personal life. Kahn (1990) in his research identified that trusting interpersonal relationships would support employee engagement. Anitha (2014) identified co-worker relationships as a significant determinant of employee engagement. Employees develop a close relation with their associates and unite for most of the things they find common in each other at work and outside the work. The worker-to-worker support in construction industry help employees not only in knowledge betterment but also in the betterment of physical and mental health. According to the Mental Health Foundation (2019), "peers support is built on shared personal experiences and empathy" and said that co-workers support helps in self-understanding, self-management, self-help in improving quality of life, conflict-resolutions and improved mental health conditions. According to Sarah (2013) of UNC school of Global Public Health (2013), "emotional support is a key component of peer support and health" and people who didn't received any emotional or social support reported

higher physical and mental distress. British chambers of commerce (2019) has started a pilot project named “Construction Industry Peer Support (CIPS)” to support the workers physical and mental health in construction industry. In such tough, man-power and man-hour demanding, isolated jobs like construction, it is very much essential for each one of them who is involved in the projects to have more social and emotional support from their co-workers through healthy relations. This support would make the workers and employees feel at home and discourages the intentions to leave their jobs which turns out to be a profit for the organizations in handling the turnover issues.

Job Satisfaction through Associate Engagement

Job satisfaction is treated as one of the important and non-neglectable employee work attitudes which would be an outcome of various work-related factors. Bhatta et al., (2018) in their research on civil engineers found that the relation with co-workers has significant relation with job-satisfaction. With strong interpersonal relations at work,

it is highly possible for any employee to get motivated and encouraged at work. Though this motivation and encouragement might not be guaranteed from all the colleagues due to various issues, a minimum motivation at least from the closest peers can be considered positive for employee satisfaction. According to Dishman (2015), the relationship with colleagues’ boost both work mood and work motivation in turn resulting job satisfaction. In the construction sites, the appreciation of praise or encouragement from the colleagues’ resulted in worker’s satisfaction and is considered a significant factor for job satisfaction (Anin et al., 2015). A negative feedback and no feedback from the peers, colleagues and immediate supervisors may result in employee dissatisfaction at work which would trigger negative employee behaviors like less involvement/paying less attention at work, intention to leave etc.,

Associate Engagement Model

A model defining the importance and scope of associate engagement in the construction industry is drawn based on the understanding from the literature review findings.

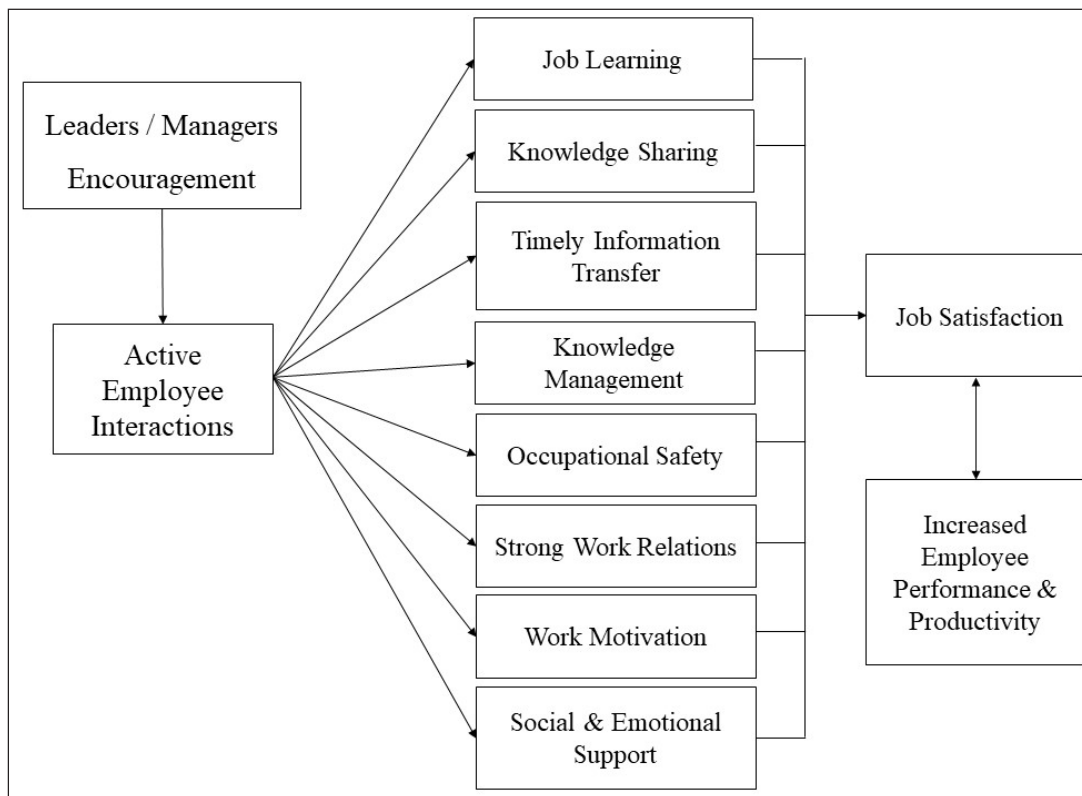


Fig. 1: Associate Engagement Model

Implications and Limitations

This study contributes to the existing employee engagement literature by shedding some light on relatively a new concept named associate engagement, which can be treated as one of the subcomponents of employee engagement. The exploratory research study conducted on associate engagement concept resulted in some useful insights which helps in understanding and expanding the knowledge pertaining to the concept. This study offers some inputs to the researchers and practitioners to keenly look at the antecedents and the scope of associate engagement at workplace. The limitations are a part of any research study and this study also has some limitations. Firstly, the study objective is to explore the concept of associate engagement in construction industry only and so the inputs presented in this paper are limited to construction industry only. Second, the authors intention is to shed light on the concept of associate engagement and present a model explaining the scope of associate engagement in construction industry by integrating the literature review findings. Future research is encouraged to conduct empirical studies by taking reference from this model. Third, the main theme of study is done with respect to construction industry. Though the outcomes of associate engagement might be same as mentioned in the model presented in this study, future research is highly encouraged to find the role and significance of associate engagement in other industries also.

Conclusion

The concept of associate engagement should be highly promoted by understanding its importance and the benefit of leveraging employee performance and productivity by means of active interactions among work groups. Co-worker engagement in construction industry has to be observed with top priority as it increases learning through mentoring, increase in job knowledge through knowledge sharing, creating awareness on occupational safety through co-workers observation, increase of cohesiveness in teams through strong work group relations, timely information transfer through employee - associate networks, betterment of employee mental health through employee-to-employee support and employee participation through

encouragement from colleagues, associates and peers, all in turn resulting in job satisfaction.

References

- Aina, O. O., & Omoniyi, A. T. (2014). The effect of job enrichment schemes on selected construction workers in Nigeria. *Organization, Technology & Management in Construction*, 6(1), 345-368. doi:10.5592/otmcj.2014.1.3
- Anin, E. K., Ofori, I., & Okyere, S. (2015). Factors affecting job satisfaction of employees in the construction supply chain in the Ashanti region of Ghana. *European Journal of Business and Management*, 7(6), 72-81.
- Anitha, J. (2014). Determinants of employee engagement and their impact on employee performance. *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*, 63(3), 308-323. doi: 10.1108/IJPPM-01-2013-0008
- Asch, S. E. (2019). Social influence. Retrieved from http://changingminds.org/explanations/theories/social_influence.htm#References
- Bell, N., Powell, C., & Sykes, P. (2015). Securing the well-being and engagement of construction workers: An initial appraisal of the evidence. In A. B. Raidén and E. Aboagye-Nimo (Eds.), *Procs 31st Annual ARCOM Conference* (pp. 789-498), 7-9 September 2015. Lincoln, UK, Association of Researchers in Construction Management.
- Bhatta, A. K., Shrestha, S. K., & Mishra, A. K. (2018). Job satisfaction among civil engineers working in building sector in construction firms of Nepal. *Journal of Advanced Research in Civil and Environmental Engineering*, 5(3), 9-17.
- British Chambers of Commerce. (2019). Construction industry peer support (CIPS). Retrieved from <https://www.emc-dnl.co.uk/about-us/initiatives-and-programmes/construction-industry-peer-support-cips/>
- Carmeli, A., Dutton, J. E., & Hardin, A. E. (2015). Respect as an engine for new ideas: Linking respectful engagement, relational information processing and creativity among employees and teams. *Human Relations*, 68(6), 1021-1047. doi:10.1177/0018726714550256
- Caesens, G., Stinglhamber, F., & Luypaert, G. (2014). The impact of work engagement and workaholism on

- well-being: The role of work-related social support. *Career Development International*, 19(7), 813-835, doi:10.1108/CDI-09-2013-0114
- Dishman, L. (2015). Why are construction workers the happiest employees? Retrieved from <https://www.fastcompany.com/3041591/why-are-construction-workers-the-happiest-employees>
- Dunn, R. (2012). Effective knowledge transfer on a construction project. Retrieved from <https://projectmanager.com.au/effective-knowledge-transfer-on-a-construction-project/>
- Harter, J. K., Schmidt, F. L., & Keyes, C. L. M. (2003). Well-being in the workplace and its relationship to business outcomes: A review of the Gallup studies. In C. L. M. Keyes and J. Haidt (Eds.), *Flourishing: Positive Psychology and the Life Well-Lived* (pp. 205-224). *American Psychological Association*. doi:10.1037/10594-009
- Hillebrandt, P. M. (2000). The construction industry and the economy. In: *Economic theory and the construction industry* (pp. 19-28). Palgrave Macmillan, London, doi:10.1057/9780230372481_3
- Hinze, J., Ugwu, M., & Hubbard, L. (1985). Absenteeism in construction industry. *Journal of Management in Engineering*, 1(4), 188-200. doi:10.1061/(ASCE)9742-597X
- Huang, Q., Davison, R. M., & Gu, J. (2011). The impact of trust, guanxi orientation and face on the intention of Chinese employees and managers to engage in peer-to-peer tacit and explicit knowledge sharing. *Information Systems Journal*, 21(6), 557-577. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2575.2010.00361.x
- International Labour Organization. (ILO). Construction sector. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/global/industries-and-sectors/construction/lang--en/index.html>
- Invest India. (2021). Construction sector. Retrieved from <https://www.investindia.gov.in/sector/construction>
- Jehn, K. A., & Shah, P. P. (1997). Interpersonal relationships and task performance: An examination of mediation processes in friendship and acquaintance groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 775-790. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.72.4.775
- Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692-724. doi:10.5465/256287
- Khan, U. A. (2020). Construction workers problems and associated labour laws compliance in construction industries in India. Retrieved from <https://blog.ipleaders.in/construction-workers-associated-labour-laws-compliance/>
- Kines, P., Andersen, L. P., Spangenberg, S., Mikkelsen, K. L., Dyreborg, J., & Zohar, D. (2010). Improving construction site safety through leader-based verbal safety communication. *Journal of Safety Research*, 41(5), 399-406. doi:10.1016/j.jsr.2010.06.005
- Kanchana, S., Sivaprakash, P., & Joseph, S. (2015). Studies on labour safety in construction sites. *The Scientific World Journal*. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/590810>
- Lingard, H., & Francis, V. (2004). The work-life experiences of office and site-based employees in the Australian construction industry. *Construction Management and Economics*, 22(9), 991-1002. doi:10.1080/0144619042000241444
- Lingard, H., Brown, K., Bradley, L., Bailey, C., & Townsend, K. (2007). Improving employees' work-life balance in the construction industry: Project alliance case study. *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management*, 133(10), 807-815. doi:10.1061/(ASCE)0733-9364
- Lopes Morrison, R. (2005). *Informal relationships in the workplace: Associations with job satisfaction, organisational commitment and turnover intentions* (Doctoral dissertation). Massey University.
- Lorente, L., Salanova, M., Martínez, I. M., & Vera, M. (2014). How personal resources predict work engagement and self-rated performance among construction workers: A social cognitive perspective. *International Journal of Psychology*, 49(3), 200-207. doi:10.1002/ijop.12049
- Mental Health Foundation. (2019). Peer support. Retrieved from <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/p/peer-support>
- Quang, H. N., Khuong, M. N., & Le, N. H. (2015). The effects of leaders' emotional intelligence on employee engagement in Vietnamese construction companies - A case of Hoa Binh Corporation. *Journal of Economics, Business and Management*, 3(8), 746-752. doi:10.7763/JOEBM.2015.V3.279
- Simmons, R. (2019). Worker engagement in construction safety. Retrieved from <https://anvl.com/blog/construction-safety-and-worker-engagement/>

- Sarah Kowitt, M. P. H. (2015). What do you mean by emotional support? Retrieved from http://peersforprogress.org/pfp_blog/what-do-we-mean-by-emotional-support/
- Shuck, B., & Reio Jr, T. G. (2014). Employee engagement and well-being: A moderation model and implications for practice. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 21(1), 43-58. doi:10.1177/1548051813494240
- Sinyai, C., Stafford, P., & Trahan, C. (2013). Doing it old school: Peer-led occupational safety training in the US construction industry. *McGill Journal of Education*, 48(3), 605-611. doi: 10.7202/1021923ar
- Skeepers, N. C., & Mbohwa, C. (2015). A study on the leadership behaviour, safety leadership and safety performance in the construction industry in South Africa. *Procedia Manufacturing*, 4, 10-16. doi: 10.1016/j.promfg.2015.11.008
- Styhre, A. (2006). Peer learning in construction work: Virtuality and time in workplace learning. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 18(2), 93-105. doi:10.1108/13665620610647809
- Tartari, V., Perkmann, M., & Salter, A. (2014). In good company: The influence of peers on industry engagement by academic scientists. *Research Policy*, 43(7), 1189-1203. doi:10.1016/j.respol.2014.02.003
- Wieneke, K. C., Egginton, J. S., Jenkins, S. M., Kruse, G. C., Lopez-Jimenez, F., Mungo, M. M., & Limburg, P. J. (2019). Well-being champion impact on employee engagement, staff satisfaction, and employee well-being. *Mayo Clinic Proceedings: Innovations, Quality & Outcomes*, 3(2), 106-115. doi: 10.1016/j.mayocpiqo.2019.04.001
- Williams Jr, Q., Ochsner, M., Marshall, E., Kimmel, L., & Martino, C. (2010). The impact of a peer-led participatory health and safety training program for Latino day laborers in construction. *Journal of Safety Research*, 41(3), 253-261. doi: 10.1016/j.jsr.2010.02.009
- Xerri, M. (2013). Workplace relationships and the innovative behaviour of nursing employees: A social exchange perspective. *Asia Pacific Journal of Human Resources*, 51(1), 103-123. doi:10.1111/j.1744-7941.2012.00031.x
- Yao, L., Kee Shin Woan, F. L., Ahmad, M. H. B., & Kuantan, G. (2017). The relationship between leadership styles and employee engagement: evidences from construction companies in Malaysia. *The Social Sciences*, 12(6), 984-988. doi:10.36478/sscience.2017.984.988