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# Employee Engagement in State Owned Enterprises. A Literature Review Paper

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper provides both quantitative and qualitative literature review on employee engagement in State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) as portrayed in literature and offers more insight into the concept on how it can be optimised. **Research design, data and methodology:** The study adopted a desktop research methodology. A review and analysis of both theoretical and empirical research and articles which are relevant to employee engagement in SOEs was conducted. Only secondary information gathered through those articles and research was used to analyse and build literature review on employee engagement in SOEs. **Results:** A literature review of both qualitative and quantitative research on employee engagement in organisations generally and in SOEs particularly was done, and it indicated the positive relationship between employee engagement and organisational performance. From the study, it is evident that employee engagement is not optimal around the world, therefore it is an area which needs more attention. Hence, this study proffered strategies for enhancing employee engagement in SOEs. **Conclusions:** This study proffers strategies for optimising employee engagement in SOEs. These are brand image, work environment, management and leadership characteristics, training and development opportunities, performance management, work life balance, effective communication and Kahn's three factors of meaningfulness, safety and availability. These strategies are essential in optimising employee engagement as portrayed in the reviewed literature.

**Keywords :** Employee Engagement, SOEs, Strategies, Employees, Optimising

**JEL Classification Code:** E44, F31, F37, G15

## 1. Introduction

One of the most frequently discussed topics in the field of human resources in recent years is Employee Engagement, which is not only discussed among businesspeople or business actors, and industry, but also organisations including State Owned Enterprises (Ohemeng et al., 2020). SOEs are major economic drivers; therefore, their survival is fundamental to the national economy since they promote socio-economic development by providing a

wide range of products and services to the nation (Muzapu et al., 2016). Employee engagement can be a deciding factor for improved organisational performance especially in the public sector since highly engaged employees drive innovation, customer service, employee retention, productivity, service delivery and profits (Chatiza et al., 2021; Wushe & Shenje, 2019). According to Ahmed et al. (2020), the key to a competitive advantage in today's organisations is the engagement of their employees. Over the last couple of years, employee engagement has been

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cited as key to an organisation's success (Burnett & Lisk, 2021). Apparently, employees who are not engaged will affect the organisational service delivery through higher absenteeism, higher turnover and lower productivity, recruitment and training cost (Crawford et al., 2013; Meutia et al., 2017). SOEs are challenged to think creatively to engage their employees in order to fulfill their mandate and responsibility to the national economy. Employees tend to be more productive in workplaces that promote higher levels of employee engagement, which help leaders retain employees (Kataria et al., 2013). Employee engagement was seen as one of the most prominent ways of promoting organisational competitiveness by many studies (Govender & Bussin, 2020; Mone et al., 2018; Rao, 2016; Gichohi, 2014; Abraham, 2012; Slatten & Mehmetoglu, 2011). Engagement is a core resource in promoting organisational success, therefore without engagement, any attempt at achieving competitive advantages is fruitless.

State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) suffer mainly from engagement problems as indicated by poor compensation and incentive programs, lack of training and career development opportunities, and ineffective leadership (Wushe & Shenje, 2019; Meutia et al., 2017). However, research studies that focus on driving employee engagement in SOEs have remained few, despite the persistent engagement problems faced by SOEs as well as the fundamental role SOEs play in driving national economies. The study aims to develop literature on employee engagement in SOEs and to present the status of employee engagement in SOEs at global level. The development of literature fosters the understanding of the concept of employee engagement in SOEs and mapping ways of how to drive it.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Employee Engagement Concept**

There are different definitions for the term 'employee engagement' in the academic literature that varies greatly according to the organizations (Bailey, 2022). Kahn (1990), described engagement as a situation whereby people's emotional, cognitive and physical selves are brought to the workplace. Similar to Kahn's definition, Maslach et al. (2001) also refer to engagement as a psychological and emotional state, a 'persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfilment' and Hallberg and Schaufeli (2006) define it as 'being charged with energy and fully dedicated to one's work'. Rothbard (2001) supports and expands Kahn's definition to suggest that engagement also reflects being absorbed and intensely focused in one's work. According to Bakker and Demerouti (2009), engagement is

defined as a positive work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. It is winning over the minds (rational commitment) and the hearts (emotional commitment) of employees in ways that lead to extraordinary effort (Rao, 2016). The University of York in 2008 suggests that 'employee engagement is a combination of commitment to the organisation and its values plus a willingness to help out colleagues.

Gallup Consultancy suggested that engaged employees are psychologically committed to their work, go above and beyond their basic job expectations, and want to play a key role in fulfilling the mission of their organisations, whilst disengaged employees were said to be 'uninvolved and unenthusiastic about their jobs and love to tell others how bad things are (Blizzard, 2004). The study by Gallup (2006) defines engaged employees as those employees who work with passion and feel an extreme connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the organisation forward. According to Ortiz et al. (2021), employee engagement is a psychological state where employees feel they do have a vested interest in the organisation's success and perform to high standards that exceed the stated job requirements. The common understanding by the researcher, derived from the various explanations of the engagement concept is that employee engagement is whereby employees fully exert considerable energy, show passion for their work and have an intellectual and emotional connection to their work and firm, resulting in improved organisational performance.

### **2.2. Categories of Engaged Employees**

Lee et al. (2019) and Gallup (2017) identified three categories of employees who are engaged as; engaged, non-engaged and actively disengaged. An engaged employee displays a positive attitude about his job and has a sense of personal responsibility and obligation to what they should do for their organization (Bedarkar & Pandita, 2014). According to Gallup (2013), engaged employees work with passion, drive innovation and feel a profound connection to their company. Gallup's (2013) report further noted that non-engaged employees are essentially "checked out." They put time, but not energy or passion, into their work. They do not have energy during the performance of their jobs. Lastly, actively disengaged employees are those employees who are unhappy with their job and always try to let everyone know that. They are toxic to others and they constantly keep trying to disengage the engaged employees.

Richman et al. (2008) note that research has found that there is an overall decline in employee engagement and there is a deepening disengagement among employees today. Actively disengaged employees are the "cave dwellers." They oppose everything at the workplace and even

undermine the efforts of their co-workers. They sow seeds of negativity at their place of work and undermine what their engaged co-workers accomplish. Problems and tensions that are fostered by actively disengaged workers cause great damage to organisations outcomes. According to the Gallup state of the global workforce study (2017) and Bersin (2014) only 13 to 15% of the employees are engaged in the workplace and 81% of the employees showed that they would consider leaving their jobs. A study by Gallup (2013) based on a large sample of the UK workforce indicated that 63% are non-engaged, 20% are actively disengaged and only 17% are engaged. These findings show that employee engagement is a major persistent problem affecting the globe at large.

### 2.3. Employee Engagement and Organizational Performance

According to Kahn (1990)'s model of psychological presence and Macey and Schneider (2008) model of the employee engagement value chain, there is a positive relationship between employee engagement and individual performance. Engaged employees exhibit emotional job attachment, unreserved commitment, increased productivity, high job passion, and in most cases, they go extra miles (Abraham, 2012). According to Leiter and Bakker (2010), work engagement has far-reaching implications for employees' performance. According to Gichohi (2014), employee engagement assumes a critical precursor role to creativity and innovation at the workplace. The energy and focus inherent in work engagement allow employees to bring their full potential to the job. This energetic focus enhances the quality of their core work responsibilities.

They have the capacity and the motivation to concentrate exclusively on the tasks at hand. Based on a review of a number of theories, Demerouti et al. (2010) concluded that engagement can lead to enhanced performance as a result of a number of mechanisms. Their conclusions are supported by a growing number of studies demonstrating a positive relationship between engagement and individual performance (Xanthopoulou et al., 2009) and another study which found that engagement is significantly related to a number of consequences including commitment, health, turnover intentions, and performance (Halbesleben, 2010). Thus, the linkage between engagement and performance is consistent with engagement models, theory, and research.

### 2.4. Employee Engagement Theories

Several theories such as the theory of Kahn's 1990 Model, May et al. (2004) Model, Burnout Theory, Three Component Model of Engagement and Social Exchange

Theory, to name but a few major ones, attempt to explain employee engagement in SOEs. These theories are the ones discussed in existing leading employee engagement literature hence, in this paper; they are referred to as bona fide employee engagement theories.

#### 2.4.1. Kahn's 1990 Employee Engagement Model

According to Kahn, there are three psychological conditions associated with engagement / disengagement at work. The constructs underlying the theory of engagement are meaningfulness, safety, and availability (Shuck & Rose, 2013). According to Shuck and Rose (2014) employee engagement develops when employees have a sense of meaningfulness, safety, and availability. The model supports that for workers to be more engaged at work, work related situations should guarantee more psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety and they should be psychologically available (Berdicchia et al., 2016). The implication of the model is that the three are critical predictors or drivers of employee engagement. This means that employers should ensure that employees work for something meaningful, are safe and psychologically dedicated to the organisation for engagement to thrive (Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006). The main thrust of this theory was to examine the effect of employee engagement on the performance of organisation. The theory suggested an explanation of engagement based on the premise that employees engage or disengage depending on the conditions of work (Kahn, 1990). Thus, the engagement theory is crucial to examine whether there is any strategy which should be employed by managers to effectively engage with their workers to improve employee performance.

#### 2.4.2. May et al. Model

This model evolved out of testing Kahn's 1990 model. The model confirms that meaningfulness, safety and availability were largely related to engagement (May et al., 2004). In addition, the model discovered that job enrichment and role fit contributed to meaningfulness, rewards and supervisor support generated safety, and available resources generated psychological availability. This model is simply an extension of the Kahn model.

#### 2.4.3. Burnout Theory

According to Maslach et al. (2001), burnout is a process of 'erosion of engagement with one's job'. He identified six areas of work life which led to burnout or engagement. These are workload, control, rewards and recognition, community and social support, perceived fairness and values. The theory stresses the point that there is need to ensure that employees are provided with the above factors in order to promote employee engagement at workplaces.

#### **2.4.4. Social Exchange Theory**

The social exchange theory (SET) has been accepted as the most and widely used theory in the employee engagement research (Hakanen & Schaufeli, 2012; Kazimoto, 2016; Truss et al., 2013). The theory provides a theoretical basis for explaining why employees opt to become more engaged or less engaged in an organization (Wushe & Shenje, 2019). The main principles of the theory are that employees make social decisions based on perceived costs and mutual benefits (Cook et al., 2013). Cropanzano and Mitchel (2005) state that the basic principle of SET is that certain rules of exchange must be followed. Markos and Sridev (2010) add that in engagement is seen as a two-way relationship between employer and employee. The theory proposes that there are obligations that are made through interactions between various parties in a state of reciprocal interdependence (Wushe & Shenje, 2019). According to the theory, employees are motivated to engage in their jobs when they believe there is a fair and balanced system of exchange (Bwire et al., 2014). Thus, the social exchange theory involves various obligations created on one independent party on the actions of another party that has the capability of producing high-quality relationships.

According to the theory, the relationship between the parties grows over time, and this may mature into trust, loyalty and mutual understanding (Saks, 2006). For instance, employees make full involvement towards their works by dedicating higher amount of cognitive and emotional and physical resources to respond to organisational actions (AbuKhalifeh & Som, 2013). Thus, employee engagement consists of psychological and emotional connections between employees and organisation, that lead to positive or negative performance at work (AbuKhalifeh & Som, 2013). The social exchange theory was used as the basis for developing the study's research framework because it provided a theoretical basis for explaining the relationship between employee engagement and improved organisational performance in organisations. Thus, employees are more likely to exchange their engagement for resources and benefits, and this explains why employees choose to become more or less engaged in their work and organisation. The forgoing has implication on this study. Where employees believe that their organisation cares about their engagement, they respond by attempting to discharge their obligation to the organisation by fulfilling the organisation's expectations. In other words, if SOEs make an effort to engage their employees by implementing strategies to drive engagement, employees will be engaged and this will result in the achievement of the organisation's objectives. Thus, this study sought to discover literature on these strategies in an effort to foster employee engagement in SOEs.

### **3. Research Methods and Materials**

The study adopted a desktop research methodology. The study reviewed and analysed both empirical and theoretical research and articles which are relevant to employee engagement in SOEs. Only secondary information gathered through those articles and research was used to analyse and build literature review on employee engagement in SOEs. Through an analysis of previous results, it is easier to outline employee engagement issues and identify areas of future research.

### **4. Results and Discussion**

For many decades, several global studies were conducted in relation to optimising employee engagement in organisations. The literature pertaining to driving employee engagement in organisations is key to this study, hence this study reviewed literature spanning for over three decades in order to have an overview of how to optimise employee engagement in today's organisations. The following literature explains the concept of employee engagement in detail.

#### **4.1. Global Employee Engagement**

Many studies were conducted in SOEs that tried to link employee engagement to many dependent variables. A study which examined the extent to which employee engagement, comprising of cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, and behavioural engagement could drive employee performance was conducted in the Indonesia in 2019. The results of the study show that: Employee engagement in Indonesian SOEs was in the "good" category, but not optimal. The UK coalition government in 2010 called for austerity and long-standing calls for public services reform due to poor performance of this sector, which was attributable to engagement problems. This means that in the UK, engagement levels have also been relatively low in the public sector.

In 2013, the Employee Engagement Index was 58%, which saw organizations creating programs to increase engagement amongst their employees (Jones and Sambrook, 2016). In the United Kingdom, employee engagement within the public sector is driving organisational performance of state enterprises. More significantly, there is also evidence that improving engagement correlates with improving organizational performance (Bakker, 2011). Research in Canada suggests that the link between engagement, customer service and profitability in the private sector could translate to the public sector – with trust and public confidence at the end of the chain, rather than

profit (Longo, 2017).

In the United States of America, for nearly two decades, the annual percentage of engaged U.S. workers has ranged from as low of 26percent in 2000 and 2005 and 34percent in 2018. On average, 30percent of employees have been engaged at work during the past 18 years (Gallup 2018). The percentage of actively disengaged workers has ranged from a high of 20percent in 2007 and 2008, immediately before and during the heart of the U.S. recession, to the current low of 13percent. In the United States of America, company performance and profitability were transformed by employee engagement (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009). There is a clear correlation between employee engagement and organisational performance and most importantly between improving engagement and improving performance. Research has found that, generally, organisations in Southern Africa have poor performance, which emanates from disengaged and demotivated employees (Mafini, 2016). The South African public sector has been failing consistently and has been accused of neglecting its service delivery imperatives (Fourie & Poggenpoel, 2017). Research shows that 45% of the South African workforce is actively disengaged whilst only 9% is actively engaged (Zondo, 2020). In South Africa, it was reported that the competitive advantage that organisations enjoy are as a result of employees who are flexible, innovative and able to handle the complexities they face, though with minor hindrances to processes (Davila & Pina-Ramirez, 2014). Mirazi (2014) concluded that most employees in companies are not willing to go that extra mile for their respective companies unless the organisations address the issue of engaging their employees.

In Zimbabwe, over the past decade Zimbabwe employee engagement levels have been declining annually since 2011. The employee engagement levels according to Industrial Psychology consultants were 60.21% for 2014, 60.54% for 2018 and 65.8% for 2017. Employees who are engaged positively influence their fellow workers, thus improving not only individual performance but also organisational performance (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009, p. 2). The above empirical studies indicate that there is continued low employee engagement levels at global level and that employee engagement is critical for organisational success, hence it is critical that ways of driving it are established.

#### 4.2. Employee Engagement Empirical Studies (Models)

There are substantial previous empirical studies and published literatures on the drivers of engagement. Table 1 presents the empirical studies on employee engagement studies conducted by various researchers.

**Table 1: Employee Engagement Models**

Model and Author/s	Focus & Methodology	Constructs	Findings
Deo (2018)	IT industry Mixed	Employer branding	Employer branding can act as a significant tool in not only building the external and internal brand of the organisation but also improve employee engagement and productivity.
Anyalor et al. (2018)	Tertiary Institutions Quantitative	Employer reciprocity	There is a positive relationship between employer reciprocity and lecturers' research output
Wushe & Shenje (2019)	Public sector service Quantitative	Effective leadership, training, career development Compensation, incentive programs, organizational policies and procedures	Employee engagement positively impacted service delivery
Smith and Bititci (2017)	Credit Union Industry Case study using semi structured interviews	Effective communication, training and coaching, and rewards and recognition	A positive relationship between the chosen constructs and employee engagement was established
Maponga (2018)	Building Societies Quantitative	Work output, people philosophy, total rewards, wellbeing, business alignment and employee growth	Employee engagement is associated with positive outcomes
Imandin et al. (2014)	South Africa Quantitative	Employee engagement constructs identified	The model tested statistically to be a valid and reliable model.

#### 4.3. Strategies for Optimising Employee Engagement in SOEs

Several engagement drivers have been proposed by researchers. There are substantial previous empirical studies and published literatures on the drivers of engagement. Discerning what enables engaged behaviours

is almost as tricky as identifying a single concrete definition of employee engagement. This is mainly because within the consultancy literature, and to some extent the academic literature, a multitude of different drivers are suggested. Practitioner perspectives on the drivers of engagement conducted by IES in 2004 found considerable variation in the views of authors in what drives engagement and pointed out that ‘there is no easy answer as far as engagement is concerned (Robinson & Hayday, 2007). It is unlikely that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is effective, as levels of engagement and its drivers vary according to the organisation, employee group, the individual and the job itself (Robinson & Hayday, 2007). Employee engagement is likely, therefore, to be influenced by many interrelated factors. Heikkeri (2010) showed that since there is no agreement among researchers in defining the term employee engagement, all undertaken studies by various scholars came up with key drivers and propositions. The following is a review of empirical literature on selected and adopted drivers of employee engagement for this study.

#### 4.3.1. Brand

Yousf and Khurshid (2021) note that an organisation’s brand image is an important factor in driving engagement as employees feel a sense of pride in being associated with a reputable organisation. Goliath states that “employees want to know they are part of a winning organisation. This could mean that the organisation is financially successful, or that it is recognized as a thought leader among customers, or that the organisation has an ambitious vision, purpose, and well-articulated business strategy in place.” Vazirani (2007) supported the impact of company reputation on engagement by highlighting the extent to which employees are prepared to endorse the products and services provided by their company to customers. It is this positive endorsement that strengthens customer brand loyalty leading to organisational profitability. This shows that the more attractive the company brand is, the more employees are engaged.

Organizations considered an ‘employer of choice’ are more likely to have higher levels of employee engagement as they create workplace environments in which employees feel respected and valued, and the connection they feel with the organisation is such that they are willing to exert discretionary effort in the pursuit of its success (Leary-Joyce, 2004). In her paper ‘Leveraging employee engagement for competitive advantage: HR’s strategic role’, Nancy Lockwood (2007) suggests that engagement is influenced by the culture of the organisation, its leadership, the quality of communication, the styles of management, levels of trust and respect, and the organisation’s reputation. Lockwood suggests that a key lever for engagement, and ultimately effective performance, is an employee’s emotional commitment to the organisation and the job, the ‘extent to

which the employee derives enjoyment, meaning, pride and inspiration from something or someone in the organisation. A breakdown of the key themes arising from recent research findings are presented below. Workplace culture is an important element of branding and it may be key to setting the tone for engagement (Alias et al., 2014; Lockwood, 2007). Sharma and Kumra (2020), found that numerous cultural traits are critical for increasing engagement levels, particularly having a culture of innovation, having good internal communication and having a reputation of integrity. Levinson (2007a) suggests that organisational cultures in which there is a collaborative leadership style (i.e. everyone is a stakeholder and can participate in all aspects of the business) drives engagement.

#### 4.3.2. Work Environment

Accordingly and Glen (2006) suggests that the work environment may play a key role in predicting engagement along with organisational processes, role challenge, values, work-life balance, information, reward/recognition, management and product service. Organisations considered an ‘employer of choice’ are more likely to have higher levels of employee engagement as they create workplace environments in which employees feel respected and valued, and the connection they feel with the organisation is such that they are willing to exert discretionary effort in the pursuit of its success (Leary-Joyce, 2004). When organisations demonstrate a commitment to ‘improving the human or environmental condition, it creates meaning and value for employees, customers, and shareholders alike’ and is most likely to encourage engagement in employees when they understand how this commitment is making a difference (Levinson, 2007b). Deci and Ryan (1987), also specified that a supportive working environment can be created through offering positive feedback, advancing skills development and advising employees to make their concerns heard.

#### 4.3.3. Management and Leadership Characteristics

Macey and Schneider (2008) suggest that the nature of an organisation’s leadership and management can have an indirect impact on engagement behaviours demonstrated by employees, through leaders building trust in their staff. In 2004, a study by the Corporate Leadership Council of 50,000 employees worldwide showed that 22 of the top 25 drivers of employee engagement are related to the manager. They found a high correlation between engagement and the extent to which the manager clearly articulates to their staff the organisational goals, the extent to which they set realistic performance expectations and the extent to which they are flexible and adapt to changing situations (Thompson, 2007).

Ixia Consultancy reported that employees feel most engaged when they have a good relationship with their



manager, when they can be professional and have autonomy to make decisions, when they feel valued and feel confident in their own role and feel proud of the work they do. They identified three key critical drivers which underpin engagement, namely the work undertaken, the managers, and the level of autonomy and control bestowed on the individual. Within each of these meta-categories Ixia proposed a number of sub-factors which were shown to have the greatest influence on engagement and the other meta category suggested was Manager who listens; develops; open communication; makes time; respects individuals; encourages; is fair; provides feedback.

The other findings were shown in a recent report by Kenexa Research Institute which was based on research looking globally at the current state of engagement in countries including Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, India, the Netherlands, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom. Kenexa proposed four key universal drivers of engagement, all of which they relate to leadership. They suggest that employees are engaged by leaders 'who inspire confidence in the future; managers who respect and appreciate their employees; exciting work that employees know how to do; and employers who display a genuine responsibility to employees and communities' (Jack Wiley, executive director, Kenexa Research Institute quoted in Wayne, 2008). In order to inspire confidence, leaders and managers may need a degree of their own self-belief. Managers have a crucial role to play in promoting clear, shared vision and values, effective communication and recognition (Sinclair et al., 2011). Luthans and Peterson (2002) found that a manager's self-efficacy can, indeed, lead to enhanced employee engagement. The importance of displaying a genuine responsibility to employees and communities, and investing in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities in order to secure engagement, is upheld by many researchers. Sirota Survey Intelligence's survey of employees from more than 70 organisations found that 86 per cent of employees who are satisfied with their organisation's CSR commitment have high levels of engagement and have positive views of their employer's sense of direction, integrity, and interest in employee well-being among others (Levinson, 2007).

However, when employees were skeptical of the organisation's commitment to CSR, only 37 per cent were engaged (Smith & Bititci, 2017). Robinson et al. (2007) found that individuals who have had an accident at work tend to have lower levels of engagement. Being harassed at work also had a detrimental impact on engagement, particularly if the perpetrator of the harassment was a manager.

Both the academic and the practitioner literature, as shown earlier in the review, highlight the significant influence that management can have on engagement levels from the moment people are recruited into the organisation.

Employee engagement research shows that the right managers can have a direct impact on bringing people into the organisation who are committed to doing quality work and facilitating a fun and caring atmosphere, which can nurture friendships among employees (Ott et al., 2019). As Ott et al. (2019) suggest, through reputation and through the ability to select the right people, good management can bring people into the organisation with the potential to be highly engaged in their work. Throughout an individual's employment in the organisation, it is the quality of the relationship between a manager and employee that can be a crucial driver of engagement and satisfaction with the organization: The quality of the relationship that an employee has with his or her immediate manager is one of the most influential factors driving engagement and satisfaction (Dye, 2018). The line manager clearly has a very important role in fostering employees' sense of involvement and value (Robinson et al., 2007). If managers can enable their staff to feel involved and valued in their work, with freedom and support, then they play a very important role in nurturing engagement.

#### **4.3.4. Training & Development Opportunities**

The importance of development opportunities in enabling engagement is a view upheld by many organisations. For instance, four studies conducted by Gallup, Learning and Development Round Table, The Conference Board, and the Corporate Leadership Council, showed 'a cross-validation for the link between employee development and high engagement. Together, they create a compelling business case for investing in the development of people.' (Levinson, 2007a). Levinson (2007a) suggests that organisational cultures where there is a belief in and practice of employee development enables employees to engage in the organisation. Likewise, Robinson (2007, p. 37) found that employees who have a 'personal development plan and are satisfied with access to development opportunities typically have high engagement levels. Moreover, research by Roffey Park Institute suggests that development opportunities are one of several key enablers of engagement, along with good management and leadership. Melcrum's research found that opportunities for career advancement, and training and development, were important drivers of engagement. As with other research, they also found people highly rated the importance of a people-centric culture, belief in company direction, formal internal communication, and involvement and consultation on company decisions in driving engagement.

#### **4.3.5. Performance Management**

According to Aguinis (2013), performance management is a continuous process of identifying, measuring, and developing the performance of individuals

and teams and aligning performance with the strategic goals of the organisation. Robinson et al. (2007) found several elements of performance management process that can have positive effects on engagement levels. For instance, receiving an appraisal and training were shown to increase engagement in some organisations (although this may be dependent upon the quality of appraisal or training received), with engagement lowest in those who had received no recent training. Similarly, having a performance development plan was seen to have a positive impact on engagement.

Opportunities for informal development through secondments and coaching were associated with higher engagement levels. Melcrum (2007) also cites the importance of compensation, benefits and formal recognition in instilling employee engagement. According to Saks (2006), when employees receive recognition and rewards from their organisation, they feel obligated to perform. In 2008, a survey by CHA asked one thousand employees what single action their employer could take immediately to help improve engagement during the economic downturn. First and foremost, a pay rise including bonus or incentives was requested, followed by company-organized social events, praise, encouragement, flexible working and reassurance about job security. In line with other research, they also asked for honest and positive senior management that is in touch, good communication, and more staff training.

Robinson et al. (2007) reported that job satisfaction, feeling valued and involved and equality of opportunity are the three strongest drivers of engagement. This echoes Blessing White's finding that rewarding efforts and encouragement are of great importance to employees. Watson (2007) found that having clear expectations and delivering promised rewards is key to engaging the workforce. They found that 69 per cent of employees who report that their employers set clear expectations and deliver on promises are highly engaged compared to around 25 per cent who say their employers do not. However, Robinson et al. (2007) suggest that, whilst satisfaction with salary and rewards can be a driver of engagement, it usually is often overshadowed by other factors and is typically more likely a disengagement, when one is dissatisfied, than an engager.

According to Aguinis (2013), there are two critical points to note during performance management; the first point is that it is a 'continuous process', which means ongoing. Organisations conduct bi-annual performance appraisals on their employees confusing it with performance management. This highlights a lack of understanding by managers and human resource business partners. Performance appraisal sessions are usually a tick-box exercise for managers, an administrative hurdle imposed by human resources. The second point is 'aligning performance

with the strategic goals'; business needs change and these changes must translate into changes in employee objectives.

#### **4.3.6. Work Life Balance**

Lockwood (2007) also suggests that work-life balance is an important lever for engagement, and that this has an impact upon staff retention. Research has shown that having life-work balance is an important factor in enabling engagement (Johnson, 2004) and that sufficient recovery during leisure time supports physical, and psychological well-being and equips people with the resources needed to be engaged and to show dedication, vigor and absorption at work (Sonnentag et al., 2010). Spam (2010) recommends that in seeking to engage today's employees, companies must not shy away from new technologies that enable telecommuting or virtual work environments since they help contribute to work-life balance. Molinaro and Weiss added that "organizations that create cultures that value balance and assist employees to achieve work life balance will be rewarded with highly engaged employees." This shows that the work environment needs to be conducive to drive engagement.

#### **4.3.7. Effective Communication**

Workplace communications consultancy, CHA, found that building a positive and appreciative culture through communication was found to keep staff motivated, especially if financial rewards are not available, which may be particularly relevant in today's economic climate. A lack of clear or poor communication can lead to distrust, high turnover, frustration and doubt. Organisations need to have a strategic communication plan that encompasses what will be communicated and the methods of communication. Delivery methods must be adapted to the audience. Effective communication is a two-way process. Employees who engage in upward communication are willing to provide the organisation with valuable information, raise concerns or give input, and when they are demotivated and stop having a voice, they may be depriving the organisation of useful information. It is therefore important that employees are allowed to have a voice without fear of intimidation or victimization. According to Morgan (2017), having good communication systems can be critical for engagement.

Leary-Joyce (2004) also proposes that employee engagement is driven by opportunities for upwards feedback, effective consultation and communication systems, and a manager who is fair and visibly committed to the organisation. Employees may engage in an organisation if they can understand the organisation's values and goals, and developments in these. They need to understand how their own role contributes to these, and the resources available to deliver them, as well as feeling well-informed about what is happening in the organisation. Only through having formal



and open two-way communication between managers and staff, such as having opportunities for upwards feedback without fear of repercussions, can employees access this information. Consulting employees in decision-making processes enables them to feel that they are being heard, and may instill a sense of ownership over the outcome.

#### 4.3.8. Kahn's Three Factors (Meaningfulness, Safety and Availability)

Kahn (1990) found that the presence of three psychological conditions influenced people to personally engage in their work and the absence of which encouraged disengagement. These are meaningfulness, safety and availability. Kahn suggests that people vary their degree of engagement in a given situation according to their perception of the benefits and the guarantees, and also by the resources they perceive themselves to have. Kahn found that people are more likely to engage in situations that are high on meaningfulness.

This proposition is supported by Lockwood (2007) who suggests that organisations who build a culture of meaningfulness are more likely to have engaged employees. Meaningfulness represents the sense of a return on investing the self and exerting energies into a task, and occurs when people feel they are valued and making a difference. It is important that the task is challenging, offers some autonomy and ownership, has clearly defined goals, is creative and varied, demands both routine and new skills, and has some influence and ownership over the work. Also important are rewarding and mutually supportive interpersonal interactions, and a sense of sharing experiences with clients and colleagues. May et al. (2004) also support Kahn's assertion and found that job fit and job enrichment positively predict meaningfulness at work. Feeling able to express and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status or career is another key determinant of engagement according to Kahn (1990).

People personally engage in situations perceived as safe, trustworthy, predictable and clear in terms of behavioural consequences (Kahn, 1990). Safety is largely promoted by the quality of relationships with colleagues and managers, which need to be open, trusting and supportive (Kahn, 1990). The perception of power and unconscious roles people play in group dynamics, roles that are accepted and played along with by other group members, such as being cast in a supporting rather than leading role may inhibit feeling able to safely personally engage, and such voices may be repressed in group situations (Kahn, 1990). Personal resources 'Physical, emotional and psychological resources are a necessary pre-requisite for engaging at work' (Sonnentag, 2003).

The level of availability that an individual has at work is determined by their own personal resources, their

recovery during leisure time and their participation in activities outside of work. 'Life outside work has an impact on how one feels and behaves at work' (Sonnentag, 2003, p. 518) 'Periods of rest at home are particularly important for maintaining well-being at work' (Eden, 2001, cited in Sonnentag, 2003, p. 518) 'Vacations and other periods of rest decrease perceived job stress and burnout and can increase life satisfaction' (Etzion et al., 1998; Lounsbury and Hoopes, 1986, both cited in Sonnentag, 2003, p. 518) According to Sonnentag (2003), individuals who sufficiently recover 'experience a higher level of work engagement during the subsequent work day' (p. 519). Sonnentag suggests that it is an individual's tendency to experience engagement and to take initiative, as well as their level of recovery during leisure time, which together account for feelings of engagement and actions of initiative on a given working day.

In summary, although there are a lot of drivers that foster employee engagement, this study identified, adopted and explained the factors shown in the figure 1 below as critical in fostering employee engagement in SOEs.

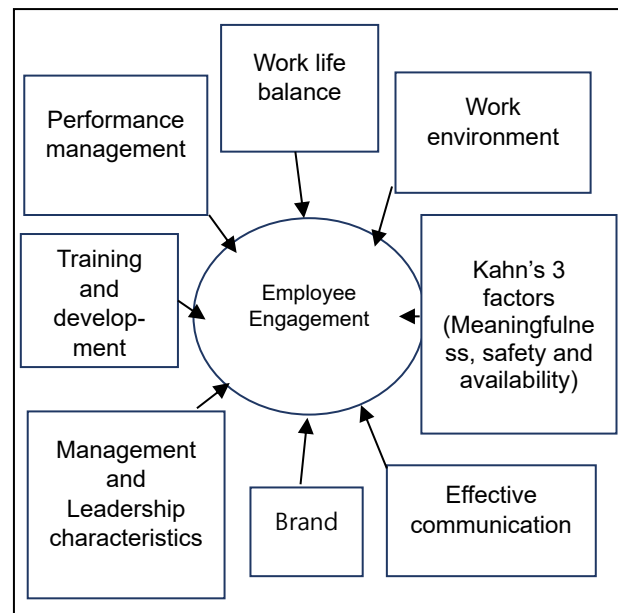


Figure 1: Strategies to Optimize employee engagement Model.

#### 4.4. Challenges to Employee Engagement

Although much of the literature has focused upon the drivers of engagement, there is also a growing focus upon identifying those factors that will inhibit employees' ability to engage or barriers to engagement at workplaces. Key factors include bureaucracy and heavy workloads. Lockwood (2007) maintains that bureaucratic behaviour in

organisations severely handicaps the potential of an organisation to engage its employees, as well as being over-worked, as both increase an employee's susceptibility to stress. These findings are supported by research by Roffey Park Institute, who found, in their survey of UK managers, that workload pressure along with poor management and poor communication were key barriers to engagement. This was particularly true during times of change, with bureaucracy and lack of time to achieve workload being the biggest de-motivators, and workload. Prior study highlighted that engagement is hindered by reactive rather than proactive decision-making, inconsistent management style which leads to perceptions of unfairness, poor communication and knowledge sharing and poor work-life balance due to long hours of work culture. MacLeod & Clarke (2009) believe that some leaders are not aware of employee engagement. Others do not believe that it is worth considering, or do not fully understand the concept and the benefits it could have for their organization. Others who are interested in the topic do not know how to address the issue. Even when leaders place great emphasis on the idea of employee engagement, managers may not share the belief, or may be ill-equipped to implement engagement strategies. As a result, the organization will be unable to deliver engagement. Among those leaders who are concerned with employee engagement, there is great variability in their views and commitment to it. Often the potential of employee engagement is underestimated.

## 5. Conclusion

Employee engagement is an area which needs more attention around the world because of its association with organizational performance indicators (Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2020). Evidence from a number of studies indicates a positive relationship between employee engagement and organizational performance indicators such as productivity, profitability, customer satisfaction and employee retention. In this regard, the need for organizations to drive engagement becomes critical. Hence, this paper provides a literature review of both qualitative and quantitative research on employee engagement in SOEs as portrayed in literature and offers more insight into the concept thereby developing and facilitating an improved understanding of employee engagement and proffering strategies for optimizing employee engagement in SOEs. This study concludes that branding, work environment, management and leadership characteristics, training and development, performance management, work life balance, effective communication and Kahn's three factors of meaningfulness, safety and availability are key in optimizing employee engagement in SOEs. This study

therefore recommends the adoption of these strategies by SOEs as they can go a long way in optimizing employee engagement problems that are prevalent in SOEs.

It is however important to note that it is unlikely that a 'one size fits all' approach is effective, as levels of engagement and its drivers vary according to the organization, employee group, the individual and the job itself (Robinson, & Hayday, 2007). Employee engagement is likely, therefore, to be influenced by many interrelated factors. Therefore, employee engagement remains a challenge that requires regular research. In this regard, this study recommends a further quantitative study that can prove the extent to which the suggested strategies can drive employee engagement in SOEs, hence validating the suggested strategies.

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