DETERMINANTS OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SOFTWARE ENGINEERS TELEWORKING IN JAFFNA

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Abstract

Employee engagements was one key concern of all the business organizations, especially during lockdown and resultant telework practice. This research investigates the determinants of employee engagement of software engineers who are teleworking. The crucial factors of employee engagement are determined through a preliminary literature survey and through conscious observation or evaluation of the study context. Internal communication, perceived supervisor support, and teamwork are the three key determinants identified for the study. An explanatory study was undertaken based on quantitative data, collected from 100 software engineers, through a pre-determined self-administered questionnaire. The descriptive statistics and correlation were measured using the SPSS software package. The results demonstrate that Internal communication, perceived supervisor support, and teamwork have a strong and statistically significant relationship with employee engagement. The scope and context limitations of this study opens up avenue for further studies.

Key Words: Employee engagement, Internal communication, Perceived supervisor support, and Teamwork.

Introduction

Dramatic changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has also resulted in unprecedented changes in world of work around the globe (Kirby, 2020). In that specific climate, firms struggle to promote employee engagement (Kumar, 2021). The businesses are compelled to prioritized employee engagement to ensure business continuity (Kumar, 2021). Thus, understanding on the determinants of employee engagement at teleworking setting became crucial (Kumar, 2021; Quantum Workplace, 2022). As a result of this event, the purpose of this study was to determine the appropriate drivers required to retain employee engagement in the new telework setting. More

specifically this study aims to examine the relationship between the identified primary employee engagement determinants and employee engagement among software engineers teleworking in Jaffna .

Sri Lanka is a booming market for worldwide IT services, in which software engineers are core employees. The IT sector is fostered and promoted, as the IT services has high potential to bring in revenue. Especially revenue in the form of foreign exchange (The Morning, 2022). Sri Lanka is well-positioned to become South Asia's IT/ITeS services

epicentre due to its favourable business environment and robust infrastructure (JLL & ICTA, 2021). Thus, the government together with SLASSCOM promotes the development of IT services and productivity of software engineers (SLASSCOM, 2022). Accordingly, the employee engagement of software engineers becomes crucial. Despite of its importance the lack of employee engagement amongst software engineers, who were involved in teleworking, is a new emergent issue to be addressed.

In numerous ways, investigation into the causes of employee engagement becomes significant. As it enlightens project managers and human resource professionals, the study on nourishing employee engagement would be of great value. Thus, decision-making regarding employee engagement programmes is facilitated. Therefore, increasing employee engagement could have a positive effect on the financial bottom line of IT firms. In addition, the HR manager or project team leader will be able to identify the elements that contribute to employee engagement and subsequently reinforce those factors. The insights will also be utilised by the IT industry and other industries to increase employee engagement. Specifically, this understanding could aid managerial decision-makers in embracing a paradigm shift in creating remote work practises. Potential project managers in the IT industry will comprehend the factors that contribute to employee engagement and afterwards design human resource initiatives. Future researchers will also utilise the findings to identify elements that can increase employee engagement, particularly in teleworking environments. This investigation seeks to address the following research question. What are the determinants of employee engagement of software engineers involved in teleworking in Jaffna?

Research Problem

Employee engagement is a major challenge for businesses, particularly in teleworking environments. In response to the pandemic, several companies transformed to remote working practice for the first time. Businesses and governments were taken off guard by the rapidity with which the pandemic demanded social and physical separation (Kirby, 2020). As all the companies around the globe, software companies in Jaffna are also following the working from home concept to ensure the safety of their employees (Al Jazeera, 2022; The Island, 2022). The critical question is what determines the employee engagement of those teleworking software engineers?

Exiting literature indicates many factors that determines the employee engagement over time. There were three main categories of determinants of employee engagement identified in the normal work setting. They are individual level determinants, job-related determinants, and organisational level variables (Bakker et al., 2006; Farndale, 2015; Harter et al., 2002; Kahn, 1990; Langelaan et al., 2006; May et al., 2004; Rich et al., 2010; Roof, 2015; Salanova et al., 2005; Schaufeli, 2008; Simbula et al., 2011; Xanthopoulou, 2009; Zhang & Can, 2005). These factors have been studied in the past in the context of normal job settings. There are, however, lack of studies on employee engagement in teleworking environments. The industrialist and academia consider that the new teleworking practise has an impact on employee engagement (Kumar, 2021; Quantum Workplace, 2022). However, the researchers has observed that the employee engagement in a teleworking setting has not been studied (Kumar, 2021).

Therefore, the researcher would like to ascertain, what are the key determinant of employee engagement of software engineers, special reference to the software engineers teleworking in Jaffna. Accordingly, the aim of this research study is, to investigate the relationship between the identified key employee engagement drivers and employee engagement of software engineers teleworking in Jaffna.

Literature Review

The popularity of the subject of employee engagement has increased among practitioners and academics (Kumar, 2021; Robertson-Smith & Markwick, 2009). The existing definitions indicated employee engagement as personal engagement, job involvement, emotional commitment, employee involvement, work engagement and executive engagement (Dharmasiri & Jayawardana, 2021). Gallup (as cited in Vance, 2006, p.3) defines employee engagement is the involvement with and enthusiasm for work. An American scholar, Kahn (1990) first define the engagement as the "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances". Kruse (2012) defines employee engagement as "the individual's emotional commitment to the organisation and its objectives". Widespread belief is that when employees feel engaged with their job position and the organization's mission, they are not only likely to be happier, healthier, and more fulfilled, but also more likely to provide improved performance, contribution, and creativity (Young & Gifford, 2022). According to Saks (2006) defined employee engagement as distinct and unique construct that consists of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural components that are associated with individual role performance. Thus, the assessment of exiting literature shows that employee engagement is defined in many different perspectives.

Employee engagement is analyzed from the job-demand resources (JD-R) model in the existing literature. Job demand resource theory indicates that resources and demands that are related to work environment and personal attributes (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Thus, the antecedences can be job demands, job resources, personal demands, and personal resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Previous empirical studies have theorised the employee engagement based on the JD-R perspective (Mayuran & Kailasapathy, 2020). Accordingly, the existing study theorizes the (internal communication, perceived supervisor's support, and teamwork) as antecedences (specifically relating to job environment) of the employee engagement of teleworking software engineers.

Internal communication is identified as a key determinant of employee engagement. The internal communication is defined as "all internal formal and informal communication occurring at all organisational levels" (Kalla, 2005, p.304). The existing empirical findings indicates that internal communication is an important ingredient of employee engagement. A study empirically validated the relationship between internal communication and employee engagement in Iran's Petrochemical Industry (Davardoost & Javadi, 2019). Further, another study conducted based on HR managers in IT firms has indicated that employee engagements can be enhanced using internal communication (Lalić, Milić, & Stanković, 2020). Moreover, Chamindi and Welmilla (2015) discovered that there is a positive and statistically significant association between internal communication and employee engagement, particularly among

operational level personnel in the Sri Lankan textile industry. Therefore, the following relationship is inferred that there is a relationship between internal communication and employee engagement.

In addition to internal communication, the perceived supervisor's support is regarded as a significant factor in employee engagement. The definition of perceived supervisor's support is "the extent to which employees perceive that their supervisor values their efforts at work and cares about their well-being." (Eisenberger et al., 2002). Perceived supervisor support is theorized as job resource under Job Demand Resource theory (Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Numerous empirical investigations have demonstrated the favourable relationship between perceived supervisor support and engagement studies. A study on employee engagement of marketing employees in the banking industry of Tangerang revealed that the perceived supervisor support is a strong indicator of employee engagement (Kurniawan & Anindita, 2021). In addition, a study on Indian banking sector employees shows that the support at work fuels employee engagement (Ghosh et al., 2016). Further, a study on employees' engagement in employees of Telecommunication companies in Malaysian revealed that supervisor support is a significant determinant of employee engagement. (Mohamed & Ali, 2016). Moreover, in a study of 1039 Australian nurses, it is found that the supervisor support is positively related to employee engagement (Holland et al., 2016). In addition, previous studies have established supervisor support as a job resource, which could predict the employee engagement (Saks, 2006; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Therefore, the following relationship is inferred that there is a relationship between perceived supervisor's support and employee engagement.

Teamwork is another significant determinant of employee engagement. Teamwork is simply the operation and cooperation of a team (Change et al., 2019). Consequently, demonstrates the capacity to collaborate toward a common vision, as well as the ability to direct individual achievements toward organisational objectives. Therefore, it is the fuel that allows ordinary people to achieve amazing results. Empirical findings indicates that teamwork is a crucial predictor of employee engagement. A study on employees' engagement in Maldives telecommunication network indicated that the teamwork and collaboration as a significant cause of employee engagement (Mansoor & Hassan, 2016). In addition, another study on employee engagement of employees in the Kenyan energy sector indicated that teamwork has the statistically significant relationship with employee engagement (Change et al., 2019). Therefore, the following relationship is inferred that there is a relationship between teamwork and employee engagement.

Prior research has demonstrated any other factors influencing employee engagement. In addition, these factors can be divided into three categories: individual factors, job factors, and organisational factors (Bakker et al., 2006; Farndale, 2015; Harter et al., 2002; Kahn, 1990; Langelaan et al., 2006; May et al., 2004; Rich et al., 2010; Roof, 2015; Salanova et al., 2005; Schaufeli, 2008; Simbula et al., 2011; Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019; Xanthopoulou, 2009; Zhang & Can, 2005). According to the existing literature, all of these many aspects determine employee engagement (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). Prior research has examined these causes in a typical workplace setting. This study identifies teamwork, internal

communication, and perceived supervisor support as the most influential elements for employee engagement in a teleworking setting. Consequently, this study considers teamwork, internal communication, and perceived supervisor support as determinants of employee engagement.

There have been research that establish a causal link between job factors and employee engagement. Kahn (1990) identified task characteristics, role characteristics, and work interaction as job-related factors that impact employee engagement. Work environment is proposed as a job-related component that influences employee engagement (Harter et al., 2002). May et al. (2004) concluded that job enrichment is a work-related factor. As job related factors, job control, job involvement, job feedback, work rewards, and job security were identified (Salanova et al., 2005; Schaufeli, 2008). Consequently, job-related variables impact employee engagement.

Researchers have conducted investigations that revealed a causal link between organisational characteristics and employee engagement. First, a second study found that direct supervisor, senior management team, and coworkers serve as organisational factors (Harter et al., 2002). Secondly, Kahn (1990) discovered that group and inter-group dynamics, management style and procedure, and organisational norms are organisational factors that influence employee engagement. Thirdly, another study suggests that job role compatibility, rewarding coworkers, and a supportive manager are organisational factors (May et al.,2004). Fourth, support, feeling of justice, interpersonal consumption, and conflict have been experimentally confirmed as organisational level characteristics that influence employee engagement (Zhang & Can, 2005). Fifth, supervisor support was cited as a determinant at the organisational level (Salanova et al., 2005; Schaufeli, 2008). In addition, Farndale (2015) found that financial returns, team culture, and participation in decision-making are positively correlated with employee engagement. Therefore, factors at the organisational level drive employee engagement.

Individual factors and employee engagement have been shown to have a causal relationship in may prior investigations. First, May et al. (2004) indicated that self-consciousness is a factor related to the individual level. Second, a separate study discovered that neuroticism, extraversion, and mobility are individual traits that influence employee engagement (Langelaan et al., 2006). Thirdly, Kahn (1990) listed physical energies, emotional energies, insecurity, and outside life as characteristics that impact employee engagement at the individual level. Fourth, a further empirical investigation confirmed that self-efficacy, self-esteem, and optimism are individual-level variables that influence employee engagement (Simbula et al., 2011; Xanthopoulou, 2009). Fifth, other elements including resilience, control points, emotional stability, and spirituality (Bakker et al., 2006; Rich et al., 2010; Roof, 2015). Consequently, indivudal level influences determine employee engagement.

Research Methodology

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows the study framework of this research. Based on the above literature, three key employee engagement drivers were considered to develop the following conceptual framework for the study.
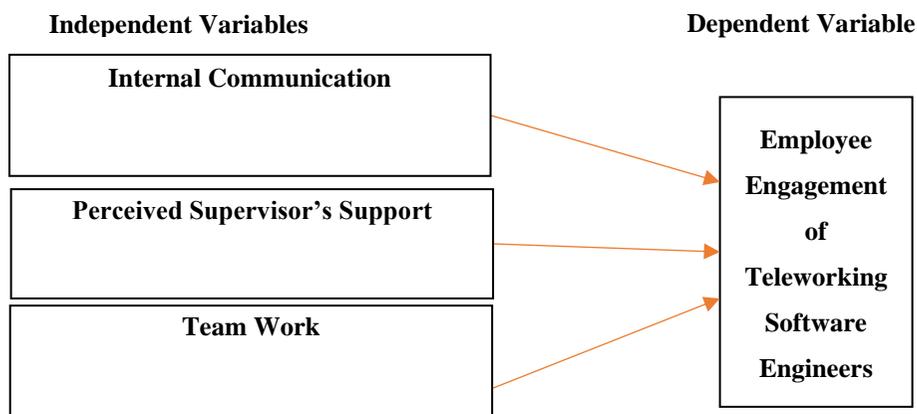
Independent Variables	Dependent Variable
Internal Communication	**Employee Engagement of Teleworking Software Engineers**
Perceived Supervisor's Support	
Team Work	

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the study.

Statements of Hypotheses

Based on the conceptual framework above, the following hypotheses have been formulated for this research study.

H1-There is a relationship between internal communication and employee engagement.

H2 -There is a relationship between perceived supervisor's support and employee engagement.

H3- There is a relationship between teamwork and employee engagement.

Sample and Data

This study attempted to investigate the basic causal relationship between identified employee engagement drivers and employee engagement of software engineer teleworking in Jaffna.

This study adopted positivist philosophy and deductive approach, to investigate the determinants of employee engagement. Quantitative design of study was therefore chosen. Moreover, hypotheses are derived from the deductions made. Upon that, the survey approach is determined, and a questionnaire is constructed. Figure 1 depicts the study's variables:

internal communication, perceived supervisor support, teamwork, and employee engagement. The study involved secondary data gathered from manuscripts of research studies and reports. In addition, the primary data for the study is collected through a questionnaire. A Likert's scale questionnaire was designed with aforementioned variables as well as demographic information. This cross-sectional survey, administrated through Google Form. Data is gathered from a convenient sample of 100 software engineer teleworking working in Jaffna during COVID-19 pandemic. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS Version 21) package was deployed to perform descriptive statistical analysis, and Pearson's Correlation analysis, on data acquired from self-administrative structured questionnaire.

Findings and discussion

Males made up 59% of the sample, while females made up 41%. Amongst them, 28 were software engineer, 22 were trainee software engineer, 17 were associate tech lead, 08 were tech lead, 08 were senior tech lead, 07 were associate consultant, 05 were associate software engineer, 04 were consultants, and 1 was other designation. Furthermore, 20% of the respondents were under the age of 20, majority of the respondents (44%) were between the ages of 21 and 30, 17% were between the ages of 31 and 40, 10% were between the ages of 41 and 50, 07% were between the ages of 51 and 60, and 02% were beyond age of 60 years. In addition, the majority of responders (39%) have 2-5 years of experience, 31% have less than 02 years of experience, 17% have 6-10 years of experience, 10% have 11-25 years of experience, and 03% have over 25 years of experience.

Descriptive Statistics of Variables

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the variables (Employee engagement, Internal communication, Perceived supervisor support, and Teamwork). The researcher studied the distribution of responses and data points using descriptive statistics, taking into consideration the Mean value and Standard Deviation (SD) of each variable. As indicated in Table 1, the Mean value of all the variables are greater than 4. In addition, standard deviation value of all the variables (independent and dependent) are less than one (SD<=1), indicating that all responses are closely clustered around respective individual Mean value. The Perceived supervisor's support recorded highest Mean value of 4.12. Further, Teamwork and internal communication recorded the mean value nearly 4.07. This result shows that the respondents agree that perceived supervisor's support, teamwork and internal communication are favourable elements that persists in the working context of teleworking software engineers.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics – Dependent and Independent Variables

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Employee engagement	4.15	0.91	100
Internal communication	4.06	0.82	100
Perceived supervisor's support	4.12	0.80	100
Teamwork	4.08	0.83	100

The Pearson's correlation coefficient performed to determine the relationships between the identified three employee engagement variables and the employee engagement. Table 2 shows the statistical results of Person correlation.

Table 2: Results of Correlation Analysis

Independent Variable	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Sig. (1-tailed) p-value (P)	N
Internal communication	0.801	0.000	100
Perceived supervisor's support	0.846	0.000	100
Teamwork	0.906	0.000	100

The first hypothesis (H_1) claimed that there is a relationship between internal communication and employee engagement. At the 5% level of confidence, the results confirm the existence of a strong (r=0.801) and statistically significant relationship (p<0.05). Thus, the observed data supports the hypothetical relationship and reveals that internal communication does have a robust relationship with employee engagement. As a result, H_1 is accepted. This finding is supported by many previous research studies. A study conducted in Petrochemical Industry in Iran, another study conducted amongst HR managers in IT firms and a study conducted in Sri Lankan Apparel sector revealed the same significant relationship between internal communication and employee engagement (Chamindi & Welmilla, 2015; Davardoost & Javadi, 2019; Lalić, Milić, & Stanković, 2020).

The second hypothesis (H_2) claimed that there is a relationship between perceived supervisor's support and employee engagement. At the 5% level of confidence, the results confirm the existence of a strong (r=0.846) and statistically significant relationship (p<0.05). Thus, the observed data supports the hypothetical relationship and reveals that perceived supervisor's support does have a robust relationship with employee engagement. As a result, H_2 is accepted. Many previous empirical studies found the significant relationship between Perceived supervisor support and employee engagement. Around two studies conducted in the

banking industries of Tangerang and Indian indicated the same significant relationship between supervisor support and employee engagement (Ghosh et al., 2016; Kurniawan & Anindita, 2021). In addition, a study in Telecommunication companies in Malaysian and health sector in Australian targeting employee engagement of nurses (Holland et al., 2016; Mohamed & Ali, 2016).

The first hypothesis (H_3) claimed that there is a relationship between teamwork and employee engagement. At the 5% level of confidence, the results confirm the existence of a strong (r=0.906) and statistically significant relationship (p<0.05). Thus, the observed data supports the hypothetical relationship and reveals that teamwork does have a robust relationship with employee engagement. As a result, H_3 is accepted. This finding is consistent with the findings of empirical studies. They are, a study on employees' engagement in Maldives telecommunication (Mansoor & Hassan, 2016) and another study on employee engagement of employees in the Kenyan energy sector (Change et al., 2019). Those studies indicated that the teamwork is a crucial determinant of employee engagement.

Current study contributes to the empirical and management implications. First, the findings demonstrate empirically that internal communication, perceived supervisor support and teamwork are critical determinants of employee engagement of software engineers, particularly software engineers involved in teleworking practice. Second, as per the findings, it necessitates managerial implications for internal communication, perceived supervisor support and teamwork. For instance, supportive norms and practices can be enforced to foster an internal communication and teamwork. Moreover, supervisory support can be enhanced through an initiative backed by well-structured reward system. This could include supervisor relationship that can be nurtured by re-design of job profile. These elements can assist foster the internal communication, supervisor support, and teamwork, hence improve employee engagement. Despite these implications, this study is not without flaws.

Scope and sample limitations of the existing study can be considered in future research. First, there are numerous predictors of employee engagement and only three employee engagement drivers were addressed in the study. Second, the findings might have been influenced by the survey method's perceptual imperfections. Thirdly, the contextual differences, particularly the industry specific conditions and sample characteristics, could have influenced the findings. As a result, this opens up the possibility of studying the effect of several other drivers of employee engagement using alternative research methodologies and in alternative contexts.

Conclusion

Considering the dearth of employee engagement among software engineers who work remotely in Sri Lanka's IT sector, the purpose of this study was to identify and examine the essential antecedents of employee engagement. Internal communication, perceived supervisor support, and teamwork were the most significant predictors of employee engagement, according to a literature review. The findings of this study reveal that all three of the aforementioned employee engagement drivers have a strong association with software engineer employee engagement. Despite its limited scope and context, this study validates the

J-DR model's causality and supports past findings. Henceforth, it suggests that a focus on teamwork, internal communication, and supervisor support may boost employee engagement.

In an IT organisation with a project-based or team-based structure, operating and collaborating with team members becomes essential for the delivery of team results. In such businesses, the performance of the team is the most important performance indicator, which is tied to an employee's awards and promotions. Thus, a teamwork environment could increase employee engagement. In addition, internal communication serves as the glue that holds the team members together. Therefore, the significance of internal communication rises in determining employee engagement. Especially in a telework environment, where IT team members are physically separated from one another, internal communications become indispensable. In addition to these factors, supervisor support is essential in a teleworking environment for reasons such as employee adaptation to a fresh setting, new teleworking practises, and new channels of communication. In addition, the teleworking environment's lack of work-life boundaries, increased technostress, and presence of isolation from work relationships resulted in a significant need for psychological support from their superiors. Therefore, employee engagement in a telecommuting environment necessitates teamwork, communication, and supervisor support.

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