

Employee Engagement Insights: Literature Review and Exploration of Core Components

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Keywords

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Abstract

The concept of employee engagement has long been recognised within human resource management, though it has recently become more important in organisations seeking to attract, retain, and maximise the performance of their workforce. This review paper synthesises evidence linking recruitment-initiated engagement to retention, productivity, and customer satisfaction. The narrative-systematic review methodology was adopted, combining relevant peer-reviewed studies from major academic databases with keywords such as "work engagement," productivity, "recruitment," "retention," and "employee engagement" that were published between 1990 and 2025.

Inclusion criteria required empirical investigation of engagement's antecedents or outcomes in organisational settings; non-empirical conceptual papers were excluded. The analysis shows that higher employee engagement is systematically correlated with lower turnover intention and longer tenure (e.g., hazard ratio = 0.22 in a healthcare study) (Zhu et al., 2023).

This review uniquely treats engagement as a recruitment-starting lifecycle, offering practitioners retention insights and highlighting a neglected recruitment-engagement-outcome research pathway.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

Organisations now take the notion of employee engagement seriously. Employees feel motivated by different aspects of employee engagement. Employee feels more connected to the organisation when they get appreciation for their work and connected with the organisation's success willingly.

Research shows that employee engagement should be the goal of a company and its management. Employee engagement is a contemporary notion born out of research on engagement, empowerment, motivation, commitment, etc. of an employee. This is not only related to employees' positive feelings towards their work and organisation, but also with their motivation, commitment and effort towards their work. Effectively using human resource services to achieve goals and create positive employee behaviour in a competitive environment is a real-time effort by organisations.

Dedicated employees identify with the organisation and ensure its success with unlimited commitment. Employee engagement can be viewed as a possible result of a workplace culture in which employees feel empathy for the organisation. Engagement also means alignment with the organisation and some level of commitment. Employee engagement occurs when a company values its employees and vice versa.

1.2 Research problem and rationale

1.2.1 Research problem

Despite increasing awareness of employee engagement as a strategic organisational objective, the levels of engagement in South Africa remain relatively low, with reports indicating only about 53% of employees being engaged and almost one-fifth being disengaged. This suggests that this area remains a challenge for consistent, sustainable engagement across sectors. Moreover, existing research often treats employee engagement as a single, broad construct, failing to unpack its components of motivation, commitment, discretionary effort, alignment, and recognition, or how these operate in the diverse range of organisational and cultural contexts. As a result, there is limited empirical understanding and conceptualisation of how these interacting dimensions have a bearing on overall engagement and organisational performance in South Africa. Addressing this gap is critical in developing targeted engagement frameworks that could help improve employee well-being, enhance productivity, and ensure long-term organisational success.

1.2.2 Rationale

Engagement has become a strategic objective of organisations due to substantial evidence that when employees are connected to the organisation, their work is recognised, and their goals are aligned with the organisation's, they become motivated, committed, and willing to go the extra mile. For example, the concept of engagement has expanded from solely feelings of positivity to one that also involves psychological investment and behavioural execution within the realm of work. In the South African context, engagement remains a challenge: for example, only about 53 % of employees in South Africa are reported as engaged, while 20 % are disengaged. The findings underline that there is a need for deeper investigation of how engagement works, its core components and antecedents, and outcomes, especially in the regional and organisational settings where empirical evidence is limited.

1.3 Purpose of the study

This study aims to explore and synthesise existing literature on employee engagement to identify its core components and understand how these influence employee performance and organisational success. It will seek to investigate the effective drivers that lead to engagement, including motivation, commitment, recognition, and alignment, and how these work within an organisational framework. Through a critical review of both theoretical and empirical evidence, the study aims to demystify the multifaceted nature of engagement and bridge existing gaps in the literature. Finally, it will provide a conceptual framework for formulating appropriate strategies that shall enhance productivity and employee well-being.

1.4 Research objectives

The purpose of this paper is to observe the key aspects inducing employee engagement. Employee engagement has developed as a noteworthy theme in modern-day human resource management. The foundations of paper were secondary. There were evaluations of articles and research papers that had been gathered from reputable periodicals, journals, newspapers, and websites that dealt with employee engagement and its factors:

- Identify and categories the core components of engagement—motivation, commitment, discretionary effort, appreciation/recognition, and alignment; and
- Highlight research gaps and propose directions for future inquiry and organisational practice.

1.5 Existing state of research and research gaps

Since employee engagement was first defined by William Kahn in 1990, as a concept that harnesses the physical, cognitive, and emotional selves of employees in work roles, engagement has been a multidimensional concept reframed through many different frameworks. For example, the JD-R model views job demands interacting with job resources (such as organisational support, autonomy, and opportunities for growth) as a key determinant of engagement. More contemporary studies conceptualise engagement as a multidimensional construct of motivation, commitment, and emotional connectedness. In an international context, studies across the world find consistent links between job resources and meaningful work, supportive leadership, and higher engagement levels. The beneficial outcomes of this include enhanced job satisfaction, greater organisational commitment, and a reduced turnover of labour. However, contextual factors might determine whether such benefits will be forthcoming; examples of these are organisational culture, leadership style, and the nature of the industry.

Despite the strong theoretical and empirical underpinning, there are research gaps. While the antecedents and outcomes of engagement have been well documented, fewer studies have looked at its core components-including alignment, appreciation, connectedness, and discretionary effort-within an integrated framework. Additionally, much of the research is context-bound, with most such studies being single-industry or single-geography-based, thus lacking a cross-sectoral understanding of the underlying mechanisms of engagement. This suggests the need for further exploration of how engagement manifests across different organisational environments and how emotional factors like recognition and connectedness to organisational success contribute toward sustained engagement and performance outcomes.

1.6 Structure of the paper

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows:

- **Section 2** presents a comprehensive **literature review**, outlining conceptual foundations, empirical studies, and the current state of research;
- **Section 3** discuss **research methodology**;
- **Section 4** presents data sources and selection criteria; and
- **Section 5** concludes with a discussion of implications, limitations, and conclusion for future research and practice.

1.7 Definitions of employee engagement

Employee Engagement Insights: Literature Review and Exploration of Core Components, Sharma & Biswas (2025).

Table 1 Noteworthy Contributions: Definitions of Employee Engagement

Contributors	Contributions
Kahn (1990)	“Personal engagement is the simultaneous employment and expression of a person’s preferred self in task behaviour that promote connections to work and to others, personal presence, and active full role performance.”
Maslach, Schaufeli and Leiter (2001) p. 417	“A positive, persistent motivational state which is characterized by high level of pleasure and activation.”
Sundaray (2011)	“Employee engagement described as the concept which dealt with the level of commitment and involvement of employee with their organization. It develops positive attitude in employees towards the organization.”
Gulati (2012)	“Employee engagement is the situation where employee should show their commitment towards their organization as well as employer and customers by his actions and attitudes.”
Iqbal et al. (2013)	“Employee engagement can be defined as the commitment and involvement of employee toward employer and its principles and values etc.”
Fatma and	“Employee engagement gets strongly impacted by the dimension’s communication satisfaction .”

Source: *Conceived and Developed by the authors based on literature review*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical background

Employee engagement is a multidimensional construct with several key underpinning theories emanating from within organisational behaviour. Kahn's psychological conditions theory (1990) defines engagement as the harnessing of the employees' physical, cognitive, and emotional selves in their work roles, placing emphasis on meaningfulness, psychological safety, and availability as drivers of motivation, commitment, and discretionary effort.

The job demands-resources (JD-R) model explains that engagement results from the balance between job demands and resources. Resources such as leadership support, recognition, growth opportunities, and meaningful work enhance alignment with organisational goals and employee appreciation, reinforcing engagement.

The social exchange theory of Blau's 1964 perspective frames engagement as a process of reciprocity: the more

organisations demonstrate support and recognition, the greater the commitment, effort, and alignment of employees. This emphasizes that connectedness and discretionary behaviour are key components of engagement.

Self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (2000) also focuses on the fact that the satisfaction of the intrinsic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness will enhance engagement. Employees feeling valued and aligned with the organisational objectives are intrinsically motivated and will invest discretionary effort.

Together, these theories form a conceptual basis for exploring engagement as the dynamic interaction of individual motivation, organisational support, recognition, alignment with goals, and discretionary effort, providing practical insights into the cultivation of sustained engagement in diverse organisational contexts.

1.2.1 Studies of employee engagement

The body of work on employee engagement which discuss the benefits of employee engagement towards various companies. This is a crucial concept that deals with the employees and their relationship with their employers. This work stresses the evaluation available on employee engagement in different sectors.

Masuku, Esterhuyzen and Ramajoe (2025) investigated the factors that determine employee engagement and job satisfaction among municipal employees. The key predictors, which emerged, included leadership communication, career growth opportunities, and organisational support; this study related engagement to improved public-service delivery. Cassim, Botha, Botha and Bisschoff (2024) studied engagement in a private higher education institution during Covid-19. They identified virtual communication, leadership empathy, and flexible work arrangements as essential to sustaining engagement in remote operations. Chikukwa, Lourens and Mbona (2024) studied engagement in a South African university, confirming positive influences on institutional performance and turnover. Supportive management and meaningful work experiences were key to developing sustained engagement. Mabotja, Cele and Mavutha (2024) investigated strategies for employee engagement in South African manufacturing, and identified recognition, transparent communication, and career growth as substantial elements of driving engagement, while the perceived lack of managerial support has reduced the effectiveness of engagement. Green and Van Zyl (2023) demonstrated how psychological capital and self-leadership significantly influence the engagement of agricultural extension advisers. The findings indicated that individual psychological resources play a significant role in developing resilience and motivation. Mmako and Schultz (2023) designed an engagement framework for South African TVET colleges, pointing out leadership, organisational culture, and recognition as important antecedents. Their framework emphasizes the importance of contextualised approaches in enhancing educators' engagement.

Zenas, Nmadu and Usman (2023) conducted a literature review across the globe to establish that engagement is

a prime predictor of performance, innovation, and commitment. The authors call for integrating strategies of engagement in HR policies for sustainable productivity. Mbhele and de Beer (2022) confirmed that transparent internal communication engenders engagement by building trust and inclusiveness. The study found that effective feedback mechanisms enhance the sense of belonging and identification in an organisation. Maleka et al. (2019) compared engagement, commitment, and satisfaction across Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The findings confirmed the positive interrelationship among the variables, thus suggesting engagement as being cross-culturally robust within the SADC region. Alghafli, Alzahrani and Alturairi (2023) illustrated, using a global corporate case study, that engagement brings about improvements in productivity and profitability. Leadership support, recognition, and empowerment were cited as key factors driving high engagement and performance outcomes.

Mulang (2022) discussed the problem that managers and leaders of organisations face for the survival of the organisation, and its solution is considering employees as integral assets within human resource management. Employees are more likely to leave, when their company perceives inequality and work-life equilibrium because their needs are not met. This study used a quantitative method and gathered primary data in questionnaire form, in a sample of 70 employees of PT. BSB–Kalla Group. For data analysis, quantitative method is used with SEM using SmartPLS. Results show that employee engagement cannot be an intermediating variable between organisational equity and work-life balance in turnover of employee intentions. Direct effects show a positive significant result of the two independent variables in determining the dependent variable. Two independent variables indirectly mediated by employee engagement have a negative impact on the dependent variable of employee turnover intentions. From the outcome of the above investigations, the decision to leave a job is affected by the application of administrative fairness to the corporation, and the work-life equilibrium of each member is created through employee engagement as an interceding variable.

Chaudhary et al. (2022) found that because of the rapid global spread of Covid-19, many organisations are changing their procedures. Some companies are transitioning their complete labour force to short term telecommuting or isolated working. As with other employee characters, changes in employee engagement are also envisioned. This study aims to explore and statistically evaluate aspects which can affect employee engagement. An online questionnaire was used to collect statistics from 208 workforces employed from home in India. Engagement scores were calculated using the UWES-14 (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale). Numerous regression analysis was used to examine the effects of a total of 10 variables. Regression findings suggest that appropriate E-tools, outreach by organisational leaders, psychological well-being research, and virtual training increase employee engagement. Women employees have been found to be more proactive when working from home than male employees. Results showed that virtual teamwork, marital status, and entertainment tools did

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not significantly affect employee engagement. Chaudhary et al propose the following: first, organisations should promote improvements in digital instruments such as internet speed and PC configuration. Second, employee salaries should not be docked. Third, organisational leaders should be in recurrent communication with employees, intensification cybernetic training, and encourage employees to undergo regular psychological well-being assessments.

Rasool et al. (2021) examined the impact of a deadly work atmosphere on employee engagement. In light of conservation of resources theory and organisational support theory, a toxic work atmosphere was found destructively affected employee engagement both directly and indirectly through organisational support and employee well-being. The study used a quantitative research method and gathered statistics from 301 workers employed in small and medium-sized enterprises in China. Partial least-squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM 3.2.2) was used to estimate the proposed relationships of the learning model. The results of this study confirmed that a toxic work environment negatively impacts employee engagement. Further, the outcomes of this study authorise that administrative support and employee benefits are key factors in adverse work environments and employee engagement. The conclusions of this study are: first, the direct relationship between noxious work environments and employee engagement support those employees working in toxic environments spread negative emotions to other co-workers. Harassment, oppression and snubbing are harmful and can lead to unnecessary stress, burnout, hopelessness and worry in workers. Second, employee wellbeing influences employee behaviour, improving employee engagement in both work and the organisation. Third, the support from the organisation also increases worker's commitment to both work and the organisation. It has also been confirmed that an employee's sense of belonging to the organisation is strengthened when they sense reinforced by the organisation.

Gaur and Mehta (2019) explored that employee engagement is not a simple concept. If engagement of employees is not properly handled in the organisation, it has an adverse effect on the overall organisation. The study found that several employee engagement activities created various stimuli in the environment including social and climatic conditions, which constitute to the list of stressors.

Bailey et al. (2017) tried to concentrate on the engagement literature that was obtainable. The scholar conducted a thorough analysis of the literature using a methodical blend of descriptive evidence. They used 214 studies that concentrated on the purpose, causes, and results of engagement. The "work engagement" measure and associated construct from Utrecht Group dominated the author's list of six alternative engagement conceptualisations in the research. Theorising involvement within the context of job demands and its resource structure is another topic covered in the article. As a result, it was discovered that five categories of factors—

mental state, leadership, job design, organisation and team component, and organisational interventions—appeared to be antecedents to employee engagement. The study demonstrates a link between engagement and task performance, organisational performance, and extra-role performance and individual morale.

Kumar and Renugadevi (2013) found that human resources are a key organisational asset that distinguishes an organisation from other unique combinations of information, skills, and proficiencies. This is a key element of competitive advantage. Finding ways by which companies can make the most of their workforce is critical. Employee engagement is a perception that is prejudiced by many aspects, counting workplace culture, company communication, and leadership behaviour, to gain trust and respect. The objectives of this paper were to define employee involvement, examine workplace engagement precedents and outcomes, measure employee engagement problems, and present an overview of employee engagement research. Study precursors were work characteristics, professed organisational and administrative support, reward and recognition, and distributive and procedural equity. Employee engagement outcomes were job gratification, organisational engagement, intent to leave, and organisational behaviour. Researchers were discussing the problem of measuring employee engagement using Gallup surveys.

Azeem, Rubina and Paracha (2013) revealed that engaging employees by training will lead to a relevant and perpetual modification in the employees' performance in the terms of increase in efficiency, as a learning experience. They define training as incremental enhancement of the skills or knowledge of employees which surely enhances the performance of employees. The basic elements of employee engagement can be taken as training and development. The authors say that if required volume of training is given to the workforces, it will help them to deal with the stress and ethics in both their professional and personal front. There are three management strategies defined which are conflict management, stress administration and ethical management. The authors had gathered the data from 28 items in a questionnaire for six independent and one dependent variable using a five-point Likert scale.

Swarnalatha and Prasanna (2012) noted that employee engagement has become a well-known and important organisational practice in recent years. It is well-defined as an employee's level of dedication and commitment to the organisation and its growth and value. The authors also make it clear by defining engaged employees as those who are aware of the company's growth, values and future state. A highly involved employee is one who collaborates with colleagues and peers to improve their work performance and benefit the organisation. Employee's positive attitude towards the organisation was closely related to employee engagement. The paper was focused on various factors to make employees engaged in the organisation.

The objective was to study the categorised employee engagement, impact of various factors on employee engagement. Employee Engagement Insights: Literature Review and Exploration of Core Components, Sharma & Biswas (2025).

engagement, Effect of employee engagement on organisational effectiveness and to propose a model which is based on extensive and exclusive literature review. Various factors found were recruitment, job designing, leadership, career development prospects, empowerment, equal opportunities and fair treatment, performance management, training and development, compensation management, job satisfaction, family friendliness and communication. The researchers had also defined the categories of engaged employees as the engaged, almost engaged, honeymooners and hamsters, crash and burn and the disengaged. This paper concludes that employee engagement provides individual outcome in terms of motivation, satisfaction, commitment, loyalty, secured job and higher performance and provides outcomes for organisation as high profit and productivity, improved quality, satisfied loyal customer, increased retention and revenue growth.

Wilson et al. (2007) examined the interplay between satisfaction and perceived co-worker age composition with younger (younger than 40) and older (older than 55) on employee engagement. The researchers had made different hypotheses of satisfaction with co-worker, age similarity and co-worker age impact. Gallup q12 is included in the research methodology. The data used in this article was collected in 2005.

Kahn (1990) suggested that people use various degrees of themselves, cognitively, physically and emotionally having implication on both their work and experiences in work role performance. Research had been conducted on members of an architecture firm and summer camp counsellor, to explore the condition where people engage themselves and express their personal selves and disengage or withdraw and preserve their personal selves. The author has discussed three psychological conditions - safety, meaningfulness and availability and their contextual and individual sources.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Narrative–systematic review

This study used narrative–systematic review using a structured search strategy across selected databases, followed by narrative synthesis of the included studies. A narrative literature review was chosen for the methodological approach because what this study intends to achieve is to develop a broad, interpretive, and integrative understanding of how the concept of employee engagement has unfolded over time. As such, the review seeks to synthesise diverse definitions, theoretical perspectives, and empirical findings-from Kahn's seminal work in 1990 up to contemporary research in 2025 that demand a supportive methodology for depth, flexibility, and conceptual exploration. Given this purpose, a narrative review is especially fit because it allows the researcher to critically engage with heterogeneous bodies of literature, interpret theoretical developments, and discuss conceptual nuances that might be difficult to catch within more rigid, protocol-driven approaches,

as with systematic reviews. Indeed, as stressed in methodological guidance, narrative reviews are apt when the objective is to trace the evolution of a construct, examine theoretical contributions, and provide an interpretive synthesis rather than answer narrowly defined empirical questions.

Narrative reviews, while offering valuable interpretive depth, are subject to limitations such as susceptibility to subjectivity, reduced reproducibility, and potential bias in literature selection and interpretation, as noted in established academic guidelines. All the selected studies were evaluated based on a structured assessment framework that reviewed the relevance, methodological robustness, and theoretical contribution of each piece to the field of employee engagement. This framework was flexible to accommodate the diverse range of perspectives and methodological approaches evident in the literature. The transparency in documentation and uniformity in applying evaluative procedures ensure that while the review upholds scholarly rigor, the flexibility required in synthesising the complex and evolving concept of employee engagement has not been compromised.

3.2 Sample of reviewed studies

The sample consisted of peer-reviewed research on employee engagement, from Kahn's foundational 1990 work through studies published in 2025. This included seminal theoretical contributions and empirical investigations across a wide range of organisational contexts, providing a comprehensive foundation for tracing the development and refinement of engagement theory over time.

3.3 Data sources and selection criteria

The research involved examining peer-reviewed academic publications. A significant consideration was also given to South African publications, especially those accredited by the Department of Higher Education and Training, including the *South African Journal of Human Resource Management*, the *South African Journal of Higher Education*, and *Communicare*. A selection of international research was also incorporated to provide comparative context. The search terms such as "employee engagement," "motivation," "commitment," "recognition," and "alignment" were used to identify relevant articles. The analysis employed a thematic approach to examine content, revealing consistent patterns and areas of conceptual convergence across the literature. Results were organised around fundamental dimensions of engagement: communication, culture, role clarity, commitment, work environment and training.

4. Discussion and Implications

4.1 Discussion

The literature reviewed indicates that employee engagement is a multi-dimensional concept determined by both individual and organisational elements. Motivation, commitment, and alignment work as cognitive and emotional drivers, while discretionary effort and recognition are behavioural outcomes. In the various South African settings, leadership quality, communication, and psychological empowerment were found to serve as consistent enablers of engagement across the studies.

However, there are persistent sectoral variations. Engagement drivers vary considerably across sectors. In higher education settings, factors such as empathetic leadership and purposeful work prove most influential, whereas manufacturing environments respond more strongly to recognition programmes and regular feedback (Chikukwa et al., 2024; Mabotja et al., 2024). This sectoral variation suggests that engagement strategies must be tailored to specific organisational contexts rather than applying one-size-fits-all solutions.

4.2 Practical implications

These findings carry important consequences for organisational leaders and HR practitioners. *First*, establishing robust recognition and communication systems can strengthen employees' sense of connection and build organisational trust. *Second*, investing in leadership development programmes that emphasise empowerment, empathy, and strategic alignment. *Third*, incorporating engagement indicators into human resource dashboards to track employee motivation, commitment, and performance levels. *Fourth*, implementing adaptable engagement strategies that accommodate hybrid working arrangements and evolving post-pandemic workplace structures. When implemented thoughtfully, such approaches transform engagement from a mere administrative function into a genuine catalyst for organisational resilience and innovative capacity.\

4.3 Theoretical implications

Theoretically, the identification of core engagement dimensions—communication, culture, role clarity, commitment, work environment, and training—reinforces engagement as a multidimensional construct shaped by both relational and organisational factors. Additionally, the JD-R and self-determination frameworks are supported here as promising theoretical bases through which engagement dynamics can be understood within emerging economies.

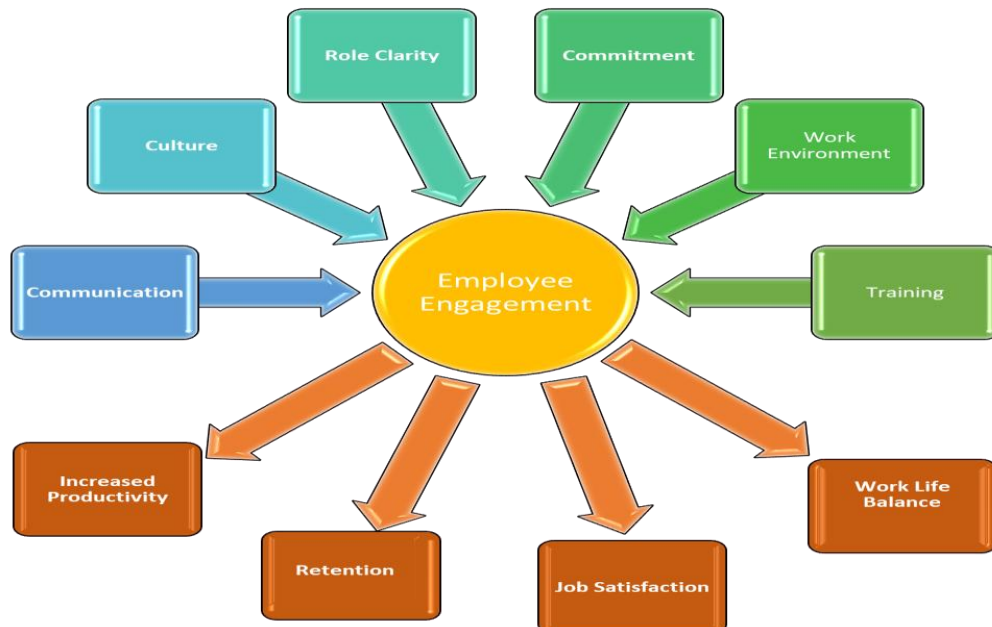
4.4 Drivers of employee engagement

From the literature review, the main key drivers for employee engagement were found to be organisational justice, appropriate virtual tools, outreach by organisational leaders, mental health research, and virtual training, toxic work environment, psychological state, leadership, job design, organisation and team component, and organisational interventions, innovation and opportunities, workplace culture, communication, training, recruitment, job designing, career development opportunities, empowerment, equal opportunities and fair treatment, performance management, compensation management, job satisfaction, family friendliness, role clarity and commitment.

4.6 Outcomes of employee engagement

Employee engagement can be defined as a state in which employees are intellectually and emotionally confined to group and organisation, and which can be measured by three primary behaviours - say, stay and drive. We can infer from the foregoing literature assessment and notable contributions that employee engagement is a term that simultaneously addresses the employer and employee. Employee demands have increased with the changing times and should be met by the organisation; else, it will negatively affect them. The company values its employees as significant resources. To retain them for long period of time or provide work life balance to them, employee engagement can be used as a key concept.

Figure 1: Proposed Model for Integrated Development of Employee Engagement



Source: Conceived and developed by the authors from the literature review

5. Conclusions and Proposals for Future Research

A thorough study of literature review advocates that employee engagement is not an easy notion to understand and a bit rigid to be executed. There are numerous aspects upsetting this concept, but they might vary from segment to segment like if the organisation is a banking organisation, then the skills and engagement to hold them is different to employees working in research area related organisation. We can find from the contributions of various scholars that there are different drivers of employee engagement. A few activities of employee engagement can influence the employee stress levels. For different organisation, key drivers of employee engagement are different, but it holds a significant place as it leads towards the development of the employee and employer as well. It is always projected to be useful for HR consultants, specialists and higher ups in understanding and in reorienting organisational HR practices in such a way that employee loyalty becomes significant future. The findings of the research could open new avenues for investigation into non-banking and other service sector entities.

Although this study integrates recent and contextually rich sources, it is limited by reliance on secondary data. Future research should adopt mixed-method or longitudinal designs to empirically validate the proposed core components. Comparative studies across industries and countries in the SADC would further enhance the generalisability of the results.

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