

**EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: THE MAGIC BULLET FOR ALL CORPORATE ILLS**

Mr, J, Jensen

University of the Free State Business School

Dr, L, Massyn

University of the Free State Business School

**Corresponding Author:**

Mr, J, Jensen

Business School

PO Box 339 (IB 17, Room 308),

University of the Free State,

Bloemfontein

9301

Telephone number: 082 480 5055

E-mail address: jonathanjensenza@gmail.com

*Key words: Employee engagement, human resource management, small business*

**Topic:** Human resource Management

**EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT: THE MAGIC BULLET FOR ALL CORPORATE ILLS**

**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how a broader knowledge of academically sound HRM approaches provide a more holistic and realistic picture of employee engagement, which ultimately informs more robust and efficient human resources strategies.

The ascent of employee engagement on the human resources agenda has drawn numerous academics and business consultants to study and write about the topic, leading to multifarious conceptualisations and measures thereof. In business, consultants tout their proprietary methods as the nostrum for all business ills and the key to success. This paper argues that these magic bullet approaches to employee engagement, fragment and confound employee engagement and lead to misinformed strategic decisions.

This paper reviews employee engagement literature and conducts a study on a small business. The results are discussed. During interpretation of the results, and the discussion of recommendations for management, the value of drawing from a broader spectrum of scholarly literature instead of a single model is demonstrated. The paper concludes that practitioner literature guides poor interpretation and strategy when compared with analysis guided by a broad spectrum of scholarly literature.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Employee engagement is hailed by practitioners to be beneficial for talent retention, motivation, job satisfaction, productivity and overall profitability. Deloitte (2015) has identified culture and engagement as the most important of the top ten global human capital trends in 2015, up from second place and surpassing leadership identified the year prior. The firm announces that human resources leaders have begun to prioritise the understanding of employee engagement within their organisations in order to retain talent and empower people (Deloitte, 2015).

Similarly Gallup (2013) estimates that in the United States of America, the annual cost of lost productivity caused by disengaged employees is between \$450 billion and \$550 billion, and that such employees undermine the potential accomplishments of their engaged colleagues by monopolising managers' time, accounting for more workplace accidents, quality defects and absenteeism.

The ascension of employee engagement along with its link to profit has enticed consultants and internet bloggers to jump on the bandwagon in order to position themselves as close as possible to the centre of attention. In the fray, new employee engagement questionnaires, models and quasi-research have proliferated.

Countless human resources practitioners each proclaim their own methodologies to be pivotal in unlocking business success. Accordingly, they formulate models in which they designate the factors that combine to produce a more engaged workforce, replete with questionnaires that produce quantifiable measures of the designated factors. The

aggregated scores inform rudimentary, descriptive analyses, guiding the selection of interventions aimed at improving the scores in subsequent surveys. The models are largely proprietary, licensed, unavailable for peer review, and consequently narrow.

In contrast, an analysis based on a broader and empirically sound knowledge base has the potential to derive better analysis, which in turn guides the most appropriate strategy.

This paper aims to illustrate how the use of a broader knowledge base provides a more holistic analysis of employee engagement. In order to accomplish this, the first step is to review employee engagement literature.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of the literature commences with an overview on the development of the definition of employee engagement, followed by various perspectives on employee engagement theories.

### 2.1. Definition of employee engagement

A number of definitions of employee engagement have been published. Kahn (1990:700) using the term "personal engagement" states that the engaged employee will "simultaneously convey and bring alive self and obligatory role." Kahn (1990, p. 694) also refers to employee engagement as "the harnessing of organization members' selves to their work roles", claiming further that engaged employees "employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances."

Employee burnout theory researchers use the term "work engagement" and define it as ... a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigour, dedication, and absorption. Rather than a momentary and specific state, engagement refers to a more persistent and pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual, or behaviour (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003:4).

Macey and Schneider (2008:4) divided employee engagement into three areas, namely: trait, state and behavioural engagement. They describe "trait engagement" as the inclination to see the world from a particular vantage point. This, in turn, is reflected in the individual's "state engagement", the consequence of which is "behavioural engagement". Behavioural engagement is defined as the exertion of discretionary effort (Macey & Schneider, 2008:6).

In congruence with the definition of behavioural engagement by Macey and Schneider (2008), a commonly cited definition purports that employee engagement consists of an “employee’s willingness to expend discretionary effort on their job” (Towers Watson, 2014:3). The aspect of “willingness” concurs with Kahn (1990), that employee engagement requires a degree of psychological availability.

Robinson, Perryman and Hayday (2003:ix), define employee engagement as “a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organisation and its values. An engaged employee is aware of the business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organisation.” This definition does not account for the more pervasive and sustained state observed by Schaufeli and Bakker (2003:4) and Kahn (1990:703).

The Gallup Organisation submits that: “The term employee engagement refers to an individual’s involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work” (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002:269). While capturing the same gist as other definitions, this definition combines engagement with other distinct constructs. Consequently, a response to a lack of engagement might aim to improve enthusiasm or job satisfaction, without necessarily improving engagement.

Definitions emanating from academia, might appear to diverge at first glance, however their common thread is the pervasive state in which psychological, emotional and physical effort are applied to one’s work. Practitioner literature generally positions engagement as attitudinal, or related to job satisfaction. Saks (2006:600) argues that definitions from practitioners have their basis in practice rather than empirical research.

## 2.2. Engagement theory

While the Gallup organisation is generally credited for coining the term, Kahn (1990) published the first scholarly article on the topic (Schaufeli, 2013). The then new construct would thereafter become the subject of much academic research. The most prominent academic theories are discussed first.

### 2.2.1. Development of the engagement theory from Kahn’s perspective

According to May (2004), it was Kahn who first conceptualised employee engagement at work in his 1990 paper on the personal engagement and disengagement of people at work. With role theory forming the backbone of his paper, Kahn (1990:700) questioned why

people applied varying degrees of their physical, cognitive and emotional selves to these roles, and so developed a framework that he termed "self-in-role" (Kahn, 1990:692). This provided a framework for a qualitative study in which he observed the fleeting moments where people engaged or disengaged with their tasks at work. The study identified three psychological conditions, namely (1) meaningfulness, (2) safety and (3) personal availability, as the driving factors of employee engagement.

Meaningfulness refers to the perception that one is receiving a return on investment of one's physical, cognitive and emotional energy (Kahn, 1990:704). Safety refers to the experience of employees being able to apply themselves to a task without fear of negative consequences for their self-image, career or status (Kahn, 1990). Availability refers to the sense of having the necessary emotional and physical energy as well as the sense of security and self-confidence required to engage at any particular moment. It is therefore a measure of one's readiness to engage (Kahn, 1990).

Kahn (1990:695) reasons that these three psychological conditions are mediated by a number of factors, such as task and role characteristics, work interactions, relationships, group dynamics, management style and organisational norms (Kahn, 1990:705). Kahn (1990:715) further notes that employee engagement draws from people different levels of exhaustible physical and emotional energy. He also records that a person's sense of security about work and status and a person's outside life could also occupy the energies that may otherwise be used for work engagement.

Kahn's paper did well to suggest a definition of employee engagement as well as the antecedents thereof. However, it lacked clear constructs required for the operationalisation of engagement. Some of these problems were confronted in subsequent empirical research, such as in the work of May (2004), who was the first to empirically test Kahn's model (Saks, 2006:602).

The point of departure for May's (2004) research is the following three fundamental questions that, according to Kahn (1990), people ask in each role situation: i) how meaningful would it be for me to bring myself to this performance, ii) is it safe for me to do so, and iii) how available am I? (May, 2004). These questions were fundamental in the development of the Work Engagement Scale (WES).

Employees who respond to Kahn's (1990) three questions in the affirmative will demonstrate greater levels of employee engagement. In addition to the correlations discussed, May (2004) also determines that self-consciousness and resources related directly to employee engagement and are not necessarily mediated by the three psychological dimensions.

The results imply that a revision of the original antecedents proposed by Kahn (1990) may be necessary. While Kahn focused on role theory, a more recent paradigm has emerged from burnout research. This framework also examines conditions that cause engagement. The work of the authors Maslach, Leiter, Schaufeli and Bakker is described next.

#### 2.2.2. The burnout antithesis approach

Two schools of thought developed from the burnout antithesis approach. The initial consensus was that employee engagement is the opposite of burnout (Simpson, 2008:1018), while an argument for the uncoupling of the two constructs emerged later (Schaufeli & Bakker 2003).

According to Maslach, Schaufeli, Leiter and Michael (2001:402), burnout has three elements, namely exhaustion, cynicism and a low sense of professional efficacy. Exhaustion is characterised by a lack of mental energy associated with stress. Cynicism is a cognitive aspect of burnout and is characterised by negative attitudes towards one's work and co-workers. A lack of professional efficacy is characterised by a doubt in one's competency at work. Accordingly, low scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory-General Survey (MBI-GS) for exhaustion and cynicism and a high score for efficacy are measures of employee engagement (Admasachew & Dawson, 2011:4). For this reason, employee engagement appears at the positive extreme of a continuum featuring burnout on its negative extreme (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003:4).

The shift towards positive organisational psychology also brought with it a greater focus on empirical research, an aspect left wanting in Kahn's initial conceptualisation of employee engagement. Concomitantly, constructs such as employee engagement were operationalised more conscientiously (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003:3).

As the burnout-antithesis assumption became the subject of scrutiny, so emerged the contention that employee engagement is a discrete construct (Gruman & Saks, 2011:125). Gruman and Saks (2011:125) refer to aspects of Leiter and Maslach's (1998) definition, specifically the energetic experience of involvement and the personally fulfilling activities that enhance the sense of professional efficacy. These are not necessarily antipodes of the three characteristics of burnout, however.

The argument by Gruman and Saks (2011:125) supports Schaufeli and Bakker's (2003:4) argument that the likelihood that burnout and employee engagement are mutually exclusive does not necessarily mean that they are the same construct on a common continuum. Schaufeli and Bakker (2003:5) therefore posit a three-dimensional definition of employee

engagement that is uncoupled from burnout. The three dimensions are vigour, dedication and absorption.

Vigour is characterised by high energy as well as mental resilience. People who work with vigour are willing to invest effort in their work. They are able to persist, even when presented with challenges. Their positive attitude is pervasive, and they demonstrate an enthusiasm for their work. Finally, they do all of the aforementioned without easily being fatigued (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003:5).

Dedication is portrayed through the sense of significance an employee derives from work. A dedicated employee feels enthusiastic, proud and inspired. To such an employee, the task is viewed as a challenge (Naude & Rothmann 2014:516). A dedicated employee demonstrates persistence and active involvement (Jacobs, Renard & Snelgar, 2014:3).

Absorption is characterised by the degree to which one experiences a sense of joy and immersion in work. Absorbed employees find it difficult to detach themselves from their work (Naude & Rothmann, 2004). When absorbed, employees become engrossed in their work. They may even be unaware of the amount of time that passes while they concentrate on the task fully (Jacobs et al., 2014:3).

In order to assess employee engagement as an independent construct, Schaufeli and Bakker (2003:5) developed a self-report questionnaire called the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), a widely used tool.

In the year to follow, using the job demands-resources model, Schaufeli and Bakker (2004:294) determined that there was indeed a moderate negative correlation between burnout and engagement.

Job demands refer to the inherent demands of a job regarding what must be done. These demands are the aspects that require physical and psychological effort. Due to their ability to cause strain and anxiety, they are associated with burnout. Job resources are those aspects that mitigate these demands and are useful for achieving work goals as well as stimulating personal growth and development. Job demands and the lack of job resources predict burnout, while the availability of job resources predict engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004:294).

Other studies, also using the job demands-resources model, show that burnout and engagement have different antecedents (Schaufeli, 2013), thus strengthening the case for studying employee engagement independently from burnout.

The academic conceptualisations of Kahn (1990) and Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) both propose a physical energy, or vigour, and an emotional-cognitive component, or absorption. Both acknowledge the exhaustible nature of this energy. Both examine the antecedents of employee engagement. Neither paradigm explains why the various conditions influence employee engagement (Saks, 2006:125). A different paradigm, the Social Exchange Theory (SET), argues that employee engagement is a form of repayment for resources provided by employers (Pati & Kumar, 2011:264).

### 2.2.3. Engagement and social exchange theory

One of the fundamental tenets of the SET is that relationships evolve over time to enable employees to form loyal, trust-based commitments. Towards this end, both parties in the relationship must abide by principles of exchange. These principles are eventually adopted by both parties as relationship norms (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005:275). In organisational behaviour, a reciprocal relationship between managers is founded on these norms, and by implication, managers and their subordinates are reciprocally interdependent.

Contrasting the two approaches, Saks (2006:129) observes the burnout-antithesis model as a causal relationship between employee engagement and certain conditions, whereas the SET paradigm suggests that engagement is a personal response and therefore a choice. On this basis, Saks (2006:129) argues that the SET provides a strong theoretical rationale for employee engagement.

Saks (2006:127) points out that employee engagement's ascent in popularity since Kahn's paper, spawned volume of literature claiming that the presence of engagement was a predictor of various beneficial outcomes, such as employee performance, shareholder return, employee retention and general organisational success. Saks (2006:127) laments the lack of academic research, noting that much of the existing literature was produced by practitioners at consulting firms. The concern was that employee engagement in practitioner literature regularly overlapped with other constructs. In response, Saks (2006) published a study on the antecedents and consequences of employee engagement, which discerned employee engagement from other concepts.

The study by Saks (2006) uses SET to account for Kahn's observation that some people felt obliged to bring themselves more fervently to their roles than others. Saks (2006:129) concludes that the degree of cognitive, emotional and physical energy that an employee would devote in the performance of a specific role is an act of reciprocation for the economic and socio-emotional resources provided by the employer. For that reason, when



employees experience enriched and challenging jobs, they will obligatorily respond with a higher level of engagement (Kumar & Swetha, 2011:232).

By examining antecedents and consequences, Saks (2006:129) explains that engagement mediates the relationships between the antecedents and organisational outcomes such as job satisfaction, commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour and intentions to quit. Saks (2006:133) also distinguishes job engagement from organisational engagement. Job engagement, which is the same as employee engagement, focuses the performance of an employee in the assigned role, whereas organisational engagement centres on general extra-role efforts (Kumar & Swetha, 2011:233).

The study also allayed speculation that employee engagement was merely a management fad. It also lent academic strength to the notion that employee engagement should or could be fostered and enhanced by the organisation (Saks, 2016:615). Finally, the study cleared the path for employee engagement to be studied independently as a construct, rather than one that overlapped with others.

Studying the antecedents and consequences of employee engagement, Rich, Lepine and Crawford (2010:2164) observe that a link exists between job performance, job involvement, job satisfaction and intrinsic rewards, but also argue that such theories show these factors are able to operate independently to a significant extent. Citing Saks (2006), Kumar and Sweetha (2011) conclude that there are sufficient grounds to argue that employee engagement correlates with but is distinct from other organisational behaviour constructs such as organisational commitment, organisational citizenship behaviour, job involvement and job satisfaction. Finally, these, along with intention to quit, are consequences of employee engagement (Kumar & Swetha, 2011:266).

The impact of employees' engagement on the bottom line of a business, attracts human resources consultants. A discussion of practitioner studies on employee engagement follows.

#### 2.2.4. Commercial entities and practitioner research

Deloitte (2015) reports the global ascent of employee engagement on the management agenda in its annual publication on global human capital trends. Its ascent may have been a consequence of the awareness created by introducing employee engagement to the survey the year prior, rather than actual exigency.

By capturing employee engagement under the heading "Culture and Engagement" (Deloitte, 2015:4), Deloitte (2015) confounds the topic. It is unclear which construct actually

drove the trend. According to Deloitte (2016), culture is the sense of how things are done, while engagement refers to how employees feel about how things are done. Deloitte (2016) expands the concept to include people's feelings about the future of the organisation, a measure of corporate health, and an indicator of the potential to support change while referring to research that clearly shows that empowerment and a sense of ownership are key drivers of employee engagement. Employee engagement descended to fourth on the agenda in the 2016 report. Still fourth in 2017, engagement was denoted as employee experience (Deloitte, 2017). Accordingly, the location of employee engagement's priority on the management agenda is difficult to track if the construct is reframed continuously.

The Gallup organisation claims to have pioneered "the employee engagement movement" in the late 1990s and that they "remain at the forefront of employee engagement" (Gallup, 2016, para 4). Gallup has introduced what it proclaims is the premier tool for measuring engagement, referred to as the Gallup Q<sup>12</sup>.

The Gallup organisation has a commercial interest in employee engagement research as well as a motive to identify clients who need assistance to improve employee engagement. The organisation may have earned its credibility through its globally acquired volume of data. The data is so voluminous that it is tempting to quote its statistics as empirically sound or representative. Gallup also publishes the authoritatively titled annual "State of the Global Workplace" report in which the link between employee engagement and financial gain is emphasised. For example, "Countries that double the number of engaged employees in every company will be best positioned to win the lion's share of the US\$140 trillion" (Gallup, 2013:2).

Schaufeli (2013) laments that the Gallup definition intermingles employee engagement with job satisfaction. Indeed, a Gallup Q<sup>12</sup> Meta-Analysis states, "criterion-related studies were combined into a meta-analysis to study the relationship of employee satisfaction and engagement (as measured by Q12)" (Harter, Schmidt, Killham & Asplund, 2006). As a measure of employee engagement, the Q<sup>12</sup> correlates strongly with job satisfaction ( $r = 0.91$ ) (Harter, Schmidt & Hayes, 2002; Schaufeli, 2013). Saks (2006) and Rich et al. (2010), also confirm that these factors operate independently.

As reports and blogs commix employee engagement with other concepts, employee engagement becomes an umbrella term and something of a panacea. Less credible practitioner literature exacerbates this concern.

Son (2015) writing for employee survey software firm, TINYPulse, puts forward a list of 20 questions which she asserts are essential for an organisation's engagement survey. The questions were categorised under headings such as workplace satisfaction, intention to

quit, work-life balance, feeling appreciated, the ability to recite organisational values, organisational culture and even fun.

In its 2016 Global Human Capital Trends publication, Deloitte (2016) contends that due to the changing nature of careers, employers need to accelerate career development and job promotional cycles in order to experience greater employee engagement. Deloitte (2016) cautions further that employers that fail in this regard, will lose their millennial employees. Rigoni and Nelson (2016) in Gallup (2016) argue that only 29% of millennials are engaged, a threat considering that the current generation will constitute 75% of the workforce by 2015. The argument collapses when the same organisation warns that 87% of employees worldwide are disengaged (Gallup, 2017).

Global consulting firm, Blessingwhite (2012) touts in its X-model, that employee engagement is the intersection of personal job satisfaction, defined as liking one's work and doing it well, and job contribution, defined as the contribution towards organisational goals. Accordingly, the firm classifies employees in to one of five levels on a scale. The scale denotes the a) disengaged; b) the crash and burners, who are engaged but experience low job satisfaction; c) the honeymooners and hamsters who are satisfied at work but offer low contribution; d) the almost engaged featuring employees that contribute highly and are satisfied; and finally e) the engaged, who demonstrate high satisfaction and contribution (Blessingwhite, 2015).

Depending on an employee's placement on the scale, the firm selects an HR intervention from its prospectus. Items on the prospectus address one or more of three areas, namely leadership, professional development and engagement. The firm advocates the use of their tried-and-tested solutions over personalised programmes, arguing the time and cost efficiencies thereof (Blessingwhite, 2017).

Bersin (2014) writing for Forbes advises that it is time to rethink employee engagement. While blurring the distinction between employee engagement and job satisfaction, Bersin (2014) advocates research data that is claimed to help companies become irresistible organisations. Such organisations in turn are characterised by meaningful work, great management, growth opportunities, inclusivity, flexibility and fun, and finally, trustworthy leadership. He furthers the argument, claiming that the term employee engagement is limiting as it influences managers to think that it is their responsibility to reach out to employees rather than to building meaningful, fulfilling and fun organisations. While the intermixing employee engagement with retention is common, pitting employee engagement as an intention or behaviour, contradicts academic consensus that employee engagement

is better characterised as a pervasive state in which psychological, emotional and physical effort is exerted.

Without a clear understanding of employee engagement, the practitioner community tends to focus on the results or antecedents of engagement instead of the construct itself. A results-based approach may have face value for business application, if one is prepared to overlook inherent self-confirmation bias. An antecedent based-approach is also convenient because it focuses on other well-recognised and related constructs. However, without a clear and operationalised understanding of the construct itself, it is impossible to derive reliable or valid assessments. Invalid assessments will produce meaningless findings. Consequently, interventions based on such findings have no rationale.

Simply re-packaging job satisfaction, culture, leadership, wellness, ergonomics or employee motivation activities as engagement strategies does nothing to advance the study of, or the potential gains attainable from employee engagement research. In practitioner literature, employee engagement is a blanket term for innumerable HR constructs and seems to be the magic bullet for all corporate ills.

Ultimately, as seen in Bersin's (2014) article, the muddled and re-bundled concept loses its meaning and seems better left abandoned. Schaufeli (2013:5) cautions that the research methodology and even questionnaires of consulting firms are proprietary, guarded intellectual property, which precludes them from being peer reviewed.

### **3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

The objective of this paper is to illustrate how the use of a broader knowledge base provides a more holistic analysis of employee engagement.

In order to achieve this, a small-scale study was conducted at a family owned accommodation business in order to gain a snapshot of employee engagement, using an academically sound instrument. The results were analysed drawing from a broad knowledge base of employee engagement research.

### **4. RESEARCH METHOD**

The subject of the research was a family owned accommodation business in South Africa. The business experienced enormous growth over the span of 20 years. Initially, as a small guest lodge, it grew into a large business with over 160 hotel rooms, 225 townhouses, conference facilities and 1120 residential flats. As the business grew, the founding family

members increasingly needed to focus on broader executive functions. Accordingly, they appointed new managers for the general business functions.

From the once close-knit family-style, business evolved an organisational structure, characterised by greater distance in the relationships between the founding family member managers, and their staff members. It became taller, more complex and less personal. More recently, management reported that staff seem dissatisfied and burnt out and that there were concerns regarding employee absenteeism. The link between these concerns and work engagement formed the basis of this study.

This research was based on the objectivist epistemology. The study took place in the natural environment in which the employees function, during the natural course of business, thus constituting a non-contrived setting. A quantitative design was adopted.

The population constituted the full staff complement of the business. The sample comprised the full population of 40 employees. All elements of the population had an equal chance of being selected, and were conveniently available as employees of the business hence the study making use of non-probability, convenience sampling.

The Utrecht Work Engagement Survey (UWES) was used in this study. In order to reduce potential social desirability response bias which may arise from connotations with the concept of “work engagement”, the term “work engagement” was omitted from the title, with the more neutral title, “Work and wellbeing survey – UWES”, being used instead.

#### 4.1. Reliability and validity of the UWES

There is a volume of literature that ratifies the validity and the reliability of the UWES internationally and in South Africa.

From a sample of 2313 respondents, Schaufeli and Bakker (2003:14) determined the Cronbach alpha for the UWES-17 to be within the following ranges: vigour, 0.81 to 0.9; dedication, 0.88 to 0.95; and absorption, 0.70 to 0.88. Schaufeli and Bakker (2003:14) measured the internal consistency of the three subscales using Cronbach's alpha and found there to be a total score of 0.93 for the UWES-17. Cronbach's alpha increases with test length, and varies by only 0.01 for two of the dimensions when comparing the 15-item scale with the 17-item scale. It is therefore possible to compare studies that used different versions of the UWES.

Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) also gathered data on test-retest reliability. When administered twice in one year to two different occupational groups in Australia and

Norway, no significant differences in stability were found to exist between the three dimensions.

Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) record that confirmatory factor analysis reveals the three-factor structure of the UWES to be superior to a one-factor model in tests across various nationalities.

In a literature review, Rothmann and Rothmann (2010) refer to a study by Storm and Rothman (2003) that determines UWES to be internally consistent and valid for the work engagement construct in different research populations in South Africa. An examination of Cronbach's alpha has confirmed the UWES reliability when the scale was used on a sample of members of the South African Police Service as well as emergency medical technicians in Gauteng. This population spanned different genders, languages and occupational positions. In this case, there was internal consistency for the three subscales where vigour was 0.78, dedication was 0.89 and absorption was 0.78. Rothmann and Rothmann (2010) have therefore confirmed that the UWES is an internally consistent and valid test for measuring engagement as a construct in South Africa.

One point of concern was pointed out by Rothmann and Rothmann (2010). The result of exploratory factor analysis with target rotations identified problems in the construct equivalence of the three scales, particularly with respect to items 9, 10 and 14. In item 9, which reads, "I feel happy when I am engrossed in my work", the word "engrossed" might not be understood by all respondents. In item 10, which reads, "I am proud of the work that I do", racial differences accounted for differences in responses among members of the South African Police Service. Lastly, item 14, which reads, "I get carried away by my work", was identified as potentially problematic because it employs a metaphor. However, after removing these items from the analysis, the result was acceptable. Rothmann and Rothmann (2010) suggest that future studies should consider re-phrasing the question or translate it into other South African languages.

Similarly, Goliath-Yarde and Roodt (2011:10) confirmed the overall reliability of the subscales of the UWES-17 for different South African cultural groups. The study found differential item functioning on all three dimensions and concluded that the UWES-17 should not be used comparatively for employment decisions of different cultural groups. The differences were estimated to have occurred due to levels of education or language proficiency.

Given the validity and reliability of the various versions of the UWES, it was decided to proceed with the English UWES-17, with the intention to be observant for item bias.

#### 4.2. Ethical considerations

The organisation participated willingly in the study and assisted in administering the questionnaires. Ethical positions taken by the researcher were impressed upon management. Accordingly, all members of the research sample were provided with a brief description of the research procedure and the expected duration thereof. The identity of the researcher and contact details were made available in case any of the respondents wished to query any aspect of the questionnaire before deciding whether to respond or not. Finally, no inducements were made in order to solicit responses. The survey took place during working hours, therefore respondents were requested to complete the questionnaire when convenient or permitted by management.

#### 4.3. Statistical procedures

The three subcomponents of engagement, namely vigour, dedication and absorption, as well as overall engagement were constructed as variables. The internal consistency and inter-item consistency of these variables were confirmed using Cronbach's alpha coefficient.

Each of the questionnaire items pertaining to a specific dimension of engagement were tested to ascertain whether or not they actually measure the associated variable. Thereafter the three subcomponents of engagement were tested to establish whether or not they measure overall engagement. A Cronbach's alpha equal to or exceeding 0.6 was set as the threshold for determining the reliability of the variable.

Pearson's correlation coefficient, denoted as  $r$  was used to test the direction and strength of correlations between variables. A perfect positive correlation is represented by 1.0, a negative correlation by -1.0 and no correlation by 0.0. A correlation does not indicate causation (Sekaran & Bougie, 2013:290). The correlation between the biographical variables age and tenure and the variables pertaining to engagement was established. The  $p$ -value was used to identify the significance of these correlations.

Due to the sampling size, it was necessary to combine some of the biographical variables into broader sub-groups. Languages were combined into Afrikaans and other. Similarly, the population groups White and Coloured were combined into one group and compared with Black respondents. There were no Asian respondents. This meant that there were always two subgroups for the nominal biographical variables.

The means for each group were calculated. The subgroups for the nominal biographical variables were subjected to an independent samples *t*-test in order to determine the statistical significance of any differences between the means of the various biographical groups.

## 5. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

After constructing the variables, the descriptive statistics – specifically mean, mean percentage, and standard deviation – were computed.

As shown in Table 1, all of the variables had a Cronbach's alpha exceeding 0.6, except for absorption. It was established that if item 14, "I get carried away when I am working", was removed, then absorption's alpha exceeded 0.6. Therefore, the absorption variable was constructed without question item number 14.

**Table 1: Cronbach's alpha**

Variables	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
Vigour	0.792	6
Dedication	0.805	5
Absorption	0.591	6
Absorption (excluding question 14)	0.734	5
Engagement	0.875	17

### 5.1. Tests for normality

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov (KS) test was used to ascertain whether or not these variables are normally distributed. Where *p*-values are less than 0.1, the variables are considered to be normally distributed. Only absorption was normally distributed. This influenced test selection. The *t*-test and Pearson's correlation coefficient were used for vigour, dedication and overall engagement, while the Mann-Whitney test and Spearman's rho were used for absorption.

Mean percentages were used in order to interpret levels of employee engagement. Where the highest possible score for an item is six, the mean percentage provides an average measure of the variables for each of the respondents. For example, the mean percentages of 66.7% and 100% correspond to a score of four and six respectively. The results are presented in Table 2.



A lay-person's interpretation of the mean scores in Table 2 might conclude that absorption is lower than the other dimensions. However, the figures must be read in conjunction with UWES-17 percentage norms, which have been bracketed for classification, ranging from very low to very high. As seen from the norms in Table 3, the scores for each of the three variables, as well as overall engagement are in fact average. Therefore, while absorption appears to be an outlier, the score is not practically significant.

Table 2: Descriptives per item

Variables	Items	Mean	Mean %	Standard Deviation
<b>Vigour</b>	At my work, I feel bursting with energy	4.47	74.5%	1.319
	At my job, I feel strong and vigorous	4.63	77.1%	1.289
	When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work	4.78	79.7%	1.338
	I can continue working for very long periods at a time	4.88	81.3%	1.238
	At my job, I am very resilient, mentally	4.19	69.8%	1.533
	At my work, I always persevere, even when things do not go well	5.00	83.3%	1.481
<b>Factor result</b>		<b>4.656</b>	<b>77.6%</b>	<b>4.9%</b>
<b>Dedication</b>	I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose	4.52	75.3%	1.411
	I am enthusiastic about my job	4.77	79.6%	1.407
	My job inspires me	4.61	76.9%	1.606
	I am proud of the work that I do	4.97	82.8%	1.251
	To me, my job is challenging	4.19	69.9%	1.600
<b>Factor results</b>		<b>4.613</b>	<b>76.9%</b>	<b>4.8%</b>
<b>Absorption</b>	Time flies when I'm working	4.97	82.8%	1.150
	When I am working, I forget everything else around me	3.81	63.5%	1.958
	I feel happy when I am working intensely	4.66	77.6%	1.359
	I am immersed in my work	4.25	70.8%	1.704
	I get carried away when I'm working	3.63	60.4%	1.661
	It is difficult to detach myself from my job	3.78	63.0%	1.581
	<b>Factor results</b>		<b>4.182</b>	<b>69.7%</b>
<b>Overall Engagement</b>		<b>4.476</b>	<b>74.6%</b>	<b>7.3%</b>

Table 3: UWES-17 mean percentage norms.

(N = 2313)	Vigour (%)	Dedication (%)	Absorption (%)	Engagement (%)
Very low	≤ 36.2	≤ 26.7	≤ 26.7	≤ 19.9
Low	36.3 – 53.3	26.8 – 50.0	26.8 – 45.8	32.3 – 51.0
Average	53.5 – 80.0	50.2 – 81.7	46.0 – 73.3	51.2 – 77.7
High	80.2 – 93.3	81.8 – 96.5	73.5 – 89.2	77.8 – 92.2
Very high	≥ 93.5	≥ 96.7	≥ 89.3	≥ 92.3

## 5.2. Biographical variables and engagement levels

### 5.2.1. Language, population groups and occupational level

No significant differences for engagement and language were observed. There were also no significant differences between population groups for any of the engagement variables.

With respect to occupational level, 72% of the employees in the sample were non-managers while 28% were managers. No significant difference for engagement exists between managers and non-managers. Therefore, every employee, regardless of occupational level, had an equal chance of experiencing all of the dimensions of engagement, or overall engagement.

### 5.2.2. Gender

Table 4: t-test results for gender

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	Mean difference	t-statistic	p-value
Vigour	Female	16	4.99	0.73	-2.32	0.03
	Male	20	4.26			
Dedication	Female	16	4.99	0.63	-1.67	0.20
	Male	20	4.37			
Absorption	Female	16	4.38	0.24	-0.7	0.49
	Male	20	4.14			
Engagement	Female	16	4.80	0.59	-2.14	0.05
	Male	20	4.21			

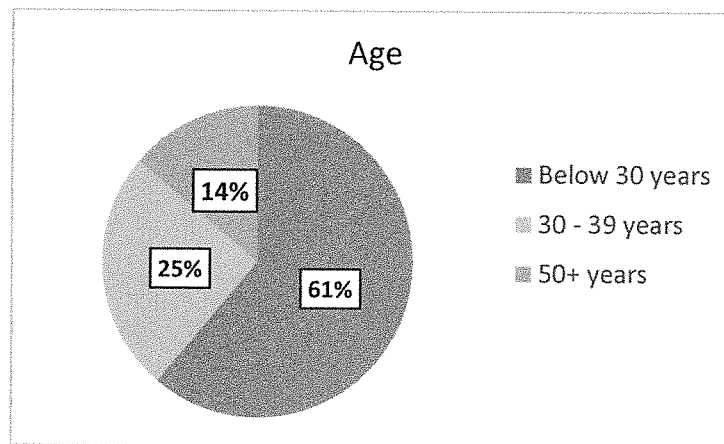
As seen in Table 4, female respondents, representing 44% of the workforce, demonstrated significantly higher levels for vigour and overall engagement than male respondents. There were no significant differences between gender for dedication and absorption. That 56% of

the workforce showed lower engagement on two of three variables may certainly tempt some to draw conclusions from this. However, further analysis revealed that that mean differences were less than one standard deviation, and therefore held little practical significance.

### 5.2.3. Age and job tenure

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of respondents by age. Employees below the age of 30 who are regularly referred to as millennials, form the largest group. The correlations of age and tenure with engagement appear in Table 5.

**Figure 1: Representation of respondents by age**



**Table 5: Correlations with age and tenure**

Variables	Age		Tenure	
	Correlation	<i>p</i> -value	Correlation	<i>p</i> -value
<b>Vigour</b>	0.134	0.437	0.144	0.402
<b>Dedication</b>	0.334	0.046	0.291	0.085
<b>Absorption</b>	0.144	0.401	0.146	0.395
<b>Engagement</b>	0.204	0.233	0.223	0.190

Correlations with age proved weak and insignificant thus indicating that employees' preparedness to engage with work is not dependent on their age.

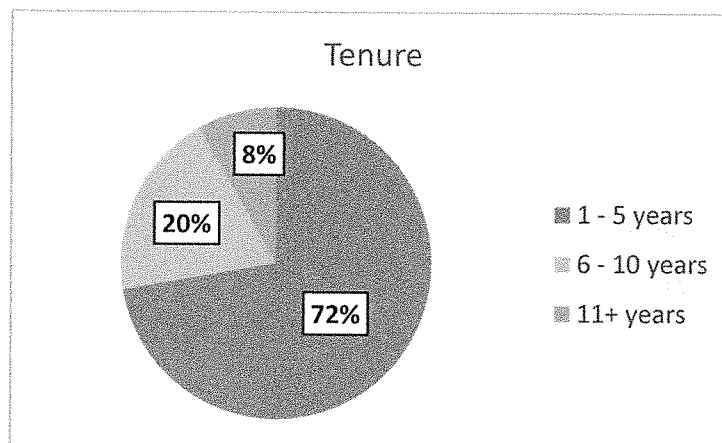
Other studies have found a link with engagement and age. Jacobs et al. (2014) have identified a significant positive relationship between all three engagement variables and, consequently, overall engagement. Similarly, Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) have identified positive, albeit weak correlation between age and engagement.

### 5.3. Tenure and occupational levels

Figure 2 illustrates the representation of respondents by tenure. Notably, employees with a tenure of 1 to 5 years are the majority, due to the rapid expansion of the family business in the last couple of years. No significant relationship between tenure and engagement is observed in these results. However, when one consider the statistics from consulting firms', conclusions are drawn from worldwide data sets, possibly ignoring contextual factors that might influence employee engagement.

It might seem logical to infer that that the longer employees work for a company, the more engaged, or at least the more dedicated they will be. However, this was not observed because, the prospective impact of employees' tenures is outweighed by the effects of the short tenure under their supervisors.

**Figure 2: Representation of respondents by tenure**



A fundamental tenet of SET is that employee relationships evolve over time before employees form trust-based commitments with their own norms. Therefore, the relatively short relationships with new managers affects the degree of cognitive, emotional and physical energy that employees would devote to their roles. A correlation between tenure and engagement will not feature in such an environment.

The next section examines how these results could guide strategy formation.

## 6. PRACTICAL MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study almost evaded any meaningful interpretation. Even though there were differences in scores for different variables, there was little statistical significance in any of the findings. This would have been problematic, as the organisation had legitimate concerns related to engagement. It was only through a broader consideration of the academic literature that useful conclusions could be drawn. These will be singled out and discussed.

### 6.1.1. Considering the measuring instrument

Being aware of language pitfalls of a questionnaire facilitates a more valid appraisal of engagement. Being a South African organisation, it was necessary to be aware of literature that had previously identified language concerns with some of the items in the questionnaire.

Management should ensure that an employee engagement questionnaire measures the construct employee engagement, rather than the antecedents or consequences thereof, as is seen in practitioner literature.

### 6.1.2. Considering a range of academic theories in interpreting results

The use of a single theory is limiting. In contrast, the UWES builds on prior academic theory, specifically the burnout antithesis theory. Even though the UWES provided a sound, empirical measurement of employee engagement, interpreting the results with the SET provided a more holistic analysis.

### 6.1.3. Engagement strategies for various generations

The weak correlation between age and employee engagement was not sufficient to merit a special focus on new techniques that engage millennials. In a more commercially motivated environment, the less-than-high engagement scores might automatically have prompted the deployment of engagement strategies. Given the sizes of the slices on the age pie chart, a solution that targets the millennial cohort would have seemed well founded.

By automatically implementing systems, models and strategies to drive millennial engagement, the organisation might have alienated the non-millennials, or 39% of its workforce. If 39% of the workforce can avoid the struggle to adapt to new methodologies

aimed at a different generation, the organisation may even avoid a sales pitch for some change management programme designed to facilitate the implementation of new engagement strategies.

#### 6.1.4. Considering the background and context of the organisation

A thorough understanding of the organisation's history was required in order to make sense of the tenure, and by implication staff retention picture. If the questionnaire had been the point of departure, interpretation of the data would have been completely meaningless.

Blessingwhite would not necessarily recommend a customised solution in favour of their tried and tested suite of programmes. While their initiatives would probably have a positive impact on engagement, it is a broad-stroke approach that would ultimately demand more organisational resources and consume more time than necessary.

It turns out, that the most efficient, and cost effective solution that can be derived from this study would be a programme that allows managers and employees to establish relationship norms and reciprocal trust. On the basis of this study, the recommendations to the firm drew upon SET.

Although the recommendations are applicable to the specific contest, they illustrate how drawing from broader theory enhances employee engagement strategy. The nature of those recommendations are outlined in brief.

Future appointments should be made mindfully of the impact they would have on the engagement of employees. It is thus recommended that management should promote a culture of management recruitment from within its own ranks, in preparation for future appointments. This will ensure that established relationship norms required for better engagement are already in place when managers are appointed.

Where it becomes necessary to appoint managers from outside, a period of orientation is recommended in order to familiarise new managers with the prevailing culture and norms that drive engagement.

SET also purports that being engaged is an act of reciprocation for the economic and socio-emotional resources provided by the employer. The analysis therefore indicates that strategies that focus on enrichment and challenge will be beneficial.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, this paper has theoretical as well as practical value. In terms of theory, this study has collated the key academic models of employee engagement and has highlighted their empirical strength. Furthermore, the models have been shown to be mutually supportive. In contrast, some of the most widely published practitioner literature was reviewed and crucial flaws were illuminated.

This paper also highlighted how a magic bullet approach to engagement leads to the fragmentation and confounding of engagement, which has its basis in sound academic literature. It also illustrated how a broader knowledge engagement theory and more rigorous methodology provides a more holistic and realistic picture of engagement, which ultimately informs more robust human resources strategy.

## REFERENCE LIST

Admasachew, L. & Dawson, J., 2011. *Employee Engagement – A Brief Review of Definitions, Theoretical Perspectives and Measures*. s.l.:Aston Business School, Aston University.

Bersin, J., 2014. It's Time To Rethink The 'Employee Engagement' Issue. Available from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2014/04/10/its-time-to-rethink-the-employee-engagement-issue/> (Accessed 11 May 2017).

Bersin, J., 2014. *The Five Elements Of A 'Simply Irresistible' Organization*. Available from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2014/04/04/the-five-elements-of-a-simply-irresistible-organization/#53f6391751b1> [Accessed 10 August 2017].

Blessingwhite, 2012. *The X Model of Employee Engagement - Satisfaction And Contribution*. Available from: <http://blessingwhite.com/business-issues/employee-engagement/the-x-model-of-employee-engagement/> (Accessed 11 May 2017).

Blessingwhite, 2015. *Business Strategies Made Humanly Possible*. Available from: [http://blessingwhite.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/BW\\_Capabilities2015.pdf](http://blessingwhite.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/BW_Capabilities2015.pdf) (Accessed 11 May 2017).

Blessingwhite, 2017. *Core Solutions*. Available from: <http://blessingwhite.com/core-programs/> (Accessed 11 May 2017).

- Cropanzano, R. & Mitchell, M., 2005. Social exchange theory: an Interdisciplinary review. *Journal of Management*, 31(6):874-900.
- Deloitte, 2015. Global Human Capital Trends 2015, Leading in the new world of work, s.l.: Deloitte University press.
- Deloitte, 2015. Global Human Capital Trends 2015, Leading in the New World of Work, s.l.: Deloitte University press.
- Deloitte, 2016. *Global Human Capital Trends 2016 - The new organization: Different by design*. Available from:  
<https://dupress.deloitte.com/dup-us-en/focus/human-capital-trends/2016/employee-engagement-and-retention.html> (Accessed 12 May 2017).
- Deloitte, 2017. *Rewriting the rules for the digital age - 2017 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends*. Available from:  
[https://dupress.deloitte.com/content/dam/dup-us-en/articles/HCTrends\\_2017/DUP\\_Global-Human-capital-trends\\_2017.pdf](https://dupress.deloitte.com/content/dam/dup-us-en/articles/HCTrends_2017/DUP_Global-Human-capital-trends_2017.pdf) (Accessed 12 May 2017).
- Gallup, 2013. State of the Global Workplace: Employee engagement insights for business leaders worldwide, Washington: Gallup.
- Gallup, 2017. *The Engaged Workplace*. Available from:  
<http://www.gallup.com/services/190118/engaged-workplace.aspx> (Accessed 12 May 2017).
- Goliath-Yarde, L. & Roodt, G., 2011. Differential item functioning of the UWES-17. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology*, 37(1): p. 11 pages.
- Gruman, J. & Saks, A., 2011. Performance Management and Work Engagement. *Human Resource Management Review*, 21(2):123-136.
- Kahn, W., 1990. Psychological Conditions of Personal Engagement and Disengagement at Work. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4):692-724.
- Kumar, G. P. & Swetha, D., 2011. A Prognostic Examination of Employee Engagement from its Historical Roots. *International Journal of Trade, Economics and Finance*, 2(3):1-10.
- Macey, W. & Schneider, B., 2008. The meaning of employee engagement. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 1(1):3-30.
- Maslach, C., Schaufeli, W. B. & Leiter, M. P., 2001. Job Burnout. *Annual Review of Psychology*, Volume 52,397-422.



- May, D. R., 2004. The Psychological Conditions of Meaningfulness, Safety and Availability and the Engagement of the Human Spirit at Work. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 77(1):11-37.
- Naude, J. & Rothmann, S., 2004. The Validation of the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Emergency Medical Technicians in Gauteng. *African Journal of Economic and Management Sciences*, 7(3):459-468.
- Pati, S. P. & Kumar, P., 2011. Work Engagement: A Rethink. *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 47(2):264-276.
- Rich, B., Lepine, J. & Crawford E., 2010. Job Engagement: Antecedents And Effects On Job Performance. *Academy Of Management Journal*, 53(3):617-635.
- Rigoni, B. & Nelson, B., 2016. *Few Millennials Are Engaged at Work*. Available from: <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/195209/few-millennials-engaged-work.aspx> (Accessed 12 May 2017).
- Robinson, D., Perryman, S. & Hayday, S., 2003. *The Drivers of Employee Engagement*. Institute for Employment Studies.
- Saks, A. M. J. L., 2006. Antecedents and consequences of employee engagement. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 21(7):600-619.
- Schaufeli, W., 2013. What is engagement?. In: *Employee Engagement in Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge,1-37.
- Schaufeli, W. & Bakker, A., 2003. UWES: Utrecht Work Engagement Scale Preliminary Manual Version 1, Utrecht: s.n.
- Schaufeli, W. & Bakker, A., 2004. Job Demands, Job Resources, and Their Relationship with Burnout and Engagement: A Multi-Sample Study. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35(3):233-315.
- Sekaran, U. & Bougie, R., 2013. *Research Methods for Business: A Skill Building Approach* United Kingdom.. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd..
- Simpson, M., 2009. Engagement at work: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 47(7):1012-1024.
- Son, S., 2015. *20 Essential Questions For Your Next Employee Engagement Survey*. Available from: <https://www.tinypulse.com/blog/sk-employee-engagement-survey-questions> (Accessed 11 May 2017).

Towers Watson, 2014. 2014 Global Workforce Study: At a Glance. Available from:  
[https://www.towerswatson.com/assets/jls/2014\\_global\\_workforce\\_study\\_at\\_a\\_glance\\_emea.pdf](https://www.towerswatson.com/assets/jls/2014_global_workforce_study_at_a_glance_emea.pdf)  
(Accessed 14 February 2016)